PERCEPTION AND REPRESENTATION OF REPUTATION THROUGH THE ERAS: FROM TRADITIONAL TRUST TO POST-COGNITION

TARİHSEL DÖNEMLERE GÖRE İTİBAR ALGISI VE TEMSİLİ: GELENEKSEL GÜVENDEN BİLİŞ SONRASINA

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of reputation from the Age of Enlightenment to the contemporary digital age and analyzes how post-modernism and the post-truth era have fundamentally changed the construction, maintenance, and destruction of both personal and institutional reputation. Using Foucault's genealogical method, the study traces concepts that show linearity in the historical development of reputation and predicts the character it may assume in the next stage.

This linearity begins with the traditional reasoning- and trust-based reputation systems of the Enlightenment, evolves into institutionalized systems mediated by gatekeepers in Modernism, is reshaped within the fragmented, situational realities of post-modernism, and finally manifests in the new social judgment mechanisms of cancel culture, performative activism, and digital boycotts during the post-truth era.

A linear trajectory is mapped across the dimensions of speed, judgment, context, form, and agency, and on that basis the research anticipates the structure reputation may take in the forthcoming AI age. It proposes that this emerging reputation phenomenon—moving beyond the limits of human perception, evaluation, and control—may be labelled "post-cognition."

Finally, the study shows that while digital technologies democratize reputation management, they also create new vulnerabilities: context collapse, permanent digital memory, and crowd dynamics can instantly undermine decades of accumulated trust. This underscores the need for new frameworks to understand reputation in an era where truth has become subjective and contested.

Key Words: Post-truth era, reputation, cancel culture, performative activism, hyperreality.

Özet

Bu makale, itibarın Aydınlanma Çağı'ndan çağdaş dijital çağa dönüşümünü incelemekte ve post-modernizm ile post-hakikat çağının hem kişisel hem de kurumsal itibarın inşası, sürdürülmesi ve yıkılmasını nasıl temelden değiştirdiğini analiz etmektedir. Foucault'nun soykütüksel yöntemini kullanarak, çalışma itibarın tarihsel gelişiminde doğrusallık gösteren kavramları izlemekte ve bir sonraki aşamada alabileceği karakteri öngörmektedir.

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Bu doğrusallık, Aydınlanmanın geleneksel akıl yürütme ve güven temelli itibar sistemleriyle başlar, Modernizmde kapı bekçileri tarafından aracılık edilen kurumsallaşmış sistemlere dönüşür, Post-modernizmin parçalanmış, durumsal gerçeklikleri içinde yeniden şekillenir ve son olarak Post-Hakikat çağında iptal kültürü, performatif aktivizm ve dijital boykotların yeni sosyal yargı mekanizmalarında kendini gösterir.

Hız, yargı, bağlam, biçim ve fail boyutlarında doğrusal bir yörünge haritalanır ve bu temelde araştırma, yaklaşan yapay zeka çağında itibarın alabileceği yapıyı öngörür. İnsan algısı, değerlendirmesi ve kontrolünün sınırlarını aşan bu yeni itibar fenomeninin "biliş sonrası" olarak adlandırılabileceğini önerir.

Son olarak, çalışma dijital teknolojilerin itibar yönetimini demokratikleştirirken yeni kırılganlıklar yarattığını gösterir: bağlam çöküşü, kalıcı dijital bellek ve kitle dinamikleri, on yıllarca biriken güveni anında baltalayabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hakikat sonrası çağ, itibar, iptal kültürü, performatif aktivizm, hiper gerçeklik.

Introduction

In June 2020, a single tweet containing a 40-second video clip transformed the reputation landscape forever. The video showed a white woman in Central Park, calling the police on a black birdwatcher, falsely claiming he was threatening her. Within hours, the woman, Amy Cooper, had lost her job, her dog, and her social status. The incident, emblematic of what would come to be known as the "digital guillotine," demonstrated how reputation—once a slowly accumulated asset built over years of consistent behavior—had become something that could be destroyed in minutes through viral social media dynamics (Newsweek, 2025).

This particular event represents more than a mere technological shift; it signals a fundamental reorganization of how society constructs, validates, or destroys reputation. Hence, it is a reflection of how perception, judgement, rationalization of reputation altered. Where once reputation was mediated by institutions, geographic communities, and face-to-face interactions, it now exists in what Baudrillard (2011) would recognize as a hyperreal digital space where simulation and reality have become indistinguishable. The contemporary reputation gear operates through mechanisms unimaginable to earlier theorists: algorithmic amplification, context collapse, performative activism, and what has been termed "cancel culture"—a phenomenon that combines elements of accountability, mob justice, and virtue signaling in complex and often contradictory ways.

