

## **The effect of corporate environmental responsibility on reputation across B2B: Does innovation mediate them?**

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### **Abstract**

The study has been structured as follows: relationships among variables are highlighted, and development of hypotheses. Next, methods, instruments, sample have been illustrated. Then, it shows the findings, conclusions, and limitations. Further, the research ended by literature and managerial contributions besides future research.

**Keywords :** Corporate environmental responsibility, Reputation, Innovation, B2B.

### **Introduction**

Enterprises environmental practices are not an option any more in business arena since firms have faced more pressure from societies and stakeholders unlike few decades ago. These green activities have been developed over last years, and managers try to comply with new changes in high competitive environment. However, they can take an advantage of practicing environmentally such as thinking differently than their competitors; as a result, products will be different because leaders and employees have thought out of the box. Those green behaviors often affect organizations' brand, reputation etc. as (Aksak, Ferguson, and Duman, 2016) have pointed out since customers tend to deal with such firms. But, we need to understand deeper how reputation can be impacted by such green practices, particularly, literature has not focused on those relationships broadly despite scholars have attempted to do so.

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\* Ahmad Husni Aqel.

**The effect of corporate environmental responsibility on reputation across B2B: Does innovation mediate them?**

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Reputation of an organization affects all stakeholders whether negatively or positively since it influences enterprises' future and position in business arena. Managers' main role is to deliver their firms brand and image; besides, avoiding any action that could harm reputation in both short and long-terms. It shows stakeholders expectations from a company financially and/ or non-financially. It is what have been recognized and received by internal and external stakeholders, and it has a crucial role on organizations' success, value, resources etc. and its dealing with other businesses. However, reputation important for a firm is not confined by it, but its affect other businesses that deal with; in other words, other corporations are impacted by their partnerships images and brands; mainly across business to business (B2B).

However, reputation is a result of enterprises' activities and operations. Innovation has been suggested to provide further explanation of nature of the relationship between reputation and corporate environmental practices (CEP). Innovation includes vary categories and types such as product, processes, open, closed etc., and the focal point is to provide something new regardless the way or the tool, and it is not merely relying on research and development department any more. However, innovation is not an objective by itself, but has been seen as mechanism for other purposes; for instance, competitive advantage, reputation and so on. Researchers have investigated it with the outcomes, and provided different conclusions. For example, (Maemunah, 2018; Gallardo-Vazquez, Valdez-Juarez, Castuera-Diaz, 2019) resulted a positive and crucial correlations between innovation and reputation, on the other hand, others have yet to find a strong association.

Reputation is outcomes of organizations activities, and different factors, contexts etc. affect it; besides, these variables have varied levels of impacts on it. For instance, literature has proposed that meeting internal and external groups desires and demands lead to better performance (Adebanjo, Teh, and Ahmed, 2016, Okazaki, S., & Taylor, C. R. 2021). However, we do not expect similar results across enterprises for many reasons mainly the commitment and experiences of organization regarding green challenges and innovation are dissimilar. Despite several attempts to examine the role of environmental practices on reputation, it is still unclear how to explain such relationship, and there is a need to understand how this association could be mediated by innovation. More importantly, this association is ignored across B2B particularly those companies have to assure that their partners have complied with governments and societies standards and expectations. Thus, the study aims to bridge those gaps, and examine environmental responsibility practices influence on reputation with a mediating role of innovation. The article contributes on reputation and environmental activities domains due to adding innovation as a mediator, and its extending NRBV by providing a comprehensive view of how these correlations can be understood.

**Procedural definitions**

**Corporate environmental responsibility:** refers to a company's commitment to minimizing its ecological impact through sustainable practices. This includes reducing carbon emissions, managing waste, conserving resources, and engaging in ethical sourcing. Companies often develop environmental policies that align with their business strategies, aiming to enhance their reputation, comply with regulations, and meet stakeholder expectations.

