

What matters most: customers perceptions of a&o Hotels and Hostels during COVID-19 – A quantitative case study

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Abstract

Background: The current COVID-19 pandemic has become a global crisis and has far-reaching implications on individuals, society and economy. Scientific literature points out that crises imply consequences on the reputation of organizations. Above all industries, the hospitality industry has suffered from the coronavirus crisis through booking cancellations, travel restrictions and customers that are concerned about the consequences of staying in a hotel. Considering this, the question arises what hotels can do regarding their reputation management to not only protect their reputation during the coronavirus crisis but speed up the recovery from the crisis by retaining and attracting customers through a favorable reputation.

Aim: This study aims to explore customers perceptions of a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne, Germany to eventually propose advice regarding their reputation management during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method: This paper suggests a reputation management approach that compares customers perceived strength versus customers perceived importance of seven drivers of reputation. The following predictors of RepTrak ® are included in this study: products and services, innovation, workplace, governance, citizenship, leadership and performance. A total of 131 guests of a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne were asked to fill-in an online questionnaire. In the first part, participants were asked to indicate to what extent the drivers are associated with the hotel from their point of view using a Likert scale ranging from 1-7. In the second part, participants were asked to indicate which drivers are most important during the COVID-19 pandemic from their point of view using a pair-wise comparison method.

Results: The findings of this research show that the performance, governance, and leadership are reputational driver that are more associated with a&o Hotels and Hostels from the customers' point of view compared to innovation, citizenship and workplace but are perceived as less important and vice versa. The product and service dimension was assessed as one that describes a&o Hotels and Hostels compared to the other drivers and was perceived as important during the COVID-19 pandemic as well.

Conclusion: This study highlights the need of monitoring stakeholders' sentiment in general and especially during crisis situations. The findings of this research suggest that a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne should focus on its workplace, innovation, and citizenship area to maintain a favorable reputation.

Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, reputation management, crisis management, hospitality industry, customer expectations

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1. Introduction

The coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) is causing the novel human coronavirus disease COVID-19 and was first reported in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019. Because of its highly contagious nature it has rapidly spread around the world and led to a global pandemic as the WHO (World Health Organisation) declared on March 11, 2020. The virus is especially dangerous for the elderly and for people with pre-existing diseases. The infection can cause mild to severe symptoms, including flu-like symptoms, pneumonia, acute respiratory syndrome and in some cases death (WHO, 2021). By now, the World Health Organization (2021) has confirmed 160.000.000 cases from which 3.320.000 had lethal consequences (retrieved May 12, 2021). The pandemic has pushed healthcare systems nationwide to their limits and revealed that their infrastructures are overburdened by such a high rate of infections and patients to be treated (Lal, Erondu, Heymann, Gitahi, & Yates, 2020). However, the consequences of the coronavirus crisis go beyond the threat of public health.

In the following sections, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be reviewed from a psychological and economical perspective. The paper will then discuss its implications on companies. Further, as crises management and corporate reputation have been examined as interrelated topics in scientific literature, this paper discusses the value of a company's reputation in times of COVID-19 and examines how reputation management represents a crises management strategy during the coronavirus crisis. A reputation management approach will be provided. Finally, the paper seeks to give advice for businesses within the hospitality industry.

1.1 The psychological impact of COVID-19

The outbreak of the coronavirus does not only endanger the physical health of people but involves adverse effects on its mental health as well. In fact, previous research has shown that pandemics such as SARS, MERS, and H1N1 provoke mental distress (Armour, McGlinchey, Butter, McAloney-Kocaman, & McPherson, 2020). The reasons for this are manifold: First, the mental well-being is negatively influenced by individuals' perceived threat of COVID-19 since being infected or potentially infecting others generates fear and vulnerability (Paredes, Apaolaza, Fernandez-Robin, Hartmann, & Yanez-Martinez, 2021). Second, media usage concerning this pandemic can be problematic. The flood of accurate and inaccurate information, also termed as 'infodemic', can cause confusion, fear, anxiety and stress as well as mistrust in authorities (WHO, 2021; Kumar, & Nayar, 2020). In fact, the study of Bendau, Petzhold, and Pyrkosch (2020) shows that the frequency and duration of COVID-19-related media consumption positively correlates with symptoms of depression and anxiety. Third, the coronavirus crisis has led to unprecedented changes in the lives of billions of people. Research across different countries indicates the adverse impact of prevention measures such as social-distancing, self-isolation and quarantine on the mental health of society (Rossi, Socci, Talevi et al., 2020; Kwong, Pearson, Adams, Northstone et al., 2021; Armbruster & Klotzbücher, 2020). In addition to that, it remains uncertain how the pandemic evolves, leading to high uncertainty about health, employment and general lifestyle among citizens. As a consequence of all this, people might feel socially isolated and lonely, or could be more prone for online gambling and drug consumption for example (Moreno, Wykes, Galderisi et al., 2020). Furthermore, scientific literature points out that the psychological impact varies among different cohorts: For example, healthcare workers are exposed to a higher threat of being

infected by COVID-19 and the workload significantly increased within the healthcare sector due to the pandemic. This can cause stress, anxiety and fear, and can lead to serious mental illnesses such as depression or burnout (Khan, Mamun, Griffiths, & Ullah, 2020). As most severe mental illnesses occur in a young age, students and children are at risk to suffer from the consequences of the pandemic in particular. For example, the closure of schools and universities as well as the reduction of educational and cultural activities involve adverse effects on the mental well-being of students (Kohls, Baldofski, Moeller, Klemm, & Rummel-Kluge, 2021). Research indicates that students and young adults have suffered from psychological distress symptoms such as depression, anxiety or stress due to the pandemic (Tang et al., 2020; Liu, Zhang, Wong, Hyun, & Hahm, 2020). Besides that, other vulnerable groups are people with pre-existing mental disorders, homeless individuals as well as those who are working in the leisure and hospitality industry as the financial consequences of the pandemic have been particularly felt in these industries, leading to an increase in unemployment and financial uncertainty of many individuals (Khan, Mamun, Griffiths, & Ullah, 2020). Aside from the physical consequences the coronavirus can have on individuals, the implications of the coronavirus crisis affect the mental health on society as well. This highlights the importance of organizations' social responsibility towards their employees and society.

