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The Effect of Customer Empowerment on Corporate Reputation Perception

Yağmur KERSE¹

Abstract

Corporate reputation perception is an effective variable in shaping customer behaviors. A positive perception of reputation leads to positive outcomes such as loyalty, positive word-of-mouth marketing, low perceived risk, and commitment. In the marketing literature, it has been observed that the factors affecting the perception of corporate reputation have not been sufficiently analyzed and certain factors such as satisfaction, trust, corporate social responsibility, and financial strength have been focused on. In this study, unlike the factors in the literature, the effect of customer empowerment on the perception of corporate reputation is examined. Customer empowerment is considered an important tool in the competitive race in marketing. Within the scope of this research, data were collected from 343 consumers by questionnaire technique. Consumers were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with the statements in the questionnaire by thinking about the clothing store they visit most frequently. SPSS 18 and AMOS 18 package programs were used in the analysis of the data obtained. In the reliability analyses, customer empowerment and corporate reputation scales were found to be reliable. As a result of the confirmatory factor analysis of the scales, it was seen that the fit index values of the scales met the reference values. It was determined that the AVE values of the scales also met the reference values. Normality test was also performed for the data in the study. Since the skewness and kurtosis values of the variables were within the reference values, it was observed that the data met the normality assumption. Then, the relationship between variables was analyzed. Partial correlation analysis was preferred for the determination of this relationship. In this direction, correlation analysis was carried out by controlling gender, age, education, and income status variables. As a result of the correlation analysis, it was observed that there is a positive relationship between customer empowerment and corporate reputation. After the determination of the relationship between the variables, path analysis was performed with the AMOS program to test the research hypothesis. In the analysis, it was seen that the fit indices of the research model provided the reference values. In addition, it was determined that customer empowerment positively and significantly affects the perception of corporate reputation.

Keywords: Customer Empowerment, Reputation, Corporate Reputation Perception, Apparel Industry, Path Analysis

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Müşteri Güçlendirmesinin Kurumsal İtibar Algısı Üzerindeki Etkisi

Yağmur KERSE¹

Öz

Kurumsal itibar algısı müşteri davranışlarının şekillenmesinde etkili bir değişkendir. İtibar algısının olumlu olması sadakat, olumlu ağızdan ağıza pazarlama, düşük algılanan risk, bağlılık gibi olumlu çıktılar elde edilmesini sağlamaktadır. Pazarlama literatürde kurumsal itibar algısını etkileyen faktörlerin yeterince incelenmediği ve memnuniyet, güven, finansal güç, kurumsal sosyal sorumluluk gibi belli başlı faktörlere yoğunlaşıldığı görülmüştür. Bu çalışmada literatürdeki faktörlerden farklı olarak müşteri güçlendirmesinin kurumsal itibar algısı üzerindeki etkisine bakılmıştır. Müşteri güçlendirmesi pazarlamada rekabet yarışında önemli bir araç olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Bu araştırma kapsamında 343 tüketiciden anket tekniğiyle veriler toplanmıştır. Tüketicilerden en sık gittikleri giyim mağazasını düşünerek ankette yer alan ifadelere katılma derecelerini belirtmeleri istenmiştir. Elde edilen verilerin analizi için SPSS 18 ve AMOS 18 paket programları kullanılmıştır. Yapılan güvenilirlik analizinde müşteri güçlendirmesi ve kurumsal itibar ölçeklerinin güvenilir oldukları belirlenmiştir. Ölçeklere yapılan doğrulayıcı faktör analizi sonucunda ölçeklere ait uyum iyiliği değerlerinin referans değerlerini karşıladığı görülmüştür. Ölçeklerin AVE değerlerinin de referans değerleri sağladığı belirlenmiştir. Araştırmada veriler için normallik testi de yapılmıştır. Değişkenlerin çarpıklık ve basıklık değerleri referans alınan değerler arasında yer aldığı için verilerin normallik varsayımını karşıladığı gözlenmiştir. Daha sonra, değişkenler arası ilişkiye bakılmıştır. Değişkenler arası ilişkiler için Kısmi Korelasyon analizi tercih edilmiştir. Bu doğrultuda cinsiyet, yaş, eğitim ve gelir durumu değişkenleri kontrol altına alınarak korelasyon analizi gerçekleştirilmiştir. Korelasyon analizi sonucunda müşteri güçlendirmesi ve kurumsal itibar arasında olumlu yönde bir ilişkinin olduğu görülmüştür. Değişkenler arası ilişkinin tespitinden sonra araştırma hipotezinin testi için AMOS programıyla yol analizi yapılmıştır. Yapılan analizde araştırma modelinin uyum indekslerinin referanslar değerleri sağladığı görülmüştür. Bunun yanında müşteri güçlendirmesinin kurumsal itibar algısını pozitif yönde ve anlamlı düzeyde etkilediği saptanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Müşteri Güçlendirme, İtibar, Kurumsal İtibar Algısı, Hazır Giyim Sektörü, Yol Analizi

