



REPUTATION AS COMPETITIVE CAPITAL: EVALUATING CORPORATE REPUTATION IN THE FINANCIAL SECTOR

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Abstract:

Corporate reputation plays a critical role in the financial sector, influencing stakeholder trust, organizational legitimacy, and long-term competitiveness. This study aims to evaluate reputation performance within the financial sector through a comprehensive, stakeholder-centered lens. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates quantitative insights drawn from the RepTrak model—measuring seven core reputation dimensions—with qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews and pulse surveys. Findings indicate that the sector demonstrates strong performance in areas such as product and service quality, operational success, and corporate citizenship. However, innovation and workplace environment emerged as weaker dimensions, pointing to critical development opportunities. Pulse data reinforces the importance of trust, leadership visibility, and customer-centricity in shaping positive stakeholder perceptions. Stakeholders express expectations not only for high-quality services but also for ethical leadership, transparency, and responsiveness—particularly through digital channels. Qualitative insights further highlight the role of emotional engagement, societal value creation, and internal-external alignment in building resilient reputational capital. Strengthening employer branding, expanding corporate social responsibility initiatives, and fostering accessible leadership communication are identified as strategic priorities. Moreover, real-time responsiveness to customer needs via digital innovation is seen as essential for reinforcing reputational strength. This research contributes to reputation literature by offering an integrated and practice-oriented assessment model, while also providing actionable insights for financial institutions seeking to enhance stakeholder alignment and adapt to evolving sectoral expectations. The study concludes that reputation management in the financial sector must be dynamic, transparent, and multidimensional to ensure sustainable competitive advantage.

Keywords:

corporate reputation, financial sector, stakeholder engagement, RepTrak, qualitative insights

JEL Code:

M1, M10

1. Introduction

In today's complex, dynamic, and highly interconnected business environment, corporate reputation has emerged as one of the most valuable intangible assets for organizations across sectors—particularly for financial institutions, where trust, credibility, and risk perception are integral to operational legitimacy. Increasing evidence supports the strategic weight of reputation; recent global executive surveys reveal that 33% of leaders attribute 76% or more of their firm's market value directly to its reputation. This data highlights the evolving understanding of reputation not just as a byproduct of performance, but as a critical enabler of strategic success, stakeholder engagement, and long-term competitiveness.

In the financial sector—comprising banking, insurance, investment services, and fintech—reputation assumes an even more prominent role. Institutions in this sector operate in a trust-sensitive landscape where reputational signals influence client acquisition, investor confidence, regulatory goodwill, and crisis resilience. A strong reputation serves as a buffer against market volatility, enhances stakeholder loyalty, and shapes public expectations regarding the ethical and responsible behavior of financial actors. Despite its intangible nature, reputation yields tangible organizational outcomes by influencing behaviors, enabling access to strategic partnerships, and reinforcing corporate legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders.

This study aims to evaluate the reputation of financial institutions from a stakeholder-centric perspective, uncovering how various internal and external stakeholders perceive these organizations in terms of credibility, ethical commitment, service quality, innovation, and social responsibility. It further seeks to identify the strategic advantages of possessing a strong reputational foundation and to highlight critical areas that require development to ensure alignment with evolving expectations. In doing so, the study provides actionable insights for reputation management in the financial sector, with a particular focus on digital transformation, stakeholder trust, and adaptive leadership.

The relevance of reputation has been amplified by the profound shifts introduced by Industry 4.0 and the digital transformation of organizational communication. In today's hyper-visible digital landscape, corporate actions—particularly those related to sustainability, transparency, and ethical governance—are subject to immediate and continuous evaluation by diverse stakeholders through social media, digital platforms, and third-party watchdogs. Thus, managing reputation is no longer a reactive mechanism for damage control during crises; it has evolved into a strategic and proactive function that requires a sustained commitment to transparency, accountability, and innovation.