One of the most concise summaries of the Post-Truth era is that it marks a period in which appeals to emotion and personal belief resonate more strongly than objective facts. To highlight this shift, Post-Truth was selected as the Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016

(McIntyre, 2019). The comparison between emotional resonance and objective truth suggests that reputation no longer functions as a reliable indicator of character or institutional integrity. Instead, it has become a contested arena, where competing narratives, tribal loyalties, and algorithmic dynamics determine one's social position.

For individuals and companies alike, reputation is increasingly tied to the frequency and visibility of symbolic gestures rather than to genuine commitment to a vision, cause, issue, or function. Reputation now moves linearly with the performance of such symbolic acts. The institutionalization of this logic has paved the way for the rise of performative activism, while traditional notions of authentic reputation have become layered, fragmented, and often hollowed out.

This study on reputation traces its evolution through distinct historical paradigms. Starting from the Enlightenment's emphasis on rational, objective judgment and consistent moral behavior, it revisits the institutional mediation of the Modernist period, explores the image-constructed reputation of the Postmodern and Post-Truth eras, and finally offers a linear projection of reputation's transformation in the digital world, hyperreality, and the age of artificial intelligence—a journey along what can be called the information highway.

To map this trajectory, the study employs Foucault's genealogical method, combining a critical history of reputation with historical materials to enable a "revaluation of values" in light of current paradigms. Drawing on critical theory, media studies, and digital sociology, it examines how phenomena such as cancel culture, digital boycotts, virtuous performance, and algorithmic reputation management are generating new forms of both reputational strength and vulnerability.

The analysis reveals that we have entered an era that we offer to call the post-cognitive era, in which the traditional link between actions and outcomes, authentic behavior, and social recognition has been fundamentally disrupted. In this new landscape, reputation no longer reflects true character or institutional values but functions instead as a performative construct, shaped by viral dynamics, algorithmic evaluation, and the collective input of digital crowds. Understanding these transformations is critical—not only for individuals and institutions

navigating today's social terrain, but also for addressing broader questions of truth, justice, and social cohesion in democratic societies.

1. Reputation through the eras: from enlightenment rationalization to digital tribunals

1.1 The shifting grounds of reputation: from enlightenment rationality to postmodern relativism

The roots of the concept of reputation, as we understand it today, are grounded in the fundamental definitions put forward during the Enlightenment, when thinkers such as John Locke articulated principles of individual rights, rational judgment, and social contract theory. In his *Second Treatise of Government* (1689), Locke argued that humanity's natural liberty stood above any superior power and that people, as equal and independent individuals, possessed certain moral duties that formed the basis of civil society. This framework established the conditions for reputation to function as a social mechanism grounded in consistent ethical behavior, evaluated through rational thought and objective observation.

During this period, reputation operated within what Habermas (1989) would later term the "public sphere"—a domain of social life where individuals could come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems. Reputation was built slowly over time through face-to-face interactions, community observation, and institutional validation. The coffee houses of London, the salons of Paris, and the table societies of Germany served as venues where interpretations of reputation were established, contested, and validated through sustained intellectual and social engagement.

The Industrial Revolution introduced new complexities to reputation management. As McNeill (2004) notes, the emergence of telegraph networks in the 1840s created the first instantaneous communication systems, fundamentally altering how information—and therefore reputation—traveled. The rise of mass media introduced intermediaries between individuals and their publics, creating what would become the modern public relations industry (PR Academy, 2025).

The modernist period, roughly spanning from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century, saw the institutionalization of reputation through formal systems of credentialing, professional associations, and corporate bureaucracies. Max Weber's analysis of bureaucratic rationalization helps us understand how reputation became increasingly mediated by institutional frameworks during this period. Professional reputation was validated through degrees, licenses, and institutional affiliations rather than purely through community assessment (Heckman, 1983).

This period also witnessed what the Frankfurt School identified as the commodification of culture and, by extension, reputation itself. Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry illuminates how reputation became something that could be manufactured, packaged, and sold (Baudrillard, 1997). The emergence of Madison Avenue and the modern advertising industry represented the professionalization of reputation management, where image construction became a specialized field of expertise.