**Reputation:** A reputation company is a business that specializes in managing, building, and repairing the public perception of individuals, organizations, or brands. They work to enhance their clients' reputations by improving their online presence, handling public relations, and responding to negative publicity. These companies may offer services such as search engine optimization (SEO), social media management, content creation, crisis management, and review monitoring to maintain a positive image for their clients. Their goal is to ensure that their clients are perceived positively by their target audience and stakeholders.

**Innovation :** is the process of developing new ideas, products, services, or methods that create value or improve existing ones. It involves the introduction of something new or making significant changes to an existing process, technology, or product to enhance efficiency, effectiveness, or appeal. Innovation can occur in various fields, including technology, business, healthcare, education, and more. It often leads to advancements that solve problems, meet needs, or open up new opportunities, driving progress and growth.

**B2B** stands for Business-to-Business. It refers to transactions, communications, or relationships between two businesses, rather than between a business and an individual consumer (which is called B2C, or Business-to-Consumer).

### **Theoretical Background**

#### **Corporate environmental responsibility**

Several environmental challenges that enterprises have to face and handling them, further, they should go beyond laws of countries such as practicing environmentally although there are a lot of differences across states. CER has been defined a company's practices to protect natural environment and minimize its negative effects on it (Turker, 2009, Fatma et al 2022). Stakeholders' groups and civil organizations have made pressures against enterprises to practice environmental friendly (Eweje, 2014, Brammer & Pavelin, 2020). Moreover, due to corporations define themselves as a part of societies, those associations are demanded positive roles from them in order to not just protect the environment, but to enhance it, and reduce natural resources consumption.

However, organizations are not always taking those challenges seriously because of financial situation and they do not believe that they have a significant negative effect on environment; in addition, investing on green issues is not justifiable( Brammer et al., 2012, Kapoor, et al, 2021). But, businesses and consumers tend to deal with responsible and green firms (Nair & Sodhi, 2012; Ishak et al., 2017), further, shareholders believe that investing at environmental friendly enterprises is less risky ( Kapoor, et al, 2021, Mahmood & Humphrey, 2013). Furthermore, green initiatives are often reflecting on others like employees, and they could think differently than others, which can lead to innovation (Diehl & Klee, 2015). However, there are different degrees of reputation across companies due to dissimilar activities, innovation, context etc.; in other words, environmentally practices and challenges have different norms around the world, which generate different levels of innovation and reputation (Brammer & Pavelin,2020, Chang et al., 2013).

### **Innovation**

Organizations face a high pressure in local and global markets to provide new products, processes, services etc. that different than others. Consumers' demands and desires are changing over time, and what is good and acceptable today, is not guarantee will be tomorrow or/and for next generations, which lead corporations to focus on innovation. It has been seen as adoption/improvement or any change in a process and/or a product to improve a firm outcome (OECD, 2005). Innovation is a tool to form a flexible and appropriate business model to serve the interest of customers and managers as well in a high competitive business arena (Darroch & McNaughton, 2002). However, innovation often is a cumulative process of research, leaders' decisions, individuals' experiences and knowledge etc.

However, innovation cannot be existed without several factors and contexts. For instance, CER can affect innovation meaningfully for it changes managers and employees' thoughts, as a result, they have think differently, which lead to see things from other perspectives; in other words, they can think outside the box. In business arena companies often imitate competitors' ideas, but when green organization probably have their own and vary thinking, which leads to dissimilar products and processes; in other words, innovation is output of individuals' beliefs. Thus, these innovations help firms to achieve better outcomes like enhance their reputation. Clients build their attitudes towards enterprises based on their experiences, and innovation is a crucial factor that convince them about a company image and brand. All in all, innovation is influenced by people's thoughts, and its affect an organization's reputation (Hooi, Ahmad, Amran, & Abidu rahman, 2016).