At the organizational level, reputation management now entails aligning corporate values and behaviors with digital-age expectations. Companies are expected not only to deliver high-quality products and services but also to operate with integrity, contribute meaningfully to societal well-being, and communicate authentically across all platforms. In this context, financial institutions must navigate the dual pressures of maintaining stakeholder confidence and demonstrating ethical leadership in a digitally networked society. Building on this backdrop, a growing body of academic literature has sought to conceptualize reputation as a multidimensional construct, define its antecedents and consequences, and explore how it can be strategically leveraged for competitive advantage. Particularly in finance-driven industries, where perception often precedes performance, the ability to manage and enhance reputation across stakeholder groups has become a vital aspect of strategic management.

This study contributes to this ongoing discourse by offering a multi-method, stakeholder-based evaluation of reputation in the financial sector. Through the integration of quantitative assessments (based on the RepTrak model) and qualitative insights (gathered from stakeholder interviews and pulse surveys), it sheds light on how financial institutions can build reputational resilience, improve stakeholder alignment, and enhance their position in an increasingly scrutinized and rapidly evolving environment.

2. Theoretical Framework

Corporate reputation is a multidimensional construct that draws upon diverse theoretical foundations to explain how it is built, maintained, and perceived across stakeholder groups. In this study, several key theories are employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of corporate reputation, particularly within the context of the financial sector. These include Institutional Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, Stakeholder Theory, Signaling/Impression Management Theory, Identity Theory, Resource-Based View, and Social Construction Theory (Fombrun, 2012). Each contributes uniquely to understanding the dynamics of reputational capital.

Institutional Theory focuses on the contextual foundations of reputation, emphasizing how organizations gain legitimacy and social support. It posits that firms are influenced by the institutional norms, rules, and expectations of their environments, and must align their behaviors accordingly to be perceived as legitimate actors. In the financial sector, where regulatory and ethical standards are highly salient, institutional alignment plays a critical role in shaping trust and public confidence.

Agenda-Setting Theory highlights the power of mass media in shaping public discourse and stakeholder perceptions. Media outlets serve as central agents in constructing and amplifying organizational reputation. The theory suggests that increased media visibility leads to greater recall and influence—organizations that are more frequently featured in media narratives are more likely to be perceived as reputable. For financial institutions, positive media exposure is crucial for reinforcing credibility and transparency in the public eye.

Stakeholder Theory provides a foundational framework for identifying the various groups that influence and are influenced by organizational activities. It emphasizes that organizations must regularly assess and align with the preferences of distinct stakeholder groups—such as shareholders, customers, employees, regulators, and NGOs—to maintain reputational strength. Primary stakeholders (e.g., employees and customers) and secondary stakeholders (e.g., media and competitors) may hold differing expectations and perspectives, necessitating a differentiated approach to reputation management (Ali et al., 2014).

Identity Theory addresses the distinctiveness, consistency, and continuity of an organization's self-concept. It explores how firms define themselves and express that identity through behaviors, values, and stakeholder relationships. In a competitive and trust-sensitive sector like finance, projecting a coherent and relatable organizational identity is fundamental to fostering loyalty and stakeholder engagement (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Social Construction Theory conceptualizes reputation as a collective, socially constructed outcome that reflects the aggregated perceptions of multiple stakeholders. It posits that reputation is not a fixed or objective quality, but rather emerges from interactions, narratives, and symbolic exchanges across stakeholder networks. In this view, reputation is fluid and shaped by meaning-making processes rooted in social context (Fombrun, et al., 2015).

2.1. Corporate Reputation

This bibliometric map visualizes the most influential academic journals in the field of corporate reputation between 1975 and 2021, as well as the interconnections among them. Journals such as *Corporate Reputation Review* and the *Journal of Business Ethics* occupy a central position in the literature and demonstrate strong linkages with other

scholarly outlets. The map reveals how corporate reputation is approached across multiple disciplines, including marketing, management, and ethics, and highlights the dynamic interactions between these academic domains (Hamidi et al., 2023).