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Introduction

It can be said that efforts to have a good reputation in the eyes of customers and to maintain this reputation are one of the main endeavors of companies. Having a good reputation is an important competitive advantage that enables firms to attract more customers (Walsh & Beaty, 2007) because competitors cannot copy this resource (Hasan & Hossain, 2021). As Gotsi and Wilson (2001) state, since the mid-1980s, the strategic importance of building and maintaining a positive corporate reputation to create competitive advantage has been recognised by senior managers.

Corporate reputation is the result of a series of public judgements that develop (or deteriorate) over time (Siano et al., 2011), and the nature of corporate reputation is highly sensitive. It is susceptible to damage or destruction. As Warren Buffet has stated, it takes 20 years to build a reputation while it takes 5 minutes to destroy it (Helm & Tolsdorf, 2013). While building a firm's reputation requires many good actions, a mixed signal to the market or a bad action directed at a certain group can easily lead to the destruction of reputation (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001).

When the literature on corporate reputation is examined, it is seen that there is no clarity as to whether reputation is an antecedent or a consequence of other variables. In the literature, it is seen that most researchers consider corporate reputation as an antecedent, and few consider reputation as an outcome variable (Walsh et al., 2009). Accordingly, it is suggested that corporate reputation, which plays an important role in shaping consumer behaviors, increases the sales and market share of companies and is effective in establishing long-term relationships (Başgöze & Özdestici Yörük, 2021). In addition, it is stated that corporate reputation positively affects customer loyalty (Paça & Şahin, 2021), positive word-of-mouth marketing (Walsh et al., 2009) and customer commitment (Alniaçık, 2011), and reduces transaction costs and perceived customer risk (Walsh & Beaty, 2007). So how can corporate reputation, which leads to such important outcomes, be enhanced? This question was taken as a reference for this study. In the literature, studies are showing that satisfaction, trust (Walsh et al., 2009; O'Connor & Assaker, 2022), financial strength (Ruiz et al., 2016), corporate social responsibility (Jinfeng, et al., 2014; O'Connor & Assaker, 2022; Aggarwal & Saxena, 2023), customer experience, customer engagement (Fida et al., 2023) and corporate recognition awards (Hasan & Hossain, 2021) increase corporate reputation. In this study, it is predicted that the customer empowerment variable will increase corporate reputation. There is no research in the literature that addresses the relationship between these two variables. Therefore, it is thought that this research will contribute to the literature in this respect. In the study, firstly, the concepts of customer empowerment and corporate reputation are explained. Then, the relationship between the concepts is addressed and the hypothesis of the study is developed. In the next section, the study hypothesis is tested and the findings are presented. In the conclusion section, a general evaluation is made and recommendations are made.

Customer Empowerment

The marketing understanding of the age focuses on the co-creation of value by the consumer and the firm at various interaction points. It can be stated that customer empowerment also emerges at these interaction points. Because customer empowerment is when a company provides ways for its customers to connect with the

company and actively shape the structure of transactions and cooperate by sharing information, praise, suggestions, and complaints about its goods and services (Ramani & Kumar, 2008). Empowerment is a process that encourages and facilitates individuals to gain or take power in certain fields of activity (Alshibly & Chiong, 2015).