Edward Bernays, known as one of the founders of public relations—a field conceptualized alongside the rise of printed mass media—explained this transformation in his seminal work *Propaganda* (1928). He argued that the conscious guidance and occasional manipulation of public opinion were both necessary and beneficial in democratic societies. This perspective marked a significant shift in the history of media and the nature of media content: reputation was no longer the organic outcome of consistent behavior but something that could be engineered through strategic communication. While incorporating new dimensions such as inclusivity, reputation continued to take on various social functions; however, it remained fundamentally tied to rational and objective observation, developing over time through trust.

The postmodern turn, which began in the 1960s and accelerated toward the end of the 20th century, undermined the foundations upon which traditional notions of reputation were built. Faith in human rationality, once central to Enlightenment and modernist thought, lost credibility in a world that had witnessed two devastating world wars and the irrationality of Cold War politics. Jean-François Lyotard's skepticism toward grand narratives, as expressed in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), reflects this disillusionment. He argued that the universal standards by which reputation had previously been evaluated were no longer valid. In a world

where no shared truth claims exist and where the instrumentality of reason has already been compromised, reputation becomes increasingly relative and context-dependent (Lyotard, 1997).

At this point, Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation provides a powerful framework for understanding reputation in the postmodern era. According to Baudrillard, signs no longer refer to any underlying reality but only to other signs. In this environment, all images and communication activities undertaken in the name of reputation demonstrate that symbols have become more real than reality itself. He contends that such activities take place in a hyperreal space where simulation precedes and replaces what was once considered real (Baudrillard, 2014). Within this context, reputation is no longer a reflection of a trust builded through consistency of one's character and behavior but rather a free-floating signifier that can be constructed independently of any concrete foundation.

1.2 Moral capital in the digital agora: from cancel culture to influencer authenticity

In the post-truth era, although the symbol–reality relationship parallels that of the postmodern era, it represents more than a mere extension of postmodern themes. A fundamental break in how reputation functions as a form of social currency occurs during the transition between these two periods. McIntyre (2019) describes this transition not as the absence of truth, but as its systematic subversion through emotional manipulation and cognitive exploitation. In this landscape, reputation evolves from a symbolic representation into a deliberately constructed entity, shaped systematically and operationally.

Algorithmic mediation constitutes the most radical transformation in the architecture of reputation. Platforms such as Google, Facebook, Twitter (now X), and TikTok have transcended their roles as mere conduits of information; they now function as active architects of reputation, through recommendation engines, trend algorithms, and engagement metrics. This digital infrastructure has collapsed traditional temporal boundaries: reputations carefully cultivated over decades can disintegrate in minutes, while anonymous individuals can accumulate massive reputational capital in hours.

The transformation of Twitter into X exemplifies this volatility. Elon Musk's acquisition did not merely transfer ownership; it instantly dismantled an entire reputation ecosystem, purged

dissenting voices, and rewrote platform values overnight. In response, former CEO Jack Dorsey's team launched Bluesky, envisioned as a decentralized alternative in which domain-based verification and distributed algorithms would, in theory, protect against such autocratic disruptions (Euronews, 2024). Yet the migration itself reveals a deeper irony: in fleeing the reputational volatility of one platform, users merely migrate to another algorithmic arena, thereby perpetuating the very system they sought to escape. The promise of decentralization becomes yet another performance in the endless theater of digital reputation—a plot twist that few recognize, let alone critically engage with.

Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) concept of "surveillance capitalism" helps explain how reputation has become a key commodity in the digital economy. Our digital traces—likes, shares, comments, purchases—are collected and processed by platforms and data brokers to create detailed reputation profiles, which are then monetized. This marks a fundamental shift: from a time when reputation was primarily a social phenomenon to an era in which it has become a quantitative, tradable asset.

Another practice of the digital agora is "cancel culture," defined as "withdrawing support for someone in the public sphere, especially on social media" (Roldan, 2024). The emergence of cancel culture represents a new mechanism of reputational justice that operates outside traditional institutional frameworks. While public shaming and exiling have ancient roots, digital recurrence has unprecedented speed, scale, and permanence. This phenomenon encompasses a range of practices: exposing problematic behavior, demanding accountability, organizing boycotts, and removing platforms or influence from individuals or institutions perceived to have violated social norms (Buchman, 2023).

Cancel culture operates through what Tufekci (2017) calls "networked public spheres," where traditional gatekeepers have lost their monopoly on narrative control. This democratization has positive aspects—marginalized voices can now demand accountability from powerful figures who were previously untouchable. However, it also creates dynamics of "context collapse" where statements made in one context are judged by audiences operating in entirely different interpretive frameworks, often leading to misunderstandings and disproportionate responses.