2.1. Corporate Reputation Measurement: RepTrak

Both rankings provide critical indicators for analyzing companies' reputational value and the strength of their connection with society. The Most Admired Companies list reflects how organizations are perceived by a broad audience, while the Reputation Quotient evaluates corporate reputation based on social responsibility and ethical standards. Therefore, the 2024 data offer important insights into identifying companies that excel in reputation management and demonstrate strong societal engagement.

The World's Most Admired Companies ranking is widely recognized as a global benchmark of corporate prestige. This list is compiled based on a broad set of criteria, including leadership, innovation, quality of products and services, and employee satisfaction. It goes beyond financial performance to evaluate companies' long-term reputation. As such, it reflects how well-regarded and respected companies are within the global business community (Forbes, 2024).

The 2024 Reputation Quotient, conducted by AXIOS and The Harris Poll, is another prominent reputation index that measures key dimensions of corporate reputation such as trustworthiness, ethical values, and social responsibility. By capturing public perceptions and levels of trust, the Reputation Quotient offers insights into how successful companies are in managing their reputation and fulfilling their societal responsibilities (Harris Poll, 2024).

There are numerous approaches to measuring corporate reputation, each leading to the development of different strategies. However, a major challenge in evaluating corporate reputation lies in the fact that existing measurement criteria are often one-dimensional, limited in scope, or focused on specific stakeholder groups. For instance, respondents may be asked to rate a company's reputation on a scale from "poor" to "excellent," but such simplistic assessments often fail to explain why a company holds a stronger or weaker reputation. The conceptual ambiguities and methodological diversity surrounding reputation measurement further complicate evaluations in this domain. To address these challenges, the RepTrak model offers a comprehensive tool that has been widely adopted to assess the reputation of financial institutions. The RepTrak model evaluates reputation across multiple dimensions, including financial performance, leadership, product and service quality, innovation, workplace environment, citizenship, and governance. By integrating the perceptions of various stakeholder groups, the model enables a more holistic and nuanced assessment of corporate reputation (RepTrak, 2024).

The RepTrak model is one of the most widely adopted frameworks for assessing corporate reputation. It evaluates how people feel, think, and act toward companies, not only based on rational performance indicators but also through emotional and behavioral responses. Reputation, in this context, is not a singular or static concept; rather, it is a multi-dimensional construct shaped by a range of performance and perception-based indicators.

The model measures reputation on a scale from 0 to 100, categorizing it as follows: 80–100 (Excellent), 70–79 (Strong), 60–69 (Average), 40–59 (Weak), and 0–39 (Poor). This scoring system enables organizations to diagnose their reputational standing and take action based on different stakeholder insights (Ponzi et al., 2011).

RepTrak identifies seven core dimensions that influence stakeholders' perceptions of reputation (Fombrun, et al. 2015)

- Products and Services: Delivering high-quality, reliable, and valuable offerings that meet consumer needs.
- Innovation: Being seen as adaptive, forward-looking, and capable of bringing new ideas or solutions to the market.
- Workplace Environment: Treating employees fairly, fostering a positive internal culture, and being considered a good place to work.
- Governance: Operating with integrity, transparency, and fairness.
- Leadership: Being recognized for strong and visionary leadership.
- Citizenship: Demonstrating a commitment to societal well-being and responsible corporate citizenship.
- Performance: Achieving solid financial results and delivering long-term value.

By integrating these diverse elements, the RepTrak model provides a holistic approach to understanding and managing reputation. It allows financial institutions to align their strategic communication, stakeholder engagement, and operational behavior with key areas that shape their reputational capital.

3.1 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to evaluate the reputation performance of institutions operating within the financial services sector in Turkey, based on the perceptions and expectations of both internal and external stakeholders. The objective is to explore how different stakeholder groups assess the reputational standing of financial institutions and to identify key drivers that shape reputational capital, trust, and long-term legitimacy.

3.2 Research Design

To capture the multidimensional nature of corporate reputation and provide a comprehensive analysis, the study employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches.