Customer empowerment, which allows consumers to be freer in expressing their opinions or making choices and to better control their consumption experiences, means that consumers feel that they have more knowledge and skills (Berraies & Hamouda, 2018). In other words, customer empowerment is the subjective experience of customers that they have more ability than before to deliberately produce desired outcomes and prevent undesirable outcomes, and that they benefit from this increased ability (Alshibly & Chiong, 2015). Customer empowerment is also defined as a firm's strategy to increase customer control over the marketing process through co-design and advice. It is stated that customers are becoming more and more empowered as they become more willing to interact with companies and other customers and with the spread of electronic communication (Aldaihani et al., 2020). Thanks to the internet and electronic communication, customers are equipped with a wealth of information and opportunities, and as a result, they reject the role of passive recipients. This situation forces brands to interact with their customers in a quick, open, and continuous way. However, since this is no longer enough, today's conditions push brands to empower their customers (Acar & Puntoni, 2016).

Customer empowerment is a management practice that results in the transfer of power to customers (Berraies & Hamouda, 2018). Since shifting "power" to customers allows customers to influence the service process and be autonomous in decision-making, customers can flexibly change service content according to their needs with the support of the company (Xie et al., 2020). Customer empowerment plays an important function as customers' roles shift from passive recipient to active participant in the creation and delivery of services. Customers perceive that their participation provides value, that they are influential in shaping the process and outcome of services, and they are satisfied with this sense of control (Auh et al., 2019). Because the need for control is a basic psychological need and customer empowerment practice gives customers this sense of control (Xie et al., 2020). Customer empowerment offers significant contributions not only to customers but also to firms. For example, Jayawardhena and Foley (2000), in their research in the Internet banking sector, stated that Internet banking allows customers to have more control over their accounts, and in this way, the customer empowerment function contributes to banks in reducing costs and increasing efficiency.

Customer empowerment is considered essential in today's competitive environment and is recognized as a growing force in marketing (Singh et al., 2014). Customer empowerment activities result in higher marketing performance. In other words, customer empowerment leads to positive increases in marketing performance variables such as customer satisfaction, positive attitude towards business employees, trust, loyalty, and price insensitivity (Bozacı & Durukan, 2016). On the other hand, empowerment is seen as a fundamental element to increase profit, loyalty, and purchase frequency among consumers (Castillo, 2017). It is thought that another positive output of customer empowerment, which provides such positive outputs, maybe a positive perception of corporate reputation.

Corporate Reputation Perception

The concept of corporate reputation, which is examined in many fields such as economics, organizational behavior, and marketing, is handled in different ways in different fields. Economists associate “reputation” with product quality and price. In the field of organizational behavior, reputation is described as an intangible and important resource that contributes significantly to the performance and survival of the organization. Marketers, on the other hand, examine “reputation” under the title of “brand value” and associate it with the credibility of the company (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001).

It is argued that corporate reputation is generally formed as a result of past activities of firms (Caruana & Ewing, 2010). Because people tend to prefer to work with companies that have been experienced to be reliable in the past (Walsh & Beatty, 2007) and they decide whether a firm is reliable by comparing what the company says it will do with what it actually does (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001). On the other hand, it is stated that a company's reputation is based not only on its previous achievements, but also on its ability to meet consumer expectations and generate value for all its stakeholders (customers, shareholders, employees, suppliers, etc.) (Siano et al., 2011).

Corporate reputation is defined as the perception of values such as trust, dignity, and credibility by stakeholders and the judgements of a company for the future that reveal its past actions and difference (Aykan & Sevim, 2013). Corporate reputation is the sum of stakeholders' and society's opinions about the company and is the equivalent of being a company that is liked, appreciated, and respected (Koçoğlu, 2018). Customer-based corporate reputation is defined as a customer's overall assessment of a company based on interactions with the company's goods, services, representatives, communication activities, and supporters (such as other customers, employees or management) or known corporate activities (Walsh & Beatty, 2007).

Corporate reputation cannot be copied by competitors (Hasan & Hossain, 2021) and above all, it provides a competitive advantage to the firm. Corporate reputation creates awareness and perception of difference towards the firm's products. This perception enables the firm to increase its revenues financially, attract a qualified workforce to the firm in terms of human resources, and increases overall efficiency (Aydemir, 2008). On the other hand, while a good reputation helps firms to attract more customers (Walsh & Beatty, 2007), loss of reputation can bring the end of the firm (Demirci, 2023).