The phenomenon that Tufekci refers to—where issues discussed within networked communities are detached from their original context—is conceptualized by Bauman and Lyon (2017) through the notion of liquid modernity, marked by the fluidity of lifestyles. According to the authors, liquidity describes a constantly shifting, uncertain, and transient mode of life—fragile and perpetually in motion. In such a society, individuals are represented through identities they feel compelled to continuously reconstruct. Although social media appears to offer individuals a "free" public space for self-expression, in what Han (2017) describes as a new mechanism of control within the performance society, the individual has become a performance subject. The performative individual is someone who feels the constant need to optimize themselves to succeed—or to appear successful—seeking visibility through likes and clicks, and ultimately becoming the entrepreneur of their own identity; in other words, a personal "brand" (Han, 2017).

The rise of performative activism—also derisively termed "slacktivism"—represents another crucial development in contemporary reputation management. This phenomenon involves individuals or corporations making symbolic gestures of support for social causes primarily to enhance their reputation rather than create meaningful change (Friedman, 2021).

However, in today's digital world, the symbolic participation of individuals or institutions in social movements often stems from a motivation to showcase their performances and constructed identities. While Bauman and Lyon (2017) acknowledge that social media offers individuals the opportunity to express their resistance on certain issues, they argue that the nature of social media culture renders this resistance fluid, making it difficult—if not impossible—for such expressions to evolve into lasting, collective movements. Similarly, the actions taken by corporations through corporate social responsibility campaigns or by expressing support for social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter are not driven by a mission to create genuine social transformation, as Debord suggests, but rather by a desire for visibility. In this sense, corporate participation in social movements is motivated strategically—to enhance image, gain prestige, or increase visibility (Debord, 2006).

Another well-known practice that can serve as an example of slacktivism is performance activism. The concept of "virtue signalling," while often used pejoratively, points to a real dynamic in digital reputation management. In an environment where reputation is constantly

performed and assessed, individuals and institutions feel compelled to continuously broadcast their alignment with perceived social values. This creates what Han (2015) calls the "transparency society," where the private self disappears into continuous public performance.

The concept of "consequence culture"—a reframing of cancel culture that emphasizes accountability—has made corporate reputation increasingly precarious. Companies must now navigate not only their own actions but also the statements and behaviors of their employees, partners, and even customers (Medium, 2025).

1.3 Algorithmic bias and reputational inequality

The role of algorithms in shaping reputation has introduced new forms of bias and inequality. Studies have shown that search algorithms can perpetuate racial and gender stereotypes, affecting how individuals' reputations are constructed and perceived online. The phenomenon of "algorithmic reputation" (Katell,2019) means that factors entirely out of an individual's control—such as the behavior of others with similar names or demographic characteristics— can significantly impact their digital reputation. It is not going to be a process related with human decision or activities anymore, reputation defined as commodified and determined by data processes.

Dr. Safiya Noble's (2018) work on "algorithms of oppression" demonstrates how search engines reinforce harmful stereotypes, particularly about women and people of color. This algorithmic mediation of reputation creates feedback loops where existing social inequalities are amplified and perpetuated through technological systems that appear neutral but embed significant biases.

The digital age has eliminated the natural ability forgetting that once allowed for reputational rehabilitation. Everything posted online potentially becomes part of a permanent record, searchable and shareable indefinitely. This has created what Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier (2013) call "digital eternity," where past mistakes can never truly be left behind.

The European Union's "Right to be Forgotten" legislation represents an attempt to restore some balance, allowing individuals to request the removal of certain information from search results

(GDPR, 2025). However, this creates tension with principles of free speech and public information, highlighting the complex trade-offs in managing reputation in digital contexts.

2. Personal and corporate reputation in the digital age

2.1. The quantified self and reputational metrics

The contemporary individual exists in what Lupton (2016) terms the "quantified self" movement, where every aspect of life becomes subject to measurement and optimization. Reputation has become similarly quantified through various metrics: follower counts, engagement rates, Klout scores (before its demise), LinkedIn endorsements, and countless other numerical representations of social standing. This quantification transforms reputation from a qualitative assessment based on character and behavior into a game of numerical optimization.