1.2 The economic impact of COVID-19

The outbreak of the coronavirus has led to a temporary economic standstill. Restrictive measures to prevent the spread of the virus such as contact restrictions, travel bans or the shutdown of public institutions resulted in a global economic recession. Although the final impact on the economy is still uncertain, experts already expect the COVID-19 crisis to lead to the deepest recession in decades (Claeys, 2020; Abay, Tafere, & Woldemichael, 2020). The Autumn 2020 Economic Forecast published by the European Commission on November 5 assumes that the EU economy will record a decline of 7,4% in 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic implies diverse effects depending on the industry. Companies that provide solutions for the implications of the pandemic benefit from the health crisis. For example, medical, pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies like Moderna which has developed a COVID-19 vaccine, generate profit during the coronavirus crisis (Sokol & Pataccini, 2020). In addition to that, the demand for remote services such as online communication technologies or food delivery services increased significantly while the demand for services that require face-to-face interactions decreased due to the coronavirus crisis. Above all, the hospitality industry has suffered from the consequences of the pandemic (Abay, Tafere & Woldemichael, 2020). In the course of the coronavirus crisis, worldwide travel warnings, lockdowns and other restrictions placed by the government resulted in a standstill of tourism. Bookings have been cancelled which in turn, led to a decline in occupancies and revenues (Jiang & Wen, 2020). In Germany, for instance, the tourism industry already recorded a loss in revenue of 24 billion euros in March and April (Statista, 2020). In addition to that, the effects of the coronavirus crisis are expected to persist longer on the hotel industry compared to other sectors; Customers will remain concerned about being infected, travel restrictions are likely to maintain unchanged and conferences are likely to be held online which in turn, slows the recovery of the hotel sector (Jones & Comfort, 2020). In fact, it is estimated that U.S hotels will need approximately five years to achieve pre-COVID-

19 revenue (Dobrosielski, 2020). Moreover, the hospitality industry contributes 10% to the global GDP, reflecting its importance for the overall economy (Kumar, 2020). It is therefore crucial that hospitality scholars gather new knowledge and shift their focus to develop solutions for this industry during the coronavirus crisis. There is an urgent need to research customers sentiment towards hotels and how to make them return in the time of the pandemic (Gursoy & Chi, 2020). Therefore, this paper examines how reputation management represents a strategic tool during the pandemic in order to retain and attract customers.

1.3 Reputation management during COVID-19

This paper seeks to find advice for hotels during the corona pandemic by examining the reputational impact of the coronavirus crisis. As scientific literature emphasizes, crises involve threats as well as opportunities on the reputation of organizations. So far, literature rather focused on the reputational damage that may arise due to crises that are caused by organizations themselves. In this scenario, the reputational damage is determined by the degree of crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2007). However, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic that involve no crisis responsibility may affect the reputation of organizations as well. As the Harvard Business Review (2007) points out, one determinant for reputational risk is the shift of stakeholder beliefs and expectations. For example, the climate change made stakeholders more concerned about the environmental pollution of companies and the increasing digitalization implies higher concerns regarding the data protection of stakeholders. Events like these affect society as well as economy and are likely to change the beliefs and expectations of stakeholders. If companies do not act in accordance to changed expectations, reputation will be harmed. On the other hand, however, companies that assess and accept the impact of changing expectations and act accordingly, maintain a strong and sustainable reputation (Eccles, Newquist, Schatz, 2007). Scientific literature already widely examines the benefits of a favorable reputation; It is a valuable asset of organizations and provides a competitive edge, it attracts customers (Gardberg & Fombrun, 2002; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Groenland, 2002), influences customer trust and loyalty as well as the financial performance of organizations (Rindova et al., 2005). Thus, maintaining a favorable reputation during the COVID-19 era is an important asset of the crisis hospitality management. Eccles, Newquist and Schatz (2007) emphasize two main steps in reputation management; The reputation must first be assessed, and stakeholder expectations must be monitored. Consequently, this paper will investigate the following two research questions by asking customers of “a&o Hotels and Hostels” in Cologne, Germany.

RQ1: To what extent associate customers of “a&o Hotels and Hostels” different drivers of reputation with the hotel?

RQ2: Which of these different reputational drivers are perceived as most salient during the COVID-19 pandemic by customers of “a&o Hotels and Hostels”?

The goal of this research is thus to first assess the performance of “a&o Hotels and Hostels” regarding different drivers of reputation and then evaluate the expectations of their customers during the COVID-19 crisis. Based on that, hotels can adapt their operations so that they are line with customer expectations and thereby maintain a strong reputation. This, in turn, facilitates to improve their overall performance during, and after the COVID-19 crisis.

The report is structured accordingly: First, literature regarding corporate reputation

will be reviewed and the RepTrak ® System for measuring corporate reputation will be explained. Secondly, implications of the COVID-19 crisis on each dimension of the RepTrak ® System will be described. Thirdly, the methodology of this study will be explained. The Result section then examines the outcomes of the study. Next, the Discussion section outlines the implications of the study on the hotel sector, reflects on limitations of the study and gives suggestions for future research. Finally, a main conclusion is provided.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section, literature regarding corporate reputation will be reviewed. First, the concept of corporate reputation will be explained. Additionally, outcome variables of corporate reputation that are most salient for the hotel industry will be described. Finally, the RepTrak ® System for measuring corporate reputation will be explained and implications of the COVID-19 crisis on the dimensions of the RepTrak ® System will be identified.

2.1 Corporate reputation

Over the last years, corporate reputation has gained more interest by researchers and practitioners and has become one of the central principles in public relations. It is an intangible strategic resource of companies that reflects how stakeholders perceive and evaluate a companies' overall performance. According to Wang et al. (2003), corporate reputation is an important asset for hotel firms, because the evaluation of service quality implies greater ambiguity compared to product quality evaluations. Scientific literature already widely examines the benefits of a favorable reputation for organizations. According to Cristou (2003), a strong reputation provides a competitive edge by influencing the guest loyalty towards hotel firms. Additionally, a favorable reputation attracts customers and influences the purchase intention of customers, especially when there is little difference in price and the quality between other competitors. This in turn, has a positive impact on occupancies of hotels, revenues and thus their financial performance. Indeed, a strong corporate reputation is associated with beneficial financial outcomes through, for instance, lowering transaction costs (e.g Eberl & Schwaiger, 2005; Caruana, Ramasashan & Krentler, 2004; Rose & Thomsen, 2004). The reputation management of hotel firms therefore plays a critical role in their recovery in and after times of the COVID-19 crisis.