- Quantitative Phase:

The quantitative component was based on the RepTrak model, which assesses corporate reputation across seven core dimensions: products and services, innovation, workplace environment, governance, citizenship, leadership, and performance. This model also includes emotional and behavioral indicators—such as admiration, trust, and willingness to recommend—that reflect stakeholders' overall reputation perceptions.

- Qualitative Phase:

In order to deepen and contextualize the quantitative findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected internal and external stakeholders. These interviews explored reputation-related experiences, expectations, and interpretations beyond what could be captured through standardized survey instruments.

3.3 Data Collection and Sample

Data were collected from institutions representing the financial sector in Turkey. A total of 1,041 stakeholders participated in the study, including employees and managers (internal stakeholders) as well as customers and other external actors. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation across roles, relationship types, and experience levels. This approach allowed the research to reflect a rich spectrum of reputational perceptions within the financial sector.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and dimensional reputation scores based on the RepTrak index scale:

- 80–100: Excellent
- 70–79: Strong
- 60–69: Average
- 40–59: Weak
- 0–39: Poor

The qualitative data collected through interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes and patterns related to trust, emotional attachment, ethical perception, and corporate behavior. This two-stage analysis provided a multi-layered understanding of reputation performance, enabling comparisons across stakeholder groups and reputation dimensions within the financial sector.

4. Findings

Quantitative Findings

4.1 Reputation Performance of the Financial Sector Based on Stakeholder Perceptions

The findings of this study indicate that the financial sector demonstrates a strong overall reputation performance, with an average score of 71.5 across all stakeholder groups. This score reflects a generally favorable perception among both internal and external stakeholders and places the sector within the “strong reputation” category according to the RepTrak model. Among the seven dimensions assessed, the highest score was observed in the products and services dimension (75). This suggests that stakeholders perceive the sector's offerings as high-quality, reliable, and capable of creating value, which positively influences customer satisfaction and reputation outcomes. The performance dimension received a similarly high score (74), highlighting that the sector's operational efficiency

and financial stability are key contributors to trust and long-term credibility. This score reflects confidence in the sector's ability to deliver consistent financial results and fulfill stakeholder expectations. Also scoring 74, the citizenship dimension points to the importance of corporate social responsibility and community engagement. Stakeholders value the sector's contribution to social causes and view this engagement as integral to its overall reputation. The governance dimension, with a score of 71, underscores the significance of ethical standards, transparency, and accountability. These elements are seen as foundational to maintaining stakeholder trust, particularly in an industry where integrity is crucial. In contrast, the sector's innovation capability was rated slightly lower at 70. While this score still reflects a generally positive perception, it suggests that stakeholders expect more visible or impactful innovation initiatives, particularly in the context of digital transformation and emerging technologies. The workplace environment received a score of 68, indicating a need for improvement in areas such as employee satisfaction, internal communication, and talent development. Although not critically low, this dimension highlights the potential for strengthening internal reputation drivers within the sector.

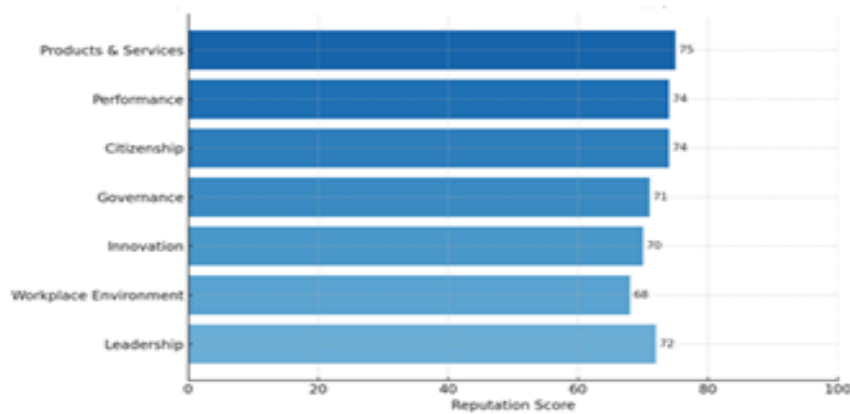


Figure 2: Reputation Scores

Finally, the leadership dimension scored 72, showing that the sector is viewed as having competent and strategically oriented leadership. However, enhancing leadership visibility and stakeholder communication may further reinforce reputation in this area.