The gamification of reputation through platforms like Reddit's karma system or Stack Overflow's reputation points creates new incentives and behaviors. Individuals optimize for metrics rather than genuine contribution, leading to what Hui (2016) calls "cosmotechnics"— the reshaping of human behavior to align with technological systems. The rise of "engagement pods" on Instagram, where users artificially inflate each other's metrics, exemplifies how quantified reputation systems can be gamed. China's Social Credit System represents the most extreme version of quantified reputation, where citizens' behaviors across multiple domains are tracked, scored, and used to determine access to services, travel, and opportunities. While Western democracies haven't adopted such centralized systems, the proliferation of background check services, credit scores, and digital reputation management tools create a similar if more fragmented landscape of quantified reputation.

Goffman's (1956) distinction between multiple identities acted out by a person for different audiences on a daily basis has largely collapsed in the digital age since a post might reach out to different social circles. What Bauman (2000) identified as the beginning of this collapse— when personal intimacies began being shared on television—has accelerated to the point where the private self has almost entirely disappeared. Social media platforms encourage continuous self-disclosure, creating what Marwick (2013) calls "the influencer imaginary," where individuals internalize the logic of continuous self-promotion.

The concept of "context collapse" introduced by Boyd (2014) explains how digital platforms flatten different social contexts into a single performative space. A Facebook post intended for friends might be seen by employers, family members, and strangers, each interpreting it through different frameworks. This collapse creates what Duffy (2017) terms "aspirational labor," where individuals must constantly manage their self-presentation across multiple imagined audiences.

The rise of "finstas" (fake Instagram accounts) among the younger generation represents an attempt to reclaim some private space for "authentic" self-expression. However, even these supposedly private spaces often become performative, with users crafting different but equally constructed personas for different audiences (Forbes, 2025).

Navigating the digital public sphere has become increasingly perilous, especially when attempting authentic expression beyond the metrics of the quantified self. This aligns with what Tufekci (2017) describes as "digitally networked public spaces," where conventional gatekeepers no longer shape the narrative. In these environments, a single screenshot—often stripped of its original context—can rapidly go viral, reframed through the lens of the prevailing cultural conflict. As a result, dominant communication patterns don't merely become the most accepted; they risk being perceived as the only legitimate truth. The phenomenon of "milkshake ducking"—where someone gains positive attention only to have problematic past behavior immediately surface—has become so common it's now a recognized pattern (Dictionary, 2025).

As Byung-Chul Han (2024) argues, individuals increasingly construct their identities through the display of personal photographs from their lives, turning self-representation into a visual exhibition. This shift contributes to a loss of deeper meaning, where the number of "likes" becomes the primary measure of value. Han (2020) further explains that in a society where visibility is equated with existence, individuals sacrifice their *cult value*—the intrinsic, aura-like uniqueness—for *exhibition value*, transforming themselves into commodities within a market of universal display.

The normalization of self-representation in the digital public sphere not only shapes how individuals construct the foundations of communication, but also subjects them to continuous self-branding, requiring the constant performance of the self as a strategic and marketable

identity. Personal branding has evolved from a career development strategy to an existential requirement. Platforms like LinkedIn transform professional reputation into a continuous performance of success and positivity, what Vallas and Christin (2018) term "entrepreneurial professionalism." The pressure to maintain a consistent, marketable personal brand across platforms creates what Gill and Orgad (2015) identify as "confidence culture," where any admission of struggle or failure becomes reputationally dangerous.

This persistent pressure to perform hinders the development of authentic, individual ideologies and undermines the formation of genuine collective social movements. In such a landscape, what remains in the hands of individuals is performative activism—a superficial yet inevitable element of personal reputation management. This creates what Kanai (2019) calls "affective labor," where emotional performance becomes a required part of maintaining reputation.

The phenomenon of "virtue signalling" reflects a broader transformation where political and social positions become fashion statements rather than deeply held convictions. For example, the variety of expressions in individuals' social media bio sections—from Ukrainian flag emojis to various personal pronouns to statements emphasizing current events—reflects what Han (2015) describes as a "fatigue society," in which constant performance leads to exhaustion and cynicism.

2.2.   Corporate reputation in the age of instant accountability

The evolution of corporate reputation in the digital era mirrors the individual pressure to self-brand and perform within the logic of visibility. Just as individuals are compelled to curate their identities for social capital, corporations now find themselves forced to perform moral alignment in response to a hyper-reactive, networked public. The rise of digital platforms has dramatically reshaped corporate reputation management, shifting it from a controlled, message-driven practice to a space of constant negotiation under public surveillance.

Coombs and Holladay's (2012) concept of "paracrisis" captures this shift: reputational threats now surface and escalate at a pace that outstrips traditional crisis response models. The velocity of digital outrage—seen in phenomena like Twitter storms—exposes companies to

instantaneous judgment, often triggered by a single viral post. The standard PR triad—acknowledge, apologize, act—has proven too sluggish for the algorithmic tempo of digital scrutiny.