2.2 RepTrak ® system

Scientific literature suggests various drivers for corporate reputation and provides different instruments to measure corporate reputation. For example, the RepTrak ® System is a measurement tool that analyses the perceptions of stakeholders and hence a companies' reputation. It consists of 23 indicators that form seven dimensions on which reputation is built on. Since the instrument has been shown to be valid in measuring corporate reputation (Fombrun, Ponzi & Newburry, 2005), this study will apply the RepTrak ® System to measure the reputation of "a&o Hotels and Hostels" in Cologne, Germany.

The following section will review the seven drivers of reputation. Finally, theoretical implications of the COVID-19 crisis will be explored.

Products and Services

The product and service dimension of RepTrak ® assesses how stakeholders perceive the overall quality of an organizations' product and service. This dimension includes the

price/performance ratio and the ability of an organization to meet customer needs, as well as its willingness to stand behind its products and services. Especially customers are expected to assess an organizations reputation based on its product and services (Fombrun et al., 2015). According to Park et al. (2014) and Rhee and Haunschild (2006), the product and service quality is the main driver of reputation. In hotels, the quality of the product and service is a critical driver for attracting new customers and encourage guest to return to the hotel. The quality of a hotel is determined by different factors besides the quality of the accommodation and service itself. The guests experience furthermore relies on hospitality, safety, security, sanitation and visitor management offered by the hotel (Qoura & Khalifa, 2016).

Innovation

The ‘innovation’ dimension of RepTrak ® assesses the perceived innovativeness and adaptability of a company. Companies that are perceived as innovative and adaptive by for instance, offering new products, developing new ideas or adapting quickly to change are more likely to be respected and admired by its stakeholders. This, in turn, positively influences its reputation (Fombrun et al., 2015). Scientific literature furthermore confirms the relationship between innovation and reputation (Courtright & Smudde, 2009). With regards to the COVID-19 crisis, innovation within the hotel sector is a critical asset of crisis hospitality management. Hotel operators already begin to pay attention to the use of technologies such as AI and robotics to improve hygiene and cleanliness as a prevention strategy against COVID-19. Also, mobile check-ins or robot cleaning systems are already implemented in some hotels (Jones & Comfort, 2020). Indeed, the study of Shin & Kang (2020) reveals that customers’ booking intention is positively influenced by reduced health perceptions through technological innovations within the hotel sector.

Workplace

The ‘workplace’ dimension of RepTrak ® refers to the extent to which stakeholders perceive a company to care for its employees. The reputation of a company is positively influenced if stakeholders perceive the organization as one that cares about the well-being of their employees and treats them fairly. Satisfied employees, in turn, contribute to a company’s performance in several ways: First, satisfied employees are more likely to participate in a long-term relationship with the company. Second, satisfied employees are ambassadors of a company and produce good publicity. Eventually, stakeholders are more likely to respect and trust a company that cares about its personnel (Fombrun et al., 2015). This all facilitates the process of maintaining a favourable reputation.

Governance

The ‘Governance’ dimension of RepTrak ® comprises stakeholder perceptions of a company for being fair, ethical and transparent. The openness and transparency of a company are critical factors in the overall assessment of the company by its stakeholders. The more a company represent stakeholders’ beliefs and is perceived as ethical and open about its activities, the more likely stakeholders are to admire and respect the company (Fombrun et al., 2015; Soleimani, Schnepfer & Newburry, 2014). This, in turn, positively influences the reputation of companies. With regards to the current pandemic, the governance of organizations is one of the main issues as the coronavirus and the underlying safety measures

of the government have led to growing complexities, forcing businesses to adapt their business operations.

Citizenship

The 'Citizenship' dimension of RepTrak® assesses the extent to which stakeholders perceive that a company acts environmentally friendly, supports good causes and is a positive contributor to society. According to scientific literature, organizations that meet these attributes are admired and respected by stakeholders and hence maintain a favorable reputation. This, in turn, encourages stakeholders to support the company in various forms (Fombrun et al., 2015). Scientific literature indicates that corporate social performance correlates with corporate reputation (Maden, Arikan, Telci & Kantur, 2012; Vercic & Coric, 2018). In addition to that, the study of Islam et al. (2021) revealed that corporate social responsibility initiatives are significantly associated with other beneficial outcomes except from its positive correlation with an organization; Accordingly, customer loyalty and satisfaction is positively associated with effective corporate social responsibility.

Leadership

The 'Leadership' dimension of RepTrak® concerns the stakeholders' perception of a company's management. Stakeholders are more likely to generate feelings of trust and admiration towards companies with excellent managers that have a strong and positive vision of their future. In addition to that, appealing leaders are more likely to attract positive media coverage and investor endorsement, which in turn, generates the feeling of being a credible company (Fombrun et al., 2015).

Financial performance

The 'Financial Performance' dimension of RepTrak® comprises stakeholders' perceptions about the profitability, financial results, and growth prospects for the future of companies. Also, the financial performance represents a company's overall success and conveys an important signal to stakeholders. Scientific literature emphasize that financial performance and corporate reputation are highly correlated (Fombrun et al., 2015).

2.3 The reputational impact of COVID-19

As mentioned in the previous section, crises such as the current COVID-19 pandemic are likely to affect customers beliefs and expectations towards organizations. More specifically, this paper argues that customers of a&o Hotels and Hostels attribute a higher importance to certain reputational drivers compared to others during the current coronavirus crisis. Although some of the drivers are perceived as strong, it does not necessarily mean that those drivers are perceived as most relevant during the COVID-19 crisis. There are three out of the seven drivers that are expected to be assessed as most important by customers of a&o Hotels and Hostels considering the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