Relationship between Customer Empowerment and Corporate Reputation Perception

Achieving a positive corporate reputation is not a simple task for companies. Companies make great efforts and investments to build a positive corporate reputation (Hasan & Hossain, 2021). For this reason, determining the factors that will create a positive corporate reputation perception will facilitate the work of companies. In this study, unlike the factors in the literature, “customer empowerment” is considered as a variable affecting corporate reputation. Because when customers are empowered by the firm, they tend to be more satisfied, feel that they are valued and ultimately develop a great sense of belonging to the firm (Berraies & Hamouda, 2018). In other words, empowerment can make customers feel positive emotions and direct them to positive behaviors. Therefore, in this study, it is thought that empowered customers will positively perceive the reputation of the companies they shop with. Indeed, Siano et al.

(2011) argued that empowered customers can play a role in reputation building when they operate in various social networks.

Since companies generally regard customers as co-producers or partial employees, customer empowerment is considered as a natural and logical extension of employee empowerment (Pranic & Roehl, 2012). Regarding this issue, in the field of organizational behavior, Kaya Özbağ and Gündüz Çekmecelioğlu (2022) state that psychological empowerment has a positive relationship with corporate reputation. Erkul, Kanten, and Gümüştekin (2018) state that structural empowerment has a significant effect on the perception of corporate reputation. Although there are no studies on the relationship between the concepts in the field of marketing, based on this finding in organizational behavior, it is predicted that customer empowerment will have a positive effect on the perception of corporate reputation. Therefore, the hypothesis of the research was formed as follows:

H: Customer empowerment positively and significantly effects the perception of corporate reputation.

Method

Research data were obtained through a questionnaire technique. SPSS 18 and AMOS 18 package programs were used to analyze the research. First, confirmatory factor analysis and normality test analysis were performed, followed by correlation analysis and path analysis.

Purpose and Sample of the Study

It is known that a positive corporate reputation leads customers to positive attitudes and behaviors such as trust, loyalty, and satisfaction (De Nicola et al., 2023). In today's competitive conditions, companies have become more dependent on the positive attitudes and behaviors of customers. In order to achieve positive outcomes, firms should have a favorable reputation and should strive to maintain this reputation continuously. In the studies on the antecedents of corporate reputation in the literature (O'Connor & Assaker, 2022; Ruiz et al., 2016; Hasan & Hossain, 2021), it is noticeable that certain factors such as satisfaction, trust, service quality, corporate social responsibility are focused on. Unlike these factors, this study aims to examine the effect of customer empowerment on corporate reputation.

The population of the research consists of customers of clothing stores. Customers were asked to fill out the questionnaire form by considering the clothing store they visit most frequently. Data were collected from 356 customers online and face-to-face using a convenience sampling method. After eliminating incomplete and incorrectly completed questionnaires, 343 questionnaires were evaluated. It was observed that 51% of the participants were male and 38.5% were between the ages of 18-27. Most of the participants were customers with associate's/ bachelor's degrees (67.3%).

Scales Used in the Study

In the study, Berraies and Hamouda's (2018) "customer empowerment scale" consisting of 3 statements, and Ponzi, Fombrun and Gardberg's (2011) "corporate reputation scale" consisting of 4 statements were adapted according to the purpose of the study. Necessary translation processes (such as translation, back translation) were followed in

the creation of the items. The scales are one-dimensional. Both scales are graded on a 5-point Likert scale (1-strongly disagree, 5- strongly agree). The scale items used in the study are given in the Appendix.

Findings

Analyses Related to Scales

Reliability and validity analyses were performed for each scale used in the study. The Cronbach alpha value was examined for reliability. Accordingly, since the alpha values of customer empowerment and corporate reputation scales (0.723 and 0.730, respectively) are higher than 0.60 (Kalaycı, 2009), they are found to be highly reliable scales.