The emergence of purpose-driven brands and the broader ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) movement of corporations signal the efforts to institutionalize values-based branding. Yet, just as individuals in digital spaces often adopt causes to enhance their personal brand rather than pursue genuine change, corporations too fall into the trap of greenwashing and woke-washing—superficially adopting social causes for reputational advantage. In both cases, performance eclipses substance (Vredenburg et al., 2020). As a result, performative activism—whether individual or corporate—becomes less about structural transformation and more about symbolic survival in a visibility-driven economy.

The case of Patagonia, which has built its reputation on environmental activism to the point of giving away the company to fight climate change, contrasts sharply with companies engaged in what Sobande (2019) calls "woke capitalism"—the appropriation of social justice language for profit. The difference often lies not in stated values but in willingness to sacrifice profits for principles, a test few corporations' pass.

The phenomenon of "corporate purpose" has become a key battleground for reputation. Larry Fink's annual letters to CEOs emphasizing stakeholder capitalism reflect a shift in how corporate reputation is assessed. However, critics argue this represents what Fleming (2019) calls "sugar-coated capitalism," where minor reforms obscure fundamental power structures.

2.3. Algorithmic management of corporate reputation

Corporations increasingly rely on sophisticated algorithmic tools to monitor and manage their reputation. Sentiment analysis, social listening platforms, and predictive analytics attempt to quantify and anticipate reputational threats. However, these tools often fail to capture context and nuance, leading to what Crawford (2021) terms "artificial unintelligence."

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) for reputation management has become a major industry, with companies paying substantial sums to ensure positive content appears prominently while negative information is buried. This creates what Vaidhyanathan (2011) calls "the Googlization

of everything," where search rankings become more important than actual behavior in determining reputation.

Another effect of the transformation of reputation has an impact on the gig economy has created new forms of reputational labor where workers' livelihoods depend on maintaining high ratings on platforms. Uber drivers, Airbnb hosts, and TaskRabbit workers exist in what Gandini (2019) calls "reputation economies," where a few bad ratings can mean economic devastation.

This system creates what Rosenblat and Stark (2016) term "algorithmic labor control," where the platform's rating system becomes a disciplinary mechanism more powerful than traditional management. Workers must perform emotional labor—smiling, chatting, going above and beyond—not for human managers but for the algorithm's approval.

The power asymmetry in platform reputation systems—where consumers can destroy workers' livelihoods with low ratings while facing no consequences themselves—creates what van Dijck (2013) identifies as "the reputation society," where hierarchies are reinforced through seemingly democratic rating systems. According to Han, in today's digital culture, the "like button" has replaced narrative (Han, 2024). In this context, corporations no longer seek to build their reputations through meaningful storytelling or emotional experiences but rather pursue a quantified and verified form of reputation—one that is often supported by measurable data and, in many cases, strategically purchased or controlled.

The creator economy has professionalized what Abidin (2018) calls "calibrated amateurism"— the performance of authenticity for commercial gain. Successful influencers must navigate the paradox of appearing relatable while maintaining aspirational lifestyles, genuine while being sponsored, intimate while performing for millions.

Micro-influencers represent an evolution in this economy, where smaller, more targeted audiences create what Khamis et al. (2017) term "self-branding intimacy." These influencers trade on appearing more authentic than mega-influencers, but this authenticity itself becomes a carefully managed performance.

3. Research methodology and critical analysis

3.1. Theoretical framework: From critical theory to digital studies

The genealogical method used in this study, following the footsteps of Foucault's method (1961), traces how reputation as a concept and practice has been shaped by changing power structures, technologies, and discourses. This approach reveals that reputation is not a natural or stable category but rather what Foucault would call a "discursive formation"—constituted differently across historical periods according to prevailing regimes of power and knowledge.

Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation (2014) provides crucial analytical tools for understanding how reputation operates in hyperreal digital environments. His four stages of simulacra—reflection of reality, masking of reality, absence of reality, and pure simulacrum—map surprisingly well onto the evolution of reputation from authentic representation to pure construction.

Within the framework of this approach and in detail in the study, a bird's eye view of the way reputation is produced, described and presented on the stage of history is reached in the summary below.