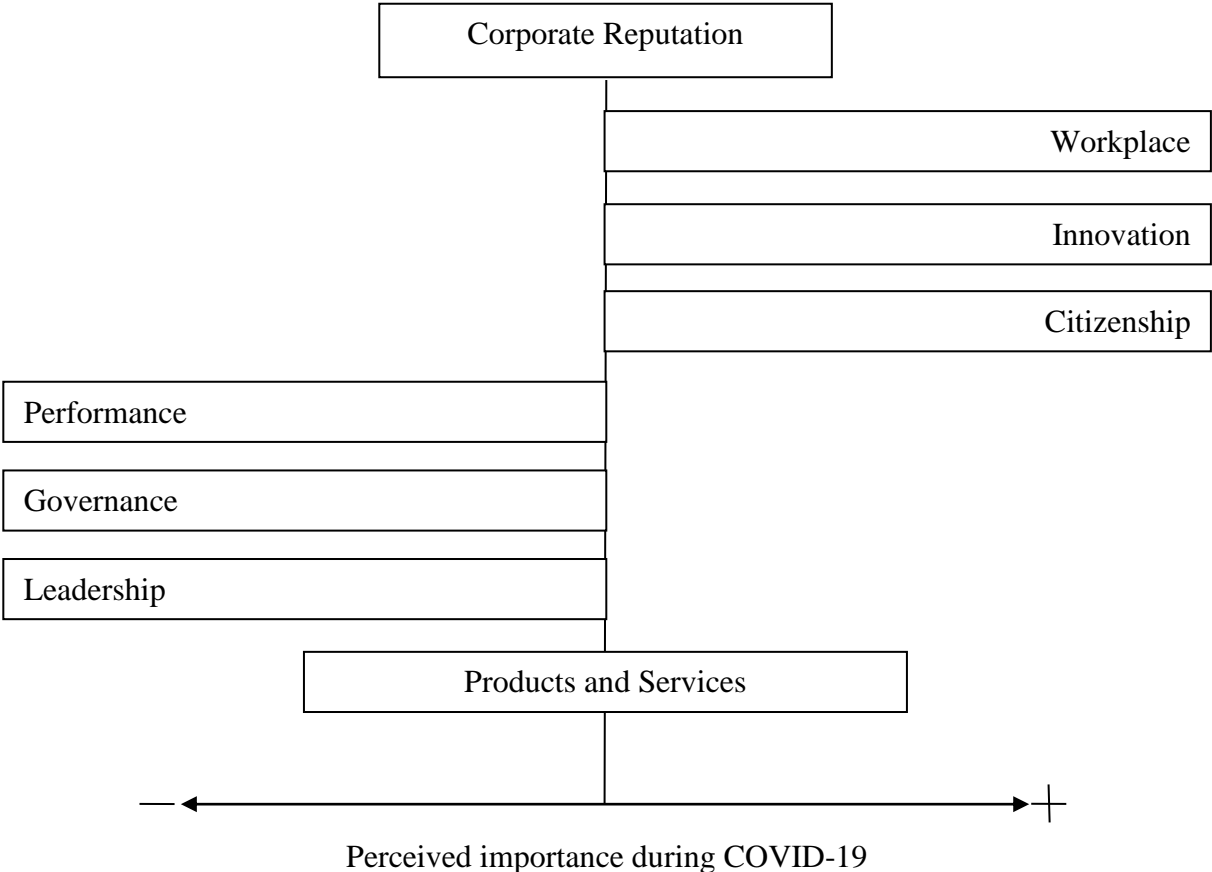
First, the Workplace dimension is expected to be assessed as highly important during the coronavirus crisis by customers of a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne, Germany. As described in the previous section, the consequences of the COVID-19 concern the society as a whole and social incentives of companies towards their employees become more important during the current pandemic considering its psychological impact. Employees, especially

those that work in the hospitality industry, face a high risk of unemployment considering the detrimental impact of the pandemic on this industry. Moreover, employees of a&o Hotels and Hostels face a higher threat of being infected by COVID-19 compared to other jobs that involve less contact with other people. It is therefore assumed that customers of a&o Hotels and Hostels perceive the workplace dimension as highly important during the current pandemic and as one of the three major reputational drivers of the hotel's reputation.

Second, the Citizenship dimension is expected to be assessed as one of the three major drivers of a&o Hotels and Hostels reputation. The coronavirus crisis not only highlights the need for internal social responsibility, but since the society as whole is affected by the consequences of COVID-19, it is expected that customers of a&o Hotels and Hostels attribute a high importance to corporate social activities of the hotel.

Third, the Innovation dimension is expected to be assessed as one of the most salient drivers of a&o Hotels and Hostels reputation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has pushed the process of digitalization and as mentioned in the previous section, the demand for services that require face-to-face interactions decreased while the demand for remote services increased. The implementation of new technologies within a&o Hotels and Hostels could minimize the risk of being infected due to reduced face-to-face interactions. Considering that customers are particularly concerned about face-to-face interactions, technologies that promote social-distancing represent a critical tool for crisis hospitality management. It is therefore assumed that customers of a&o Hotels and Hostels perceive the Innovation dimension as one of the three most important drivers of reputation.

Figure 1
Research Model



3. Method

3.1 Research Design and Procedure

In this section, the methods used to collect and analyze the data are explained. In the purpose of answering the research questions, a two-parted online questionnaire was created with the online survey tool Qualtrics and has been conducted among the guests of a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne, Germany over a time frame of four months. The study was assessed by the Ethics Committee of the University of Twente and granted permission to be conducted. Then, participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Since participants needed to be a guest at a&o hotels and hostels at least once, the easiest way to recruit participants was to ask guests at a&o hotels and hostels. Therefore, a link to the questionnaire was created and was sent via the intranet of a&o hotels and hostels to its three houses located in Cologne, Germany. The receptionists then asked guests during the check-in to fill-in the questionnaire at the reception and a free drink was offered in return. In some cases, the link to the questionnaire was present at the reception and guests were able to complete it later. Additionally, the link was sent to other people via Instagram, Facebook and Whatsapp. The questionnaire began with a short summary of the study. Then, participants were asked to agree on an informed consent form, stating their voluntarily participation. To be able to participate, the participants also had to indicate that they have been a guest at a&o hotels and hostels. The questionnaire was then structured into two parts. In the first part, the reputation of a&o Hotels and Hostels has been assessed by applying the RepTrak System. As mentioned in the previous section, the RepTrak system has shown to be valid for measuring a company's reputation. The RepTrak System can be divided into two parts. First, the RepTrak Pulse represents the heart of the model and measures the extent to which stakeholders trust, respect, admire and feel good towards a company. Second, the RepTrak System proposes a rationale part, which are the seven pillars on which reputation is built on besides the Pulse that rather concerns the emotional perception of the stakeholders. This study solely investigates the assessment of the seven dimensions on which reputation is built on. Here, participants were asked to indicate to what extent each of the 23 statements describe a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne, Germany using a 7-point Likert Scale ranging from "does not describe well" to "describes very well". In addition to that, respondents had the option to select "not sure" for each statement. The 23 statements belong to the seven dimensions and will be described in the following section.

