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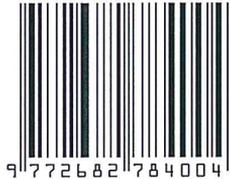
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# MALAYSIAN PERCEPTIONS ON RAYANI AIR'S ISLAMIC CORPORATE IMAGE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE FUTURE ISLAMIC AIRLINES

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## ABSTRACT

*Rayani Air's establishment as the fourth Islamic airline in world and the first Islamic carrier received spectrum attention from the top to bottom line of public in Malaysia and worldwide. However, Rayani Air failed to maintain its good publicity and the consistency of a good Islamic corporate image. Their reputation declined as they failed to solve several issues and crises that occurred which led to its shutdown. The researcher conducted the interview sessions with the company founder, ex-customers of Rayani Air, the aviation and 'shariah' experts and did content analysis to explore the corporate issue of Rayani Air. Objective: The findings of this study will embark the new guideline of the real practice of Islamic corporate image in any airline corporations based on the notions and needs of public in Malaysia. Knowing the market Islamic identity or label that layered behind the organisations' image is vital necessity for the need of Muslim consumers around the world. Results: Majority of the public changed their positive perceptions negatively after the shutdown of Rayani Air. Their perceptions of Rayani Air's corporate image are moderately satisfied. Most of the informants admitted that they were keen on its Islamic identity and trigger their attention to try out the service but what made most of them bought the ticket were because of its affordable ticket fare, cheap but high-quality service provided at the beginning of the company's kick-start. Their biggest disappointments were the failure of the company to fulfil the promises of good 'shariah' services to the customers. Conclusion: It is crucial for the Islam based business entrepreneurs to learn the facts and give their utmost respect towards the religion while making profit for both owners' and costumers' benefits which uplifting the name of Islam itself world widely. Aviation industry is a dog-eat-dog deal. One cannot simply manipulate the holiness of Islam for the sake of self-profit in the business. Right image with wrong intention will dim the white and light of Islam among the public.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The field of transportation has gradually broadened as it is a necessary component of economic growth and improved quality of modern life. In this millennial era, aviation is the principal form of transportation for business. In order to compete and to differentiate their corporate image and brand identity with other established airlines, Rayani Air used Islamic corporate image as their market segmentation. Their first Shariah compliant airline concept was highly accepted and welcomed by the Malaysian. In Malaysia, there are growing appeals for the implementation of Islamic identity in an organization in its corporate image, company branding, marketing approach, regulation and contract law and others which by considered novice and currently highly in demand as the major population of Malaysian are Muslim. However, the practice of Islamic corporate images and services are pretty uncommon in non-Muslim countries and among non-Muslim. Due to this new demand, the uses of 'shariah' concept has been widely adopted in humongous fields as we witness the appearance and rapid expansion in Islamic designated services in conversional bank and tourism sectors. The changes of demographics and purchasing power of Muslim consumers and the success of Muslim entrepreneurs have begun to render Islamic marketing a scholarly and managerially attractive field (Sandikci, 2011).

Hence, in Malaysia, the trend of implementing Islam as part of business identity are also being accepted and welcomed by the non-Muslim in this multi-racial country consisting of Malays, Chinese, Indians and numerous indigenous people. A company's corporate image can be seen and examined from various angles and perspectives. Some people associate the company with its graphical image while others link it with its product ranges and services. The pressure on companies to stand out constantly increases due to the ever-increasing competition and this phenomenon has been widely observed. This business trend has received substantial interest as the companies that successfully manage their brand can expect benefits such as advantages of market entry and differentiation over their competitors (Hatch & Schultz, 2008). Rayani Air was the fourth Islamic airline in the world after Royal Brunei Airlines, Saudi Arabian Airlines and Iran Air and Rayani Air was vividly known as the first Islamic airline in Malaysia. It promoted the Islamic image as their corporate identity and bowed to serve the best 'shariah' service as the backbone of their company structure. It was a bright news to the Muslims to have such Shariah compliant airline concept that fit into the Islam culture in this country. For them, using Islamic concept in their daily deals is an obvious choice as they simultaneously enhance their deeds and fulfil their religious obligations.

A challenging problem which arises in this domain is when the entrepreneurs either Muslim or non-Muslim did not comprehend a fine understanding of implementing the 'shariah' as a deed of religion sake or 'ibadah' not only chasing the monetary profit. The changes of demographics and purchasing power of Muslim consumers and the success of Muslim entrepreneurs have begun to render Islamic marketing a scholarly and managerially attractive field as mentioned by Sandikci (2011) as cited in (Yusof & Jusoh, 2014). However, after few months, the rated excellent performance of Rayani Air was decreased abruptly due to its external and internal crisis. The organization's failure of maintaining the good image of Islam and its practices into their services has brought plethora of criticism, crashing reviews, negative remarks and labels from top to bottom of national level on its company identity as the first Islamic Airline in Malaysia. This leads to myriad problems and dilemmas among Muslim consumers and creates the blatantly confusion among non-Muslim customers about the beauty of Islam principles and image economically. The researchers characterize different aspects of the Islamic corporate image concept used by Rayani air which carried the image of Islam religion and the problem with such an implementation when the organization failed to keep upright of 'shariah' efficiency and effectiveness in its services as promised. There is plethora of