After the reliability analysis, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to test the structural validity of the scales. The goodness of fit values of the customer empowerment scale are $X^2/df= 1.740$; CFI: 0.996; TLI: 0.989; NFI: 0.992 and RMSEA: 0.058 (see Table 1). The goodness of fit values of the organizational reputation scale are $X^2/df= 0.416$; CFI: 1.000; TLI: 1.000; NFI: 0.999 and RMSEA: 0.000 (Table 1). It was determined that these values meet the reference values ($X^2/df < 5$, CFI>0.90, TLI>0.90, NFI>0.90 and RMSEA<0.08) (Gürbüz, 2019). When the factor structures of the scales were examined, the factor loads of the customer empowerment scale ranged between 0.598 and 0.813, while the factor loads of the corporate reputation scale ranged between 0.479 and 0.753.

Table 1. Fit Index Results

Models	Cmin/Df	CFI	TLI	NFI	RMSEA
Customer Empowerment	1.740	0.996	0.989	0.992	0.047
Corporate Reputation	0.416	1.000	1.000	0.999	0.000
Research Model	2.724	0.968	0.948	0.951	0.071

AVE (average variance extracted) and CR (composite reliability) values were also examined for scale reliability and validity. The AVE value should be above 0.40 (Tavares et al., 2019) and the CR value should be higher than 0.70 (Hair et al., 2017). Both scales' AVE and CR values (customer empowerment: AVE= 0.477, CR= 0.729; corporate reputation: AVE= 0.409; CR= 0.729) were found to meet the reference values. Therefore, reliability and validity are provided in both scales.

In the study, skewness and kurtosis values of customer empowerment and corporate reputation variables were examined for the normality assumption test. These values are given in Table 2. Since the skewness and kurtosis values of the variables (customer empowerment= -0.545 and -0.408; corporate reputation= -0.797 and 0.707) are between -2/+2 values (George & Mallery, 2016), it is observed that the normality assumption is met.

Table 2. Skewness / Kurtosis Values

Variables	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Std. E.	Statistic	Std. E.
Customer Empowerment	-0.545	0.132	-0.408	0.263
Corporate Reputation	-0.797	0.132	0.707	0.263

Hypothesis Test Findings

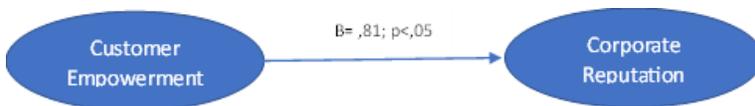
In order to determine the relationship between the variables in the study, correlation analysis was performed by controlling the variables of gender, age, education, and income status. The findings are presented in Table 3. When the table is examined, it is seen that there is a positive relationship ($r= 0.569$) between customer empowerment and corporate reputation. In other words, an increase in customer empowerment leads to an increase in the perception of corporate reputation (or vice versa).

Table 3. Correlation Analysis Findings

Control Variables		Customer Empowerment	Corporate Reputation
Gender, Age, Education, and Income Status	Customer Empowerment	r	
		p	
	Corporate Reputation	r	0.569
		p	0.000

After the determination of the relationship between the variables, path analysis was performed with the AMOS program to test the research hypothesis (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Path Analysis Results



The goodness of fit values of the research model are $\chi^2 /df= 2.724$; CFI: 0.968; TLI: 0.948; NFI: 0.951 and RMSEA: 0.071 (see Table 1). It was determined that these values met the reference values, thus the research model was validated. The prediction values of the model created in the path analysis are given in Table 4.

Table 4. Estimation Results of the Research Model

Hypothesis	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Standardise R. L.	S.E.	T Value (CR Term)	p
H ₁	Customer empowerment	→ Corporate reputation	0.812	0.067	10.283	0.000

When the path analysis results in Table 4 are examined, it is seen that the p-value is less than 0.05. This means that there is a significant effect. Therefore, hypothesis H₁ (Customer empowerment positively and significantly effects the perception of corporate reputation.) is accepted. In addition, based on the findings in the table, it is determined that the positive effect of customer empowerment on the perception of corporate reputation is at a high level ($\beta=0.812$).