Product and Service

The Product and Service dimensions is measured by four items. This dimension measures to what extent customers of the a&o in Cologne perceive the company as one that is offering high quality products and services for fair prices and meets the needs of the guests. One example of a statement is: "a&o Hotels and Hostels offers high quality products and services."

Innovation

Innovation is measured by three items and measures to what extent guests perceive the a&o in Cologne to be innovative and adaptive. One example of an item is: "a&o Hotels and Hostels adapts quickly to change."

Workplace

The Workplace dimension is measured by three items and measures to what extent guests of a&o in Cologne perceive the hotel as one that shows concerns about the health and well-being of their employees. One example of an item is: “a&o Hotels and Hostels rewards its employees fairly.”

Governance

Governance is measured by three items and measures to what extent guests of a&o in Cologne perceive the hotel as behaving ethically and being open and transparent regarding their activities. One example of an item is: “a&o Hotels and Hostels is fair in the way it does business.”

Citizenship

Citizenship is measured by three items and measures the extent to which customers of a&o in Cologne perceive the hotel as a positive contributor to society that supports good causes. One example item is: “a&o Hotels and Hostels has a positive influence on society.”

Leadership

Leadership is measured by four items and measures to what extent guests of a&o in Cologne perceive the hotel as one that is managed by excellent managers that have a clear vision for the future. One example of an item is: “a&o Hotels and Hostels is a well organized company.”

Performance

Performance is measured by three items and measures to what extent guests of a&o in Cologne perceive the hotel as financially successful. One example of an item is: “a&o Hotels and Hostels is a profitable company.”

The second part was then related to the current COVID-19 pandemic. A pair-wise comparison method was used in order to find out, which of the seven reputational drivers are perceived as most salient during the corona virus crisis by the customers of a&o hotels and hostels in Cologne, Germany. Here, each of the seven drivers for reputation was compared to one another so that participants had to decide between 21 pairs in terms of their perceived importance for hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pairs were presented in a random sequence. Consequently, the most salient drivers for the reputation during the pandemic were detected. Based on the results of both parts of the questionnaire, weak and strong drivers of a&o hotels and hostels in Cologne were identified versus those that actually rate high in perceived importance. This way, both parts complemented each other and it was possible to detect reputational drivers that both, had most potential to improve a&o hotels and hostels in Cologne, Germany during the corona virus crisis and those that ought to be managed more actively compared to others.

3.2 Participants

The target group of this study were individuals that have been a guest at a&o hotels and hostels at least once since the goal of the study was to measure its reputation from a customer perspective and get insights into the most salient drivers for its reputation during the corona

virus crisis.

A total of 131 participants have filled-in the questionnaire of which 69 were male, 61 female and 1 third gender. The age of the respondents ranges from 19 to 55. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample characteristics.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics

Age	Frequency	Percentage
19-24	35	26,7%
<i>Male</i>	19	
<i>Female</i>	16	
25-34	66	50,4%
<i>Male</i>	31	
<i>Female</i>	34	
<i>Non-binary/ third-gender</i>	1	
35-44	23	17,6%
<i>Male</i>	16	
<i>Female</i>	7	
44-55	7	5,3%
<i>Male</i>	3	
<i>Female</i>	4	

3.3 Treatment of Missing Values

In the first part of the study, the Likert scale included the value 8 indicating that participants were “not sure” to what extent the certain statement describes a&o hostels and hotels. This value was therefore transformed to a missing value in SPSS. A total of 15 missing values were detected regarding the workplace of a&o hostels and hotels in Cologne, indicating that customers might have difficulties with assessing that area.

3.4 Reliability

The reliability of this study has been tested by calculating the Cronbach's alpha using SPSS. The total Cronbach's alpha of .92 indicates a good scale reliability. The Cronbach Alpha for each variable is listed in the table below.

Table 2
Reliability statistics of variables

Variables items	Cronbach's alpha	N of
Product and Service	.69	4
Innovation	.78	3
Workplace	.8	3
Governance	.88	3
Citizenship	.68	3
Leadership	.7	4
Performance	.63	3

3.5 Construct Validity

The RepTrak System has been tested and has been shown to be a valid and reliable tool for measuring reputation. Since there is sufficient empirical support for the validity and reliability of the model, it has been applied in this study as well. However, an explorative factor analysis was conducted nevertheless using SPSS (Table 3). Interestingly, there are only five factors that are above an Eigenvalue of 1, indicating that five factors could be retained. Nevertheless, this study applied the seven factors as proposed by the RepTrak System, since the reliability test indicates a good scale reliability, and since the model has been shown to valid for application in previous research.

Table 3
Factor Analysis

Item	Initial Eigenvalues		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
High quality products and services	9,065	39,415	39,415
Good value for money	2,865	12,456	51,871
Stand behind products	2,174	9,451	61,322
Meets customer needs	1,508	6,558	67,880
Innovative company	1,094	4,756	72,636
Offers new products and services	,964	4,190	76,826
Adapts quickly to change	,841	3,657	80,483
Rewards employee fairly	,760	3,306	83,789
Concerned about employees' health	,650	2,826	86,615
Offers equal opportunities in workplace	,569	2,474	89,089
Open and transparent	,487	2,118	91,207
Behaves ethically	,424	1,841	93,048
Fair in business operations	,385	1,673	94,721
Environmentally friendly	,276	1,198	95,919
Supports good causes	,234	1,015	96,934
Positive influence on society	,170	,740	97,674
strong leader	,141	,614	98,288
Clear vision for future	,123	,535	98,823
Well-organized	,082	,356	99,179
Excellent managers	,075	,328	99,507
Profitable company	,049	,211	99,718
Exceeds financial expectations	,044	,189	99,907
Strong prospect	,021	,093	100,000

4. Results

As mentioned in the previous section, the main findings of this study can be concluded from the comparison between the results of both parts of the questionnaire. To provide an answer to the first research question, the overall mean of each dimension was calculated and compared to another. Table 4 shows the means of the seven dimensions. More specifically, the differences in the means indicate how customers of a&o Hotels and Hostels perceive its performance on these dimensions compared to the others. As depicted in Table 4, five of the seven dimensions were assessed with an overall mean above 4, indicating that the dimensions of financial performance, product and service, governance, leadership and workplace are perceived as factors that rather describe a&o Hotels and Hostels. More specifically, the dimensions that are perceived as the strongest are Performance ($M = 5,71$, $SD = 0,82$), Products and Services ($M = 5,27$, $SD = 0,78$) and Governance ($M = 5,08$, $SD = 1,06$). This points out, that customers perceive the hotel as one that is a profitable company, offers products and services for a fair price and is open, transparent and fair in the way it operates. Further, the mean score of Leadership ($M = 4,8$, $SD = 0,78$) shows that respondents perceive the performance of a&o Hotels and Hostels regarding its management as acceptable. The

same applies for the workplace dimension ($M = 4,43$, $SD = 0,95$), indicating that the hotel is perceived as one that cares sufficiently about its employees. On the contrary, the Innovation dimension ($M = 3,54$, $SD = 0,95$) and Citizenship dimension ($M = 3,83$, $SD = 0,99$) were assessed with a below 4, indicating that customers rather describe the hotel as one that is lacking in innovative qualities and is not active on a social level. In contrast to the performance of other dimensions that drive reputation, the performance regarding a&o Hotels and Hostels Innovation and Citizenship were assessed as the weakest dimensions.