previous conducted researches linked to corporate image in aviation management industry however, in our knowledge, no study has yielded the research on the Islamic concept expansion on the conservative corporate image specifically in aviation field.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The researcher chose the triangulation method in gathering data for this qualitative research design. By using the case study as the core underlying basis of research, the researcher also used content analysis and interview method to strengthen the data collection to understand the crisis of Rayani Air in depth. Bryman, A. (2012) pointed that triangulation method is used to gain good understanding from different perspectives of an investigated phenomenon. That should not necessarily mean cross-checking data from at least two sources or methods and confirming it is correct or not. It is more to increase the level of knowledge about something and to strengthen the researcher's standpoint from various aspects. The data collection is aimed to capture different dimensions of the same phenomenon. Whereas, the basic of case study method are used to provide the researcher with a humongous range of information about a single case which lead to forward deep and focused insight in understanding a current phenomenon in the society. According to Yin (2014), what makes case study research distinct from experimental studies is the case study is investigated in context, examined in its real-world setting. This case study reviewed the issues and crises of Rayani Air before and after its shutdown from the public perspectives by the content analysis method too which specifically focused on both traditional and new media feeds. To understand this phenomenon better, the researcher used mixed tools such as literature review, media documentation, direct observation participation and semi-structure interviews. The semi-structured interview was chosen as it is a more flexible version of the structured interview as "it allows depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the informants' responses" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The interview itself provides rich data as the value of interviewing is not only because it builds a holistic snapshot, analyses words, reports detailed, views of informants; but also, because it enables interviewees to "speak in their own voice and express their own thoughts and feelings" (Alshenqeeti, H. 2014). All the interviews data were collected and transcribed into transcript along with the addition information from the media documentation and observation. In the final stage of analysis, the researchers determined the coding frame, sort material into categories, looked for overlap among codes, combined codes and merge the findings in few themes and lastly count frequency of codes after ran the manual thematic analysis.

## 2. CONFLICTS & CRITIQUES OF RAYANI AIR COMPANY

Asyraf Wajdi Dasuki (2016) stressed that the concept of Shariah should not be limited to attire, but most importantly, its implementation should be made wider. He strongly justified that Islam is not a label, let alone to be bought or sold. But its principles, values and morals need to be fulfilled along the way. What happened to Rayani Air may affect the non-Muslims' perceptions towards Islam, who may see Islam as religion that stresses only on outward appearances. Any organization should not to use Islam to gain popularity, without fully understanding and implementing its values. It is afraid to lead the misconception of Sharia compliance which conducted by Rayani Air and will affect the image of Islam religion itself among the public especially non-Muslims.

Ironically, the backbones who started Rayani Air are Hindus, perhaps an indication that a business opportunity knows no religion boundaries. In our local nature, the brand that uses religion as their image or compliance usually is attractive and trustable to consume as the value of religion

itself is heartfelt among the Muslims' acceptance and as the most welcoming tradition in any affair. As opined by Adeniji, A. Adenike, Osibanjo, A. Omotayo, Abiodun, Abolaji Joachim and Oni-Ojo, E. E. (2015), the past researchers on corporate image were incorporated to create a platform for framework which identifies the variables of relationship between corporate image and customer loyalty cum profitability. Any corporate company or organisation will certainly get benefits from its positive corporate image such as loyal customers, competent employees and become a magnet of attraction to potential stakeholders and investors. These positive features of a company will entice the customers to use their product or service and increase the brand loyalty among them. Rayani Air managed to entice public to purchase their branding experience as it labelled itself as the first and only sharia-compliant airline in Malaysia. The white feedbacks turned black after they failed to tackle the issues that raised in the company till it became a company crisis and nation controversies. The former Minister of The Prime Minister's Department, Asyraf Wajdi Dasuki (2016) added that Rayani Air needs to improve many things, including its services as a Shariah compliant airline company.

There is a variety-seeking, a dissonance reducing, habitual and complex buying behaviour of the airline customers (Geraldine, O. 2013). Research has shown that specification in planning is associated with a greater likelihood to perform the behavior (Scholzetal, 2008). Based on Rayani Air chronology, we can see that the management did not plan neatly on what to do during the unexpected incidents, communication crisis and financial turbulence which lead to costumers' anger, frustration, confusion, and dissatisfaction. Among the issues that were highlighted by the public are the unsolved refund issue, employees' delayed pay, disorganized interview arrangement for the new intake employees, handwritten flight ticket pass and many more issues.

### 3. FINDINGS

**3.1 Research Objective 1:** To find out the elements of Rayani Air's Islamic corporate image that are recognized by the public and the reason why did they choose to use the service.

Based on the interviews, the researcher can sum up that the informants can sense Rayani Air's corporate image mostly based on the external image and appearance. They do agree that Rayani Air brought the image of Islam elements in their company and they can see the shariah-compliant service has been practiced in the company but at different level of understanding and acceptance. Most of the informants agreed on the same corporate image elements. They were attracted to use it because of its cheap service price and the Islamic elements of its corporate image were their major attraction that differentiates Rayani Air from other carriers.