In sum, the financial sector appears to be performing well in areas closely tied to external value creation—such as product quality, performance, and citizenship, while internal factors like workplace environment and innovation present opportunities for further development. These findings provide important insights for reputation management strategies, emphasizing the need for a balanced focus on both external perceptions and internal engagement.

4.2 Pulse-Based Stakeholder Perceptions

In addition to the dimension-based evaluation of reputation, a pulse survey was conducted to gain deeper insight into stakeholders' real-time perceptions and emotional responses toward the financial sector. The results of this pulse measurement support the findings from the RepTrak model while offering additional granularity regarding the underlying sentiments driving reputation. The majority of participants agreed that the sector holds a generally positive reputation. This widespread consensus suggests that the foundational perception of the sector is favorable, even if there remains room for targeted improvement in specific dimensions.

However, when asked about emotional attachment and admiration, the responses reflected moderate levels of warmth and loyalty, indicating that while the sector is respected, its brands may still have opportunities to strengthen stakeholder affinity and long-term identification. This implies a need for enhanced efforts in brand trust-building and emotional engagement.

The sector received notable recognition for its focus on customer satisfaction, confirming the strong influence of customer-centric strategies on overall reputation. Participants perceive that institutions prioritize client needs and experiences, which reinforces the sector’s credibility and relevance in a competitive environment. In terms of leadership, respondents expressed confidence in the sector’s strategic guidance and executive effectiveness. This strong perception suggests that leadership-related reputation drivers are contributing positively to the sector’s image.

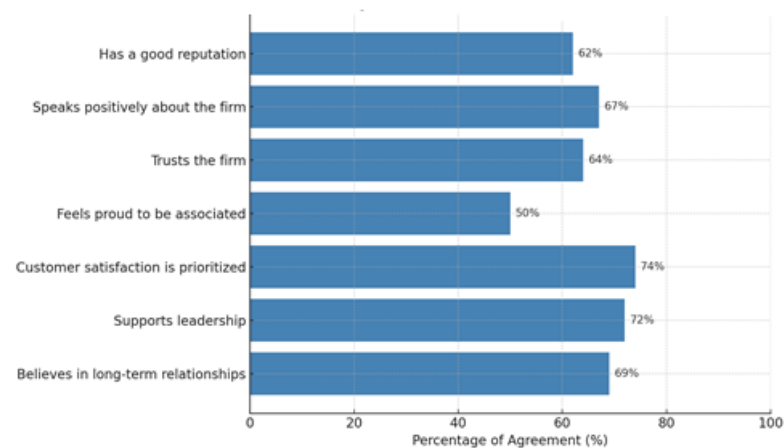


Figure 3: Pulse Survey

Finally, stakeholders reported a high level of trust in the sector’s long-term relational orientation, especially in terms of commitment to stakeholder well-being and sustained value creation. Trust and loyalty were especially strong among respondents who had long-term associations with financial institutions, pointing to the importance of relational capital in building reputational resilience. In sum, the pulse results affirm the existence of a solid reputational foundation while highlighting areas—particularly emotional connection and brand admiration—that may benefit from further strategic attention.

5. Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data also highlighted how reputation in the financial sector is shaped by strategic narratives of trust, legacy, innovation, and societal contribution. Stakeholders and internal representatives consistently emphasized the importance of institutional identity and purpose beyond commercial goals. Key quotes illustrate this:

"The financial sector is not just about solving problems—it is about creating a sense of continuity and stability, especially during periods of uncertainty."

"Reputation is built on consistency, the ability to adapt, and showing up for customers not only with solutions, but with empathy."