Table 4
Overall mean score comparison between drivers of reputation

	Products and Services	Innovation	Workplace	Governance	Citizenship	Leadership	Performance
N Valid	131	130	116	129	126	128	127
Missing	0	1	15	2	5	3	4
Mean	5,27	3,54	4,43	5,08	3,83	4,80	5,7
Std. Deviation	,77	,95	,95	1,06	,99	,77	,82
Variance	,60	,91	,9	1,13	,98	,6	,67

In order to check whether these differences in the mean scores were significantly different from each other, a General Linear Model with Bonferroni correction was calculated using SPSS. As depicted in Table 4, the assumption of Sphericity was not met, indicating that there are significant differences between the variance of differences. Since Mauchly's Test of Sphericity indicates a violation ($p < .001$), Greenhouse-Geisser (0,69) corrected results are reported.

Table 5
Mauchly's Test of Sphericity

Within Subjects Effect	Mauchly's W	Approx. Chi-Square	df	p	Epsilon ^b		
					Greenhouse -Geisser	Huynh- Feldt	Lower- bound
RepTrak	,268	141,804	20	<.001	,697	,728	,167

Table 5 shows that the mean scores were significantly different from each other, $F(4,180, 459,82) = 119,43$, $p = < .001$.

Table 6
Test of Within Subjects Effects

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
RepTrak						
	Greenhouse-Geisser	391,996	4,180	93,775	119,430	,000
Error(RepTrak)						
	Greenhouse-Geisser	361,043	459,820	,785		

To provide an answer for the second research question, the seven drivers of reputation were compared to another. Consequently, 21 pairs were presented, and participants were asked to indicate which of the dimensions are perceived as more important during the COVID-19 pandemic for each of the 21 pair comparisons. Thus, each of the drivers could have been preferred six times. The most important drivers derived from the calculation of the drivers that were preferred most often compared to the others using SPSS. The mean score was calculated to illustrate how often the dimension was preferred out of six possible selections. Table 6 depicts the seven drivers for reputation and illustrates how often each of them was perceived as more important as another. The mean scores of the Workplace (M=4,64) and Product and Service (M=4,34) dimension indicate that customers perceive these categories as most important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to the other dimensions, the innovation (M=3,83) and citizenship (M=3,95) dimension were evaluated as more important as well. On the other hand, customers perceive the Governance (M=2,62), Financial Performance (1,61), and Leadership (M=1,55) dimension as less important during the pandemic compared to the other dimensions.

Table 7
Drivers perceived as most salient during COVID-19

Drivers of reputation	Mean
Products and Services	4,3488
Innovation	3,8397
Governance	2,6262
Citizenship	3,9538
Workplace	4,6434
Leadership	1,5545
Performance	1,6102

A General Linear Model was used to examine whether the mean values differ significantly from one another, i.e. whether individual dimensions were preferred significantly more often than another. The p-values of these post-hoc comparisons were Bonferroini-corrected.

Table 8
Generalized Linear Model

		Difference	SE	p
Products & Services	Innovation	,000	,425	1,000
	Workplace	1,667	,558	,205
	Governance	,333	,523	1,000
	Citizenship	-1,000	,402	,550
	Leadership	2,267*	,371	,001
	Performance	2,467*	,336	,000
Innovation	Products & Services	,000	,425	1,000
	Workplace	1,667	,549	,187
	Governance	,333	,659	1,000
	Citizenship	-1,000	,488	1,000
	Leadership	2,267*	,408	,001
	Performance	2,467*	,291	,000
Workplace	Products & Services	-1,667	,558	,205
	Innovation	-1,667	,549	,187
	Governance	-1,333	,637	1,000
	Citizenship	-2,667*	,532	,004
	Leadership	,600	,363	1,000
	Performance	,800	,428	1,000
Governance	Products & Services	-,333	,523	1,000
	Innovation	-,333	,659	1,000
	Workplace	1,333	,637	1,000
	Citizenship	-1,333	,454	,228
	Leadership	1,933	,589	,115
	Performance	2,133	,601	,067
Citizenship	Products & Services	1,000	,402	,550
	Innovation	1,000	,488	1,000
	Workplace	2,667*	,532	,004
	Governance	1,333	,454	,228
	Leadership	3,267*	,441	,000
	Performance	3,467*	,477	,000
Leadership	Products & Services	-2,267*	,371	,001
	Innovation	-2,267*	,408	,001
	Workplace	-,600	,363	1,000
	Governance	-1,933	,589	,115
	Citizenship	-3,267*	,441	,000
	Performance	,200	,312	1,000
Performance	Products & Services	-2,467*	,336	,000
	Innovation	-2,467*	,291	,000

Workplace	-,800	,428	1,000
Governance	-2,133	,601	,067
Citizenship	-3,467*	,477	,000
Leadership	-,200	,312	1,000

5. Discussion

The primary goal of this research was to explore how customers of a&o Hotels and Hostels perceive its performance regarding the seven drivers of reputation versus the perceived importance of these drivers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings imply theoretical as well as practical implications for the hotel and for hoteliers in general. The following section will summarize the main findings and its implications.