**3.2 Research Objective 2:** To understand the perceptions of public the implementation of Islamic image of Rayani Air during the establishment and after the shutdown.

Overall, the public perception of Rayani Airs corporate image during its establishment was good and positive. Albeit few informants sensed their corporate image was only for profit based and have negative thought but they did not deny the fact that Rayani Air set a new good benchmark in airline world for Muslims' alternative. After the shutdown, majority of the informants have changed their positive perception towards negative. They agreed that Rayani Air's corporate image was not fully Islamic and not really Shariah compliance based. Most of the informants believed that the displayed Islamic airline image just been used for profit-based and few believed the founders' intention were wrong from the beginning. Most of them agreed that the wrong conduct of Rayani Air against the core value of Islam. This is majorly caused by Rayani Air's false promising to their customers

and employees. Hundreds were stranded at the airport just because the company promised them the cancelled flight will be replaced in short. They also cancelled the flight with short notice and other issues occurred.

Few of the informants, despite of the occurred issues, they still have positive perception of Rayani Air. When others have lost their trust to this airline because of their bad service, they were still considering and keep on using their service because to them Rayani Air still new and it takes time to establish a company with a good corporate image especially with Islamic identity. Rayani Air was a good alternative to them compared to other airlines. Albite the founders are non-Muslim does not lead their perception negatively. They were wondering why the Muslims did not come out with the same idea like the founders, Mr.Ravi, his wife and his business partners. The idea was great and public enjoyed the concept of Rayani Air's Islamic corporate image.

**3.3 Research Objective 3:** To understand how the public perception of Rayani Air's Islamic corporate image failure affect its comeback or the other upcoming Islamic airlines in future.

To sum up the findings for objective 3, the shutdown of Rayani Air left negative perception among majority of the public due to their poor way to solve the crisis. However, most of them still remember some part of Rayani Air's good image at the beginning of establishment and they still hoping that if Rayani Air make a comeback as announced by the founder, they will make a huge improvement and keep the good corporate image consistently including the service so that they will able to experience Islamic branding airline culture again at the affordable price. The case or Rayani Air did not affect much their perception on International Islamic airlines as much as it affected on Rayani Air itself and other local upcoming Islamic airline in future. They will be alert and beware at the highest state of choosing the next upcoming new airline especially the one who labels them under the Islamic identity.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In contrast, despite of what happened, there were some positive hopes and wishes from the public for Rayani Air to make comeback in better condition, services and practices in future as it hit many hearts of Muslims at the early stage of existence. The company's Islamic image had been accepted by the non-Muslims in this country based on the interview and content analysis findings conducted by the researcher. This what makes Malaysia known as one of the countries with a unique identity which structured and layered based on the diversity of people's race, religion and culture (Abdul Rauf Ridzuan, 2012). Malaysian government goal is to preserve and enhance this unity in diversity which has always been Malaysian strength and remains its best hope for the future. By and large, there is a major need of Muslim costumers for Islamic and Shariah compliant products and services based. If the corporations' founders, owners, employees, marketing and communication practisers do not understand the weight of carrying the Islamic identity as the shield of business nature, it will violate and abuse the trust of Muslim costumers in practicing their 'ibadah' through purchasing routine. The most ironic consequence of this unsolved crisis would be if the wrong conception and implementation of Islamic image and identity by any companies especially airlines companies who fly the passengers around the world across the social, cultural and geographic borders will lead to the wrong judgement to the core value of Islam religion itself they see and feel the wrong Islamic branding experience. The misconception of Islam religion caused by the wrong business conduct will scratch the purity of Islam as the way of life and also stab the shield of Muslims genuine personality as encouraged in the holy Al-Quran.

The failure of Rayani Air's Islamic corporate image should be recognized and identified from the root of problems and the understanding of public perceptions' perspectives regarding this matter will help any business entity with Islam label to have crystal clear understanding on how to conduct their business nature appropriately align with the Islam religion teachings as their core value aside from the profit agenda. In any business conducts, the owner must set a good attention to run a business that helps the growth of economy and expands the good alternatives for customers' choices. The idea could be based on profit intention but it is the owner's responsibility to fulfil the promises that have been made to their stakeholders, mainly their customers. Muslim businessmen need to carry a heavier burden since the sense of god-consciousness must be observed in their overall business conduct.

Therefore, the responsibilities would be much heavier for the non-Muslim to conduct an Islamic identity business as they do not practice it in normal routine. As the repercussion, Islam is a religion of peace that encourages human being to lead their way of life in kindness spiritual circle and one should never across the line for the sake of everyone's harmony sphere. Any entrepreneur or company who wishes to use Islam values as the business corporate image or identity must not violate its holy belief by misconduct or malpractice that forbidden in the religion itself. The misleading Islam image to one's corporate identity will spark the anger among the Muslim customers and also lead to prejudice and misconception of the pure values in Islam among non-Muslims community. Without the proper measurement and late action on crisis management, it will tarnish not only the religion image but also the cease the potential and good reputation of new start-up company like Rayani Air to its closedown.

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