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Regulatory agency reputation acquisition: A Q Methodology analysis of the views of agency employees

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Abstract

This article reports findings of a Q Methodology study in which we explored the opinions of employees from eight Dutch regulatory agencies on how agencies gain their reputation. This is the largest study to date examining employee's views on the relative importance of different factors in reputation acquisition by public organizations, and the first analyzing employees in regulatory agencies. Results reveal five distinct "profiles" of opinion among employees about the factors most important in reputation acquisition. Regression analysis, further, supports that different regulatory agencies are dominated by employees with different opinions on how reputation is formed. These findings contribute to the growing empirical literature on how regulatory agencies, and their various employees, understand and approach reputation management.

Keywords: bureaucratic reputation, communications, regulatory agencies, reputation management, stakeholder management.

1. Introduction

Regulatory agencies have taken on an increasingly sizeable, complex, and visible role in governing society. With the move from "black letter" law to flexible regimes, regulators have to interpret rules themselves; including rules about controversial and uncertain matters in new and expanding markets (Burgess, 2016; Levi-Faur, 2011). To assess and supervise intricate, uncertain risks, regulators commonly must find ways to collaborate with the very sectors they oversee (Black et al., 2007). They are also more in the public eye and in the public sphere than ever before (Hjarvard, 2008; Koop & Lodge, 2020). In this context, the reputation of regulatory agencies has become an increasingly important asset.

Research from literature on reputation, media, and branding suggests agencies with a stronger reputation are better able to survive, secure regulatee cooperation and compliance, maintain public support, and wield political influence to protect their autonomy (Alon-Barkat & Busuioc, 2024; Capelos et al., 2016; Carpenter, 2010; Klijn et al., 2016; Needham, 2006; Verhoest et al., 2015). As reputation is vital, it is a key motivator of agency behavior (Lee, 2022; Waeraas & Maor, 2014; Whelan et al., 2010). To describe, explain, and predict how contemporary regulatory agencies behave, therefore, we must develop sound, empirically grounded theory on how agencies think about their own reputation. This theory must posit what factors agencies consider most important in acquiring reputation with external stakeholders, and under what circumstances different kinds of agencies prioritize different factors (Binderkrantz et al., 2023).

Currently, there is a wide, diverse literature positing myriad antecedents of reputation; agency performance (Picci, 2014), media coverage (Klijn et al., 2016), inspector behavior (Loyens et al., 2019), and mandate (Boon et al., 2021), to name only a few. Empirical evidence about how regulatory agencies acquire reputation, however,

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is still developing. The most common approach to studying what factors agencies consider most important to reputation acquisition has been to analyze externally observable behavior. Scholars infer agencies have a certain understanding of, and approach to, reputation by analyzing what they do and say publicly (Bach et al., 2022; Christensen & Gornitzka, 2019; van der Veer, 2021). This approach leaves the views of regulatory agency employees themselves relatively unexplored (Bustos, 2021).

This study seeks to “open the black box” of the regulatory agency; interrogating employees directly about how they understand reputation acquisition. We draw inspiration from recent studies with employees from other public service organizations (primarily ministries) (notably, Boon et al., 2020; Figenschou et al., 2023; Garland, 2017; Gilad & Alon-Barkat, 2018; Kolltveit et al., 2019; Salomonsen et al., 2016; Schillemans et al., 2019). These studies have demonstrated that employee insights offer a greater understanding of the detailed mechanisms and nuances of reputation acquisition. Studies directly with regulatory agency employees were typical of the case-studies foundational to the field (e.g., Carpenter, 2001, 2010), but have only recently recaptured widespread scholarly interest (Binderkrantz et al., 2023). To the authors’ knowledge, no study to date has sought to systematically survey regulatory agency staff as to how they think that their agency acquires its reputation. This study seeks to contribute to this gap in research, asking: *according to their employees, how do regulatory agencies acquire their reputation?*

This study employed Q Methodology (Watts & Stenner, 2012), a method in which respondents rank statements representing different viewpoints on a topic in order of preference to address a research question. Q Methodology is especially suited to studying subjective viewpoints of individuals, especially where these are not already empirically established in a field of research. Q Methodology produces, via factor analysis, a summary of the “profiles” in a group: the common camps of opinion on a topic. These profiles consist of in-depth descriptions of each of these common camps of opinion, using both quantitative and qualitative data. Q Methodology thus provides immediate insights into nuanced and varied viewpoints within a group. Its profiles can be used to inform the design of, for example, survey items for future large-n studies or code book conceptualizations (Nederhand & Molenveld, 2022). For these reasons, we considered Q Methodology a useful approach to apply to our analysis of reputation acquisition as understood by employees in regulatory agencies. Data were collected from 205 senior staff members of eight Dutch regulatory agencies.

This study finds five profiles on reputation acquisition among our sample. These are that reputation is acquired primarily based on: (1) how well agencies manage their image in the media (Image Managers); (2) how well agencies perform and then report that performance publicly (Agency Promoters); (3) the quality of customer service for both citizens and regulatees (Customer Servers); (4) the quality of client service for regulatees alone (Client Servers), and (5) institutional and media factors outside agency control (Fatalists). Nearly two thirds of respondents who fall into a profile are either Customer Servers or Agency Promoters. Generally, employees see regulator communication strategy, mass media reporting, recent agency performance, and customer service as key factors in how their agency gains its reputation. Institutional factors are considered less important. Additionally, exploratory linear regression supports employee views on reputation acquisition are contextual. Analysis shows statistically significant differences based on employing agency, degree of contact with citizens, and job function.

In the remainder of the article, we first present our theoretical framework