5.1 Main findings

There are two main conclusions that can be derived based on the research of this study. Generally speaking, those reputational drivers that were strongly associated with a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne were assessed as least important by the guests and vice versa. Thus, those reputational drivers that were perceived as most salient during the coronavirus crisis were least associated with the hotel. The results are depicted in Table 9, showing the ranking of the strongest as well as the most salient drivers. First of all, the Product and Service dimension is highly associated with a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne and is perceived as highly important during the coronavirus crisis as well. However, with regards to the other drivers of reputation, risks as well as opportunities arise from the gap between reputational drivers that were highly associated with the hotel and those that were perceived as most important during the current pandemic. More specially, while the performance, governance and leadership dimension were greatly associated with a&o Hotels and Hostels, customers are more concerned about the workplace, citizenship and innovation of the hotel. The findings of this research therefore suggest that a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne either needs to put more effort in those dimensions that were perceived as most important or needs to communicate their effort more effectively towards their customers. The first research question can hence be answered by looking at the drivers of reputation that were perceived as the strongest ones.

Table 9

Strong drivers versus important drivers during COVID-19 perceived by customers of the a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne, Germany

Perceived as strong drivers	Perceived as important drivers
1. Performance	1. Workplace
2. Products and Services	2. Product and Service
3. Governance	3. Citizenship
4. Leadership	4. Innovation
5. Workplace	5. Governance
6. Citizenship	6. Financial Performance
7. Innovation	7. Leadership

5.2 Practical implications

The following section elaborates a strategic advice for a&o Hotels and Hostels based on the results of the research. Based on the comparison of the reputational drivers that were already strongly associated with a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne and those that were perceived as most important during the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be concluded that there is a need to improve the dimensions of Workplace, Innovation and Citizenship.

Workplace

In comparison to the other drivers of reputation, Workplace was assessed as the most important dimension during the COVID-19 pandemic, while customers perceived the a&o in Cologne to perform rather weak in this area compared to the other drivers. This means that customers of a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne expect the hotel to show concerns about the well-being of their employees. The effort that is being made by the hotel in this area implies great potential to improve its overall reputation since the workplace dimension represent the most important reputational driver during the pandemic. Thus, employees are one of the main stakeholders during this pandemic and need to be considered in particular by the hotel. It is therefore crucial for the reputation management of a&o to ensure the health of its employees by reducing the risks of getting infected through safety measures and provide medical equipment such as face masks or rapid COVID-19 tests. Although the hospitality industry faces financial hardships, customers highly appreciate hotels that protect the jobs of their employees even in these unprecedented times. perceived as most important. Employees are one of the most important stakeholders during this pandemic.

Products and Services

This dimension was strongly associated with a&o Hotels and Hostels compared to the other predictors of reputation and was perceived as relatively important compared to the others as well. The product and service quality therefore remains an important driver of the hotel's

reputation. Customers therefore seem to admire if the hotel continues to offer the same quality of its products and services despite the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Citizenship

The extent to which a&o Hotels and Hostels supports good causes and contributes to society represent an important driver of reputation during the coronavirus crisis. This include activities that are implemented to fight the pandemic such as hygiene concept and hygiene monitoring for example. The research of the RepTrak Company confirms the positive effect of COVID-19 related activities on the reputation of companies (RepTrak Company, 2020). Thus, corporate responsibility practices imply high potential to boost the reputation of a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne, Germany.

Innovation

Although Innovation is perceived as less important as Workplace, Citizenship and Products and Services, it might imply great potential to boost the reputation of a&o Hotels and Hostels considering that customers perceive the hotel performing weak in that area compared to the other drivers of reputation. Consequently, the implementation of new technologies that reduce face-to-face interactions for example might increase customers respect and admiration towards the hotel and hence improve its reputation. As mentioned in the previous section, introducing new technologies in a hotel imply other beneficial outcomes for hotels aside from its positive impact on reputation and positively affects customers booking intention through reduced health perceptions. Besides technologies, a&o Hotels and Hostels might benefit from introducing new ways of doing business. For example, during the times where only vaccinated, tested or recovered people are allowed to be checked in, the hotel could cooperate with a test station nearby where guests have the chance to be tested.

5.3 Theoretical implications

The provided reputation management approach facilitates to identify those reputational drivers that imply great potential to improve a hotels' reputation. The study highlights the need of monitoring stakeholders' sentiment in crisis situations. According to the Harvard Business Review (2007), the reputation management of various companies follows a passive approach where reputation is managed when damaged already occurred due to an organizational crisis. This study demonstrates how reputation can be actively managed in order to explore potential risks and opportunities regarding the reputation of an organization.

5.4 Research limitations and future research

There are several limitations that need to be addressed in this study. First and foremost, it need to be acknowledged that the first part of the questionnaire solely researched customers associations of the seven reputational drivers with a&o Hotels and Hostels and failed to measure the reputation of the hotel. The dependent variable "corporate reputation" could have been measured by taking the four core areas into account which are trust, esteem, admire, and good feeling of the RepTrak, measuring the stakeholders' perceptions towards the company. Although the seven drivers of reputation were statistically proven (Fombrun, Ponzi & Newbury, 2005), there are other predictors that might drive the reputation of a&o Hotels and

Hostels in Cologne. A further limitation concerns the sample population. This study explored the perceptions of a&o Hotels and Hostels customers. However, there are other stakeholder groups as well, which might have a different opinion regarding the importance of the drivers of reputation. For example, investors of a&o Hotels and Hostels are likely to perceive the hotel's financial performance as more important compared to the other factors. Thus, it can be assumed that the results are likely to be different across different stakeholder groups. Furthermore, some participants reached out to the researcher, stating that they experienced difficulties to answer some parts of the questionnaire because of limited knowledge regarding the different factors. The findings of the study reflect these experiences: 15 participants selected the "not sure" option when asked to indicate whether the workplace dimension describes a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne (e.g., Table 4). Lastly, in order to classify the calculated means, this study assumed that a mean above 4 describes that the hotel would perform rather "well" than "bad" within that dimension and a mean below 4 would indicate that a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne would perform rather "bad" than "well" in that dimension. In order to classify the results in a more detailed manner, a previous classification of mean scores is recommended. The interpretation of the results of this study are hence rather explorative.