### **Reputation**

Organizations managers protect and improve their firms' tangible and non-tangible resources to increase the value of assists. Reputation is a crucial source since its affect any enterprise's success and value (Aksak et al., 2016), employees' ethics and positive attitudes (Turban and Cable, 2003). Furthermore, it reduces transaction costs mainly across B2B because of trust across partners (Caruana, 2004), as a result attracting more clients. It is defined as the evaluation of an enterprise by its internal and external stakeholders for they compare behaviors of it with others (Jackson & Deeg, 2008; Redding, 2005). However, in this era with thousands of products, services etc. clients often buy from reputable companies since it reduces risk; hence, firms need to keep their reputation good at customers' minds.

Further, although economic reasons are crucial for customers to buy, social and environmental factors like practicing environmentally has an influence on them mainly to choose between alternatives (Calic & Mosakowski, 2016). Obviously, many enterprises concern about ecology issues for public relations and reputation (Aksak et al., 2016). However, reputation is built based on stakeholders' experiences over time, and how an organization can provide a new product or/and services. In other words, reputation is dynamic and enhanced by innovation. Besides, generating new products shows to others how a company can maintain its position in high a competitive business arena. Literature has relatively examined reputation and CER and innovation, and concluded vary results; for instance, (Gallardo-Vazquez et al., 2019; Maemunah, 2018) have found relationships across CER, innovation, and reputation; whereas, others have not

found strong associations across those factors (Szocs et al., 2016). Hence, reputation is important for firms and it has different relationships with innovation and CER.

### **Research Methodology**

The quantitative method has been adopted in this study, besides, the data is collected through self-administrated survey, and it is conducted in Tunisia. The focus was on B2B manufacturers due to those enterprises represent a significant number of manufacturers in Tunisia (INS, 2017). However, those enterprises have been defined as businesses that is conducted between corporations instead of between firms and individual clients (Chang, 2014). Items have been adopted from previous research. Simple random probability design is used due to each business of population has an equivalent opportunity to be a unite of study sample. Managers of these organizations were asked to participate in this investigation by filling the questionnaire.

### **Hypotheses Development**

#### **CER and innovation**

Businesses tend to comply with societies' values and clients' pressure by practicing environmentally and minimize their negative impacts on them. On the other hand, it could be seen an investment since it attracts new customers besides keeping current them, which in turns contributes on new thinking of new ways of processes and products as a result innovation (Vincenza Ciasullo & Troisi, 2013; Chang et al., 2013). However, businesses that deal with businesses can be proactive towards CER due to their counterparts often feel more safe to deal with green organizations; therefore, it can be an advantage over competitors for producing differently (Shahedul Quader et al., 2016). A natural resource based view (NRBV) assumes that practicing environmentally leads to different outcomes since it takes into account the natural environment protection, which influences an enterprise production, and innovate differently.

Gallardo-Vazquez et al., (2019) have found that once enterprises have satisfied social and environmental norms, innovation is improved significantly, as a result it leads to competitive advantages since their resources have been deployed effectively to green strategies, and the focus was producing differently. Furthermore, (Abdul-Rashid et al., 2017) resulted that sustainable activities influence open and closed innovation due to environmental responsible strategy are reflected into middle and operation managers, who control daily activities. And those seniors make assurance that the cope with the organization's strategy; thus, they generate new ideas regarding processes to be green practices. However, we need to know better of such relationships mainly across B2B; hence, the research proposed that CER affects innovation positively.

#### **CER and reputation**

In B2B domain firms always select their partnerships based on many standards. And one of these norms is reputation because of partners' image and brand affect all stakeholders. However, CER gives enterprises an advantage across businesses since it can be seen less risky to deal with such companies for several reasons like protecting and enhancing natural environment. These green activities build good reputation across all stakeholders, which partners can take advantages regarding their reputation due to they deal with environmentally organizations as NRBV suggested. For example, as literature found that clients prefer to deal with environmental responsible firms in comparison with other firms.