Table 1. Evolving paradigms of reputation

Era	Time Period	Definition & Paradigm	Characteristics	Social Instruments	Temporal Dynamics
Renaissance & Enlightenment	16th–18th Century	Reputation as a moral reflection grounded in rationality and consistent ethical conduct.	Rooted in Enlightenment ideals of reason, truth, and universality; community surveillance regulates morality.	Face-to-face interactions, churches, guilds, salons, gossip networks.	Slow accumulation over decades via moral consistency.
Modernism	Late 19th–20th Century	Reputation becomes institutionally mediated, validated through formalized public spheres.	Trust in objective institutions (press, academia); unified public discourse with gatekeepers.	Institutionalized parties, media, letters to editors, official censure.	Built over years through institutional achievement and public scrutiny.
Postmodernism	1960s–1990s	Reputation as a constructed	Rise of hyperreality	Television, tabloids, PR	Accelerated via media cycles;

		image, detached from underlying reality.	(Baudrillard); communication saturated with signs, symbols, and mediated spectacle.	firms, subcultural audiences.	image over substance becomes the norm.
Post-Truth	2000s–present	Reputation evolves from a symbolic representation into a deliberately constructed entity, shaped systematically and operationally. Reputation as a performative and volatile construct subject to survaillant instant judgment.	Epistemic fragmentation: truth becomes subjective and context-bound; attention economy dominates. Cancel culture, context collapsed, digital permanence; performative virtue signaling is prevalent.	Echo chambers, online tribes, viral media, hashtag campaigns, digital tribunals, digital surveillance.	Fast paced viral shifts in public perception.
Emerging AI Era	2020s–future	Reputation becomes synthetic, governed by AI systems and machinic interpretation.	Emergence of AI-generated personas, deepfakes, blockchain verification, and real-time sentiment analysis.	GPT-based narratives, AI curation, decentralized reputational ledgers.	Real-time, continuous flux; reputation becomes computationally managed.

Within the scope of this analysis, the periods of Modernism, Postmodernism, and Post-Truth were revisited, starting from the Enlightenment, and linearity was identified by considering the changes experienced through paradigm shifts. Observable and linear changes were detected across five categories. These categories were identified as speed, judgment, context, form, and agency.

The first striking feature in terms of speed was the increase in temporal acceleration. Reputation formation, which once took decades during the Enlightenment, slowed to years in Modernism, to media cycles in Postmodernism, to hours and days in the Post-Truth period, and to minutes or even real-time speed in digitized communication. If this pace continues linearly, it is predicted to progress into a state where reputation is scored by AI algorithms beyond the reach of human cognition and only partially witnessed by humans.

A similar linearity is observed in the category of judgment, shifting from human-centric to machine-centric forms. Reputation, which was once constructed through the moral and ethical evaluations of individuals or institutions, has evolved—especially in the Postmodern and Post-Truth periods—into a strategically engineered image or reputation. If this form of judgment, now often criticized as algorithmic tribunals, quant metrics, or quantified-self mechanisms, continues on the same linear path, it is expected to develop into a synthetic scoring system based on AI sentiment analysis. In fact, early signs of this transformation have already emerged. In this anticipated future, where reputations are shaped through layers of AI-to-AI interaction, it may be possible to speak of a world where bots score bots, and AI agents verify the accuracy of other agents. In such a world, where routine flows are governed by automation, human participation may be limited to understanding, verifying, or investigating the extreme shifts in reputation that are triggered algorithmically.

A linear decline was identified in the context category, the third major finding of this study. The trajectory shows a shift from the stable, local, and long-term contextuality of the Enlightenment, to nationally and institutionally regulated contexts during Modernism, to the fragmented and relativistic contexts of Postmodernism, and finally reaches context collapse in the digital era. In this progression, it is predicted that partial surveillance will become more permanent through AI capabilities, and that platform-specific contexts will be shaped by the constraints and prohibitions imposed by those platforms. Even now, we observe early-stage applications where reputation exists as a context-fluid entity, constantly rewritten based on the platform, the audience, and the temporal moment. In some cases, even language is reshaped within the boundaries dictated by the platform—content application trends today may be a preview of this future. Therefore, instead of a single and consistent reputation, we may begin to talk about multiple, demographically specific versions of an individual's reputation. Furthermore, it may become both necessary and desirable to communicate through identity-layer systems (e.g., a business representative, a public persona, a political actor), each with its own scoring logic. This is an augmented prediction of a fragmented, platform- and audience-focused, AI-driven contextual structure. Accordingly, you may be trusted in financial networks, while simultaneously shadow-banned in social networks, without knowing why—because context has become too complex to track.