Although this study provides insights in customers' perceived importance of the seven drivers of reputation during the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains unclear whether the coronavirus has changed the expectations of customers. Future research should therefore focus on the effect of the pandemic on customer expectations by monitoring their perceptions during and after the crisis for example. In addition to that, while this study suggest that Workplace, Citizenship and Innovation are areas where actions and proper communication potentially imply a positive impact on the reputation of a&o Hotels and Hostels, it remains unclear which actions within these dimensions imply the greatest potential to boost the reputation of a&o Hotels and Hostels.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the customer perceptions of a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne, Germany with regards to the perceived performance within seven different drivers of reputation as well as to the perceived importance of different drivers of reputation during the COVID-19 pandemic. To summarize, this study found that customers rather associate the dimensions Performance, Governance and Products and Services with a&o Hotels and Hostels compared to the other drivers of reputation. On the contrary, the dimensions Leadership, Performance, and Governance were perceived as least important during the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison with the other factors. The drivers Citizenship, Workplace and Innovation were least associated with a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne, while these are the factors that were perceived as most important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, if these areas are not properly managed by the hotel reputation risk might arise. The provided reputation management approach can be adopted by other organizations as well and highlights the need of actively managing reputation, especially during crisis situations. Scientific literature emphasizes the importance of reputation management. Hoteliers in particular are in need of finding ways to rapidly recover from the implications of the coronavirus crisis. This paper underlines how reputation management

represents a strategic crisis management asset. Since there is only limited research regarding the reputation management of hotels during the current pandemic, this paper provides new insights into the differences between management areas that are perceived as strong and those that are actually perceived as important and sheds light on how risks and opportunities of an organizations' reputation can be actively managed.

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Appendices

Online questionnaire

Introduction

Dear Participant,

Thank you for participating in this study. This study examines how guests perceive a&o Hotels and Hostels. We would like to find out what you think we are doing well and where we still have room for improvement. In addition to that, the COVID-19 crisis poses new challenges to all of us. Therefore, we would like to investigate what our customers think is most important during these times.

The study consists of two parts. First, you will be given statements regarding a&o Hotels and Hostels in Cologne, Germany. For each statement, you will be asked to indicate how well the statement describes a&o Hotels and Hostels according to you. In the second part, you will be asked to rank several topics related to a&o Hotels and Hostels according to your perceived importance. Please note that there are no right or wrong answers and that this study examines your own perceptions. You are free to stop the survey at any point of time without giving any further explanation. Your data will be used anonymously and only for the purpose of this study.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions:

f.schurhoff@student.utwente.nl

Thank you in advance.

Informed Consent

I have read and understood the previous information. I agree that my data will be used anonymously and only for the purpose of this study. I am aware that I can withdraw from the study at any point of time.

Yes

No

Screener

Before we begin, we would like to make sure you qualify for the study. Please indicate whether you have already been a guest at a&o Hotels and Hostels.

Yes

No

Demographics

What is your gender?

Male

Female

Non-binary / third-gender

Prefer not to say

What is your age?

Part 1: Assessment of reputational drivers

Please indicate to what extent the following statements describe a&o Hotels and Hostels from your point of view

a&o Hotels and Hostels...

Demonstrate

s concern

for the

health and

well-being

of its

employees

(9)



Offers equal

opportunities

in the

workplace

(10)



Is open and

transparent

about the

way the

company

operates

(11)



Behaves

ethically

(12)



Part 2: Assessment of most salient drivers during COVID-19

In the following section you will be asked to indicate how important the following factors are according to you, considering the implications of the current coronavirus crisis.

Please keep in mind that there are no wrong or right answers. This research examines your own subjective perception.

During the current COVID-19 pandemic, I perceive it is more important that a&o Hotels and Hostels

... stands behind its products and services, offers high quality products and services with a good value for money despite of the COVID-19 pandemic

... adapts quickly to new COVID-19 regulations, finds new ways of offering its products and services, is innovative in the way it operates during COVID-19

During the current COVID-19 crisis, I perceive it is more important that a&o Hotels and Hostels

... stands behind its products and services, offers high quality products and services with a good value for money despite of the COVID-19 pandemic

way it operates during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the current COVID-19 crisis, I perceive it is more important that a&o Hotels and Hostels

- ... stands behind its products and services, offers high quality products and services with a good value for money despite of the COVID-19 pandemic

 - ... acts responsibly to protect the environment, supports good causes, has a positive influence on society
-

During the current COVID-19 crisis, I perceive it is more important that a&o Hotels and Hostels

- ... stands behind its products and services, offers high quality products and services with a good value for money despite of the COVID-19 pandemic

 - ... rewards its employees fairly, demonstrates concern for the health and well-being of its employees, offers equal opportunities in the workplace
-

During the current COVID-19 crisis, I perceive it is more important that a&o Hotels and Hostels

- ... stands behind its products and services, offers high quality products and services with a good value for money despite of the COVID-19 pandemic

 - ... has a strong and appealing leader, has a clear vision for its future, is a well-organized company
-

During the current COVID-19 crisis, I perceive it is more important that a&o Hotels and Hostels

- ... stands behind its products and services, offers high quality products and services with a good value for money despite of the COVID-19 pandemic

 - that are better than expected, shows strong prospects for future growth
-

During the current COVID-19 crisis, I perceive it is more important that a&o Hotels and Hostels

... adapts quickly to new COVID-19 regulations, finds new ways of offering its products and services, is innovative in the way it operates during COVID-19

... is fair, ethical and transparent in the way it operates during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the current COVID-19 crisis, I perceive it is more important that a&o Hotels and Hostels

... adapts quickly to new COVID-19 regulations, finds new ways of offering its products and services, is innovative in the way it operates during COVID-19

... acts responsibly to protect the environment, supports good causes, has a positive influence on society

During the current COVID-19 crisis, I perceive it is more important that a&o Hotels and Hostels

- ... adapts quickly to new COVID-19 regulations, finds new ways of offering its products and services, is innovative in the way it operates during COVID-19
 - ... rewards its employees fairly, demonstrates concern for the health and well being of its employees, offers equal opportunities in the workplace
-

During the current COVID-19 crisis, I perceive it is more important that a&o Hotels and Hostels

- ... adapts quickly to new COVID-19 regulations, finds new ways of offering its products and services, is innovative in the way it operates during COVID-19
 - ... has a strong and appealing leader, has a clear vision for its future, is a well-organized company
-

During the current COVID-19 crisis, I perceive it is more important that a&o Hotels and Hostels

- ... adapts quickly to new COVID-19 regulations, finds new ways of offering its products and services, is innovative in the way it operates during COVID-19
- ... is a profitable company, delivers financial results that are better than expected, shows strong prospects for future growth

During the current COVID-19 crisis, I perceive it is more important that a&o Hotels and Hostels

... is fair, ethical and transparent in the way it operates during the COVID-19 pandemic

... acts responsibly to protect the environment, supports good causes, has a positive influence on society

During the current COVID-19 crisis, I perceive it is more important that a&o Hotels and Hostels

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