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**The effect of corporate environmental responsibility on reputation across B2B: Does innovation mediate them?**

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Researchers have examined businesses green and social responsible practices impacts on reputation and image. For instance, (Quintana-Garcia, Benavides-Chicon and Marchante-Lara, 2021) found green practices influence organizations reputation across stakeholders since it legitimates organizations activities and operations across them. Further, (Foerstl et al., 2010) have resulted that environmental responsible firms are optimal to have business with them for avoiding complaints from clients and other partnerships. However, we need to know how these relationships are important across B2B; therefore, the study has assumed that CER affects reputation positively.

**Innovation and reputation**

Enterprises face high competition and challenges to keep their clients and to provide new products/processes or/and enhance them in order to keep their reputation good at customers' minds. In B2B the challenges have become more complicated since many of businesses depend widely on one or few customers. Hence, providing new/modified processes and goods keep an organization standing in business arena and enhance its reputation. However, these companies can cooperate and exchange information and feedbacks, which benefits all of partners; in particular, in a long term partnership for innovation in some sectors need years to accrue desirable outcomes such as medicine sector.

Adner and Kapoor (2010) have found that innovation is not an option it's a strategy, and has to be within the context of industry, culture etc. and this strategy affect brand positively since clients can have some product/process differently. Moreover, Halme and Korpela (2014) resulted that small and medium enterprises have an advantage of innovation since those types of businesses have high flexibility to do so, as a result, their reputation can enhance rapidly mainly once they combine different environmentally resources. Besides, (Gallardo-Vazquez et al., 2019) have concluded that innovation affects organizations' profitability and reputation, in particular, once such culture of it deploys across all functions. Thus, the research assumes that innovation influences positively reputation across B2B.

**CER and reputation with a mediating role of innovation**

Businesses measure their successful through tangible like financial income and non-tangible assets such as reputation, but they need to know exact factors that could affect reputation highly; for example, inputs like environmental practices (Turker, 2009). Green practices affect the business culture, in consequence, employees' thoughts, practices, operations etc. This reflection can be seen as norms for workers and organizations over processes and activities as a result innovation is impacted as NRBV has proposed (Gao, 2017). Castaldo et al., (2009) pointed out that firms' incorporate their own environmental activities and policies, can take advantages of producing differently, which often impacts a company's financial outcomes. For instance, it delivers ethical practices into new ideas and assurance that activities contribute on new processes and products. Also, reflecting of their green strategy into employees, and resulted in innovate culture, which leads to competitive advantage and reputation as NRBV has suggested (Wiengarten et al., 2017;).

Others have applied NRBV to examine green practices, and have found a relationship between these practices and reputation, consequently, financial performance has been improved (Zhao,

**The effect of corporate environmental responsibility on reputation across B2B: Does innovation mediate them?**

Liu, & Sun, 2020). Gallardo-Vazquez et al., (2019) revealed that environmental friendly practices often support employees for engaging in innovation, as a result the image in spite the influence will be different across states because of green practices are varying (Abdul-Rashid et al., 2017). Du, Yalcinkaya and Bstieler (2016) have concluded that innovation is leading to differentiation and better performance. However, there is a need to know how these relationships could be explained; therefore, it is supposed that corporate environmental responsibility has a positive influence on reputation when it mediated by innovation.

**Measures**

The research factors are measured as a first order, however, they are adopted from previous studies. For instance, reputation has been measured by (Murphy, Tailer & Hill, 1996) scale and it refers to includes views toward the business reputation. Additionally, (Turker, 2009) items are measured CER and it can be seen as a firm practices to protect natural environment. Further, (Prajogo and Ahmed, 2006) scale for innovation is adopted, which defined as new products and/or processes that have been generated by an enterprise in a period of time. Furthermore, all of those measures consist 5 point Likert- scale.

**Analysis , Results and Discussion**

**Respondents' profile**

A total of 400 questionnaires are sent out to B2B manufacturers in Tunisia. However, 70 questionnaires were validated in order to be analyzed, which represents 17.5%. Respondents were managers of these enterprises; for example, 68% are males, and 32% of them are females. Furthermore, 44% of them have diploma and less, 30% degree, and 26% hold master degree.