Conclusion

A positive corporate reputation leads to results in favour of the company (loyalty, commitment, positive word-of-mouth marketing, repurchase, etc.). On the other hand, it is stated that companies with low reputation perception encourage negative word-of-mouth marketing (Hasan & Hossain, 2021). Therefore, it would not be wrong to state that companies need to develop and protect their corporate reputation in order to survive in today's intensely competitive market. For this purpose, in this study, unlike the studies in the literature, the variable of customer empowerment is considered in increasing the perception of corporate reputation.

As a result of the analyses conducted within the scope of the research, it was determined that customer empowerment positively effects the perception of corporate reputation. Therefore, the hypothesis of the research (H₁: Customer empowerment positively and significantly effects the perception of corporate reputation) is supported.

It is seen as an important contribution that the research deals with the relationship between customer empowerment and corporate reputation perception. Because there has not been a study examining these two concepts in the literature before. From this point of view, a new one has been added to the factors that have an effect on corporate reputation. On the other hand, there are a limited number of studies that address the concept of customer empowerment in Turkey (Bozacı & Durukan, 2015; Bozacı & Durukan, 2016). These studies were conducted in the furniture sector and the relationships between customer empowerment and marketing performance and the differences in customer empowerment perception according to demographic variables were examined. This study, on the other hand, was conducted with clothing store customers (namely the apparel industry) and contributed to the national literature in this respect.

In line with the research findings, it is useful to offer some suggestions to managers. Company managers who want to facilitate the construction of corporate reputation can start by encouraging customers to share their opinions with the company. Getting ideas from customers in the production of goods and services will ensure the transfer of power to customers and thus customers will develop positive attitudes and behaviors towards the company. Seeing that their opinions are valued will lead the customer to have positive feelings towards the company. For example, clothing stores can give control authority to their customers by voting on the products to be offered for sale in their stores through social media. Customers may have a positive impression of the store when they can choose which model, colour, or brand of products they want to see most in the store or when they see that they are effective in making decisions.

This research was conducted with a limited number of clothing store customers by convenience sampling method due to time and cost constraints. For this reason, it is recommended that future research should be conducted with customers in different sectors and with larger samples. On the other hand, only the effect of customer

empowerment on the perception of corporate reputation was examined in this study. Therefore, it may be suggested to include variables such as goods/service quality, brand loyalty, gender, and personality traits in the relationship between these two variables in future research.

Peer-Review	Double anonymized - Two External
Ethical Statement	<i>It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.</i> (Kafkas University Rectorate was taken with the decision dated 05.07.2023, numbered 47 of the Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee.)
Plagiarism Checks	Yes – Ithenticate
Conflicts of Interest	The author(s) has no conflict of interest to declare.
Complaints	itobiad@itobiad.com
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Değerlendirme	İki Dış Hakem / Çift Taraflı Körleme
Etik Beyan	<i>Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.</i> (Kafkas Üniversitesi Rektörlüğü, Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Bilimsel Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Kurulu'nun 05.07.2023 Tarih ve 47 Nolu kararı ile Etik Kurul Kararı alınmıştır.)
Benzerlik Taraması	Yapıldı – Ithenticate
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Etik Bildirim	itobiad@itobiad.com
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Appendix

Customer Empowerment Scale

1. This store encourages customers to share their opinions about its goods or services with the store (Bu mağaza, mal veya hizmetlerine ilişkin müşteri görüşlerini mağaza ile paylaşmasını teşvik eder).
2. This store encourages customers to share their opinions about its goods or services with other customers (Bu mağaza, mal veya hizmetlerine ilişkin müşteri görüşlerini diğer müşterilerle paylaşmasını teşvik eder).
3. This store encourages customers to actively participate in the design of goods or services (Bu mağaza, mal veya hizmetlerin tasarımına müşterilerin aktif olarak katılmalarını teşvik eder).

Corporate Reputation Scale

1. This store is a store I have a good feeling about (Bu mağaza iyi hisler beslediğim bir mağazadır).
2. This store is a store that I trust (Bu mağaza güvendiğim bir mağazadır).
3. This store is a store that I admire and respect (Bu mağaza hayran olduğum ve saygı duyduğum bir mağazadır).
4. This store has a store good overall reputation (Bu mağazanın genel olarak iyi bir itibarı vardır).