Institutions that are perceived as integrated actors in the ecosystem, rather than isolated service providers, were viewed more favorably:

"This institution is seen as a school within the sector—a benchmark organization known for building strong and unbreakable ties with its stakeholders."

"The brand is not just surviving the present, it is carrying its legacy forward through an adaptive, community-focused, and innovation-driven mindset."

Moreover, respondents emphasized the role of sustainability, unity, and leadership in enhancing long-term reputation:

"With a human-centered, innovative approach and a deep-rooted culture, this organization not only leads but defines the future of the financial sector."

These narratives show that reputation capital in the financial industry is reinforced when organizations are perceived as visionary, value-driven, and socially integrated. Rather than relying solely on product quality or financial strength, firms that adopt a leadership identity within the sector and foster emotional and social legitimacy gain stronger stakeholder alignment and resilience.

6. Conclusion

As in all industries, a strong corporate reputation in the financial sector functions as a strategic asset that contributes to competitive advantage and sustainable success. The findings of this study confirm that reputation in the financial sector is shaped not only by the quality of products and services or financial performance, but also by an institution's ability to build trust, meet stakeholder expectations, and actively fulfill its social responsibilities.

In this context, financial institutions should focus on strengthening stakeholder relationships, reinforcing public trust, and adopting a proactive stance in fulfilling their obligations to society. To respond effectively to evolving sectoral dynamics, reputation management strategies must be restructured around three key pillars: digital transformation, transparent communication, and social commitment.

The study reveals that financial institutions in the sector demonstrate strong performance in areas such as product and service quality, operational success, and corporate citizenship. These dimensions form the backbone of reputational strength and should be maintained through consistent strategic efforts. On the other hand, innovation and workplace environment emerge as areas that require improvement. Enhancing these domains will be critical for financial institutions seeking to elevate their reputational standing and gain leadership positioning in a competitive market. Moreover, increasing digital and social media presence, developing relationships with key opinion leaders, and strengthening communication of awards and achievements are vital steps toward enhancing stakeholder perceptions and reinforcing trust.

In summary, financial institutions must adopt an integrated and adaptive approach to reputation management—one that emphasizes sectoral leadership, internal engagement, and societal relevance. By improving their agility, innovation capacity, and employee experience, organizations in the financial sector can build a reputation that is not only strong but also resilient in the face of future challenges.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for financial institutions aiming to build and sustain a strong corporate reputation in an increasingly competitive and dynamic environment. Several managerial implications emerge from both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

First, workplace environment was identified as the lowest-rated dimension, pointing to a potential risk area for employer branding. While improvements may already be underway internally, it is critical that these efforts are effectively communicated to broader audiences. Enhancing internal satisfaction alone is not sufficient; organizations must empower employees to become brand ambassadors by aligning them with corporate values and ensuring visibility of positive change. This approach not only boosts internal engagement but also strengthens the external perception of organizational culture.

Second, the financial sector demonstrates strong performance in corporate citizenship, a dimension closely tied to social responsibility and trust. To expand this impact, it is recommended that institutions continue and diversify their community engagement initiatives. Rather than focusing narrowly on a few selected areas, a broader response to societal needs—through inclusive, diverse, and visible projects—will further reinforce stakeholder trust and societal relevance.

Third, while top management was rated positively, expectations remain high for stronger leadership visibility and strategic clarity. By becoming more accessible and communicative across various stakeholder groups, leadership teams can foster transparency, credibility, and alignment. A participatory leadership approach—without dismantling institutional hierarchy—can deepen relational trust and stakeholder commitment.

Fourth, investing in digital innovation remains essential for enhancing reputation. Stakeholders increasingly expect real-time responsiveness, convenience, and personalization in service delivery. By leveraging digital platforms to monitor customer feedback and swiftly act upon insights, financial institutions can enhance both satisfaction and trust, thus strengthening customer-centric reputation dimensions.

Finally, institutions should enhance their digital and media presence, build strategic alliances with thought leaders, and actively promote achievements and recognitions. Doing so will support stronger reputation signaling and differentiate them in an increasingly crowded market.

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