**Measurement Model**

Validity and reliability are examined to verify variables relationships and factors indicators. Reliability has been examined though Cronbach's' alpha coefficients, coefficients of variables, and were ranged between .77 to .83, which are reliable and validated (see Hair et al., 2016) as illustrated in table 1.

Table: Measurement analysis

| Constructs | Cronbach's' alpha coefficients | AVE   |
|------------|--------------------------------|-------|
| CER        | .77                            | 0.529 |
| Innovation | .83                            | 0.717 |
| Reputation | .83                            | 0.624 |

Additionally, average variance extracted (AVE) values are 0.529 for (CER), 0.717 for innovation, and 0.624 for organizations reputation, which were acceptable (see Hair et al., 2016). Therefore, measurement standards have been satisfied in order to move hypotheses testing.

**Hypotheses Testing**

The structural model is illustrated that the hypotheses have been accepted despite different path coefficients and  $R^2$  have been generated as can be seen in table 2.

**The effect of corporate environmental responsibility on reputation across B2B: Does innovation mediate them?**

Table 2: Regression analysis

| Relationship<br>Decision            | Coefficients | T-Value | P-Value   |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|---------|-----------|
| CER→Innovation<br>Supported         | .273         | 3.211   | .001      |
| CER→Reputation<br>Supported         | .278         | 2.162   | .043      |
| Innovation→ Reputation<br>Supported | .242         | 2.047   | .049      |
| CER→Innovation→ Reputation          | .378         | 3.741   | .000      |
|                                     |              |         | Supported |

The first hypothesis assumes that there is an influence of CER on innovation is supported since ( $\beta=0.273, P < 0.01$ ). Besides,  $R^2$  is 12.7, which explains 12.7 per cent of variance. In addition, it has been found CER impacts reputation ( $\beta=0.278, P < 0.043$ ), and  $R^2$  can explain .075 of variance. Further, the results illustrate that innovation affects organizations reputation ( $\beta=0.242, P < 0.049$ ), and  $R^2$  has explained .060 per cent of variance. Furthermore, innovation has been found to mediate CER and reputation ( $\beta=0.378, P < 0.00$ ), and  $R^2$  has explained the variance by 13.4%.

### Discussion

Enterprises environmental responsibility is a crucial factor for innovation and reputation as well. However, to understand deeper these relationships the research has examined them comprehensively.

The first hypothesis stated that enterprises' environmental practices affect innovation, given the empirical evidence, the study concluded that this assumption has been accepted, besides, it supports NRBV, which has highlighted that green activities reflect on new choices and ideas (Rohani et al., 2017). This result consists with (Gallardo-Vazquez et al., 2019) research, who found that environmental friendly practices determine the degree of generating new and creative solutions. Furthermore, (Du et al., 2016) have provided empirical evidence of how environmental operations determine the type of innovation since workers cannot separate their own thoughts and business innovation. Also, B2B have to lookout to their activities due to partners watch their practices closely. Additionally, these friendly operations are often influenced by the country's culture, in other words, the firm's context is crucial on this result.

The second hypothesis has illustrated that CER affects manufacturers' reputation, and it is supported; further, it consists with NRBV, which highlights that green activities influence enterprises' performance and image., Aksak et al., (2016) have resulted that social and environmental behavior of an organization determines its reputation due to moral practices lead to word of mouth across clients, which in turns enhance reputation. Additionally, within the state's context, businesses have gone beyond the regulations of Tunisian's government; therefore, those firms have got better image; in particular, in collective society such as Arabic countries, which managers tend to share their experiences with others.

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**The effect of corporate environmental responsibility on reputation across B2B: Does innovation mediate them?**

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Moreover, innovation has been found to influence enterprises reputation as H3 has proposed, and as NRBV assumes that outcomes is impacted by several factors such as new ideas and innovation are by far contributed significantly on organizations image, brand, market share etc. Previous research has found that innovation leads to different performance; for instance, (Maemunah, 2018) concluded that innovate differently impacts performance positively; particularly, any new idea can be recognized quickly in social media, as a result across stakeholders. Ioanid et al., (2018) as well have resulted that innovation culture across workers has an effect on tangible and intangible outcomes; for example, reputation since customers incline to buy from innovative firms. These empirical evidences are seen as innovation has a main role on companies' outcomes like brand and reputation.