The fourth category observed in the transformation of reputation throughout the periods is form. This transformation has evolved from exhibiting a qualitative moral character to corporate records and references, to a constructed image-based perception of reputation, followed by digital measurements, and now emotional and semantic analyses. At this stage, individuals' reputation, trust, and influence rates have gained a structure in which they are subject to measurement and differentiation through AI-supported tokens — bought and sold — and this reputation has transformed into financial gain, an application already observable in various forms today. In the digital age, we see this logic in action when an influencer gives gifts to their followers in exchange for engagement and, as a result of increased visibility, earns higher income through brand collaborations. This structure is now being transferred into artificial intelligence systems. Due to the measurement capabilities of AI, reputation functions as a programmable identity layer. It can be carried like a digital ID within an app on a phone and act as a real-time token that determines what you are allowed to do, where you can go, and how you will be treated in everyday life. This system may also sharpen class distinctions and operate as an active verification mechanism.

The fifth and final category of inference regarding the future of reputation — based on linear patterns — involves the decline in personal control. This pattern also functions as a latent variable supporting the other four categories. However, what is emphasized here differently is the transformation of agency: the significance placed on behavior and ethics during the Enlightenment, over time and with successive paradigm shifts, first became compliance with institutions and gatekeepers aligned with grand narratives, then shifted to self-presentation and constructed identity, turned into performance under observation, and finally evolved into data-driven digitization monitored by automated agents.

This linear progression suggests that individuals may lose meaningful influence over the formation of their own reputation. Control is increasingly expected to shift to AI agents, and the movement from managing staff manually to digital assistants or reputation-cleaning bots is already seen in preliminary, manual forms today. This process may result in people outsourcing their reputation management to AI agents — not out of preference, but out of necessity — because the complexity and speed of the system exceed the bounds of human cognition.

Table 2. Summary of the predictions for the future of reputation

Category	Prediction for AI / Late-AI Era
Speed	Reputation will shift *preemptively*, based on predictive models.
Judgment	Machines will judge; humans will validate in rare cases.
Context	Reputation will be *contextually fragmented*, not universal.
Form	Reputation will be tokenized, programmable, and transferable.
Agency	Individuals will lose direct control; reputation becomes machine governed.

In short, a linear and striking transformation in reputation—from essence to simulation—is observed in its transition from being a reflection of real character, to a pure construction, and finally to a numerical performance. The formation of reputation has descended from decades of impressions to fleeting moments, and eventually into real-time AI scoring at a speed and complexity that human cognition cannot grasp.

While digital tools have democratized reputation-building and broadened access to communication by making it available to everyone, they have simultaneously created unprecedented vulnerability. This paradox suggests that while everyone can participate in reputation construction, they do so within a framework of controls and limitations that are beyond their control.

This analysis, showing how reputation has become a game of numbers (followers, likes, engagement rates), reveals how neoliberal logic has infiltrated personal identity. The commodification of reputation, which has been detached from reason and context since the Enlightenment and transformed into a game of approval through intermediaries, represents a radical departure from earlier ethical frameworks. Reputation has now become a machine that operates faster and more complexly than any individual (or crowd) can consciously monitor.

This marks the second critical step in the evolution of reputation beyond human consciousness, the first being the shift to a fragmented, constructed, and mediated form. Reputation, which experienced its first rupture by gaining fragmented and performative qualities, now exits human cognition entirely.

This exit from human consciousness brings with it the departure from human attention, approval, calculation methods, observation, evaluation systems, assimilation and internalization, and the capacity for meaning-making.

4. Limitations and future implications

This study traced the historical evolution of reputation perception and concluded with theoretical projections about its current and future dynamics. Accordingly, empirical research is needed to examine and validate the ongoing shifts in how reputation is constructed and perceived.

Furthermore, future research could benefit from ethnographic studies or digital sentiment analysis to empirically test and contextualize the theoretical claims in the context of real-life reputation crises across various digital platforms.

Theoretically, this study intended to bridge critical theory, digital media studies, and postmodern discourse, but further explore the AI-mediated reputation scoring systems and how they impact user behavior and perception, also expand its practical implications.

The article draws heavily on Western-centric philosophical traditions and case studies. Future research could explore non-Western epistemologies of reputation to enhance cross-cultural validity.

Last but not least, the proposed notion of a "post-cognitive era," in which reputation is increasingly shaped by algorithmic perception and visual metrics, requires further conceptual development. This idea could serve as a fruitful foundation for future research in affect and cognition studies, as well as in the field of AI ethics.

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