The result of the research supports fourth hypothesis that enterprises environmental responsible has positive impacts on reputation once innovation has mediated the relationship. This finding is in the line with NRBV due to green practices have an effect on innovation through the reflection of such activities on workers' thoughts, and a result, generating new ideas, and provide new products, which expected affect an organization's image and reputation. Leaders of those businesses are aware of daily bases processes, and they assure that operations have complied with global environmental standards. (Taylor et al., 2018; Maemunah, 2018) have found associations across practice environmental friendly and firms' positive performance, market share, image etc. because of green culture leads to think differently, which can generate novel ideas; in consequence, reputation is enhanced. However, practicing environmentally responsible in Tunisian's context is a result of community's green culture, hence, businesses are influenced by society's thoughts and values. Thus, reputation is improved based on CER since it reflected on innovation.

This study contributes to NRBV literature by adding innovation as a mediator for explaining how reputation is affected by enterprises environmental practices. The theory proposes some factors to clarify how outcomes can be influenced, the paper provides a new variable (i.e. innovation) for extending NRBV perspective. Moreover, it has extended variables domains by opening a new window for coming studies because it provides an empirical evidence of CER and innovation literature with their consequences mainly it highlights a social factor, which the topic has yet to be examined intensely. In other words, the research correlates sociological and management factors. Furthermore, it has been shown that innovation is impacted by businesses green vision, and; thus, it influences reputation significantly despite the culture or/and state; therefore, firms' attitudes cannot be ignored, and once we examine enterprises outcomes.

It is important that enterprises adopt environmental arisen issues and practices accordingly, but they should take into consideration that each society faces different challenges, and have to protect and enhance natural environment, which expected to contribute significantly on reputation since empirical evidences have found. Additionally, organizations need to revise ecological activities regularly because priorities and needs are changing. Besides, they should share with employees arisen environmental issues. Further, those types of organizations can take advantages over competitors through practicing greenly, as a result those activities reflected on new ideas and innovative whether on products or/and processes. However, they should balance

between needed environmental practices and innovation requirements to influence reputation positively. Moreover, policymakers have to promote environmental challenges; mainly, across businesses, and prioritize them based on country's needs, and how such variables could make differences on performance, in particular, governments often have better understanding regarding environmental challenges.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

In spite the paper has provided several insights of CER, innovation and reputation, there are some limitations. At first, the study sample is B2B, other businesses types; for instance, small, medium, multinational enterprises etc. could offer further understanding, and enhance generalizability of results. Secondly, the research is cross-sectional, longitudinal study can depict deeper and wider insights, in particular, this article could be influenced by Tunisian's economic challenges that the country is facing in this period. Thirdly, the role of moderation variables like culture, government's support etc. have not been investigated; mainly, such factors might provide specific evidences in the context of environmental issues and enterprises reputation. Finally, the data is collected from businesses managers; accordingly, they might bias towards their corporations, researchers can explore others' views like employees and suppliers.

### **Conclusion**

This research examines the role of environmental practices on enterprises reputation, and how innovation could mediate this relationship since literature has not examined those variables comprehensively, and has yet to explain deeply how reputation is influenced by CER. In addition, civil organizations demand more efforts from businesses to protect environment. Several tests are used for analyzing the data; for example,  $R^2$ , t-test, and Cronbach alpha. It is concluded that CER affects innovation and firms' reputation; also innovation influences reputation positively, and innovation does mediate environmental practices and reputation. The research contributes on literature and NRBV by mediating innovation between CER and reputation, and it recommends further and deeper examination to those topics, the study has suggested some moderations for enriching management and environmental domains.

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**The effect of corporate environmental responsibility on reputation across B2B: Does innovation mediate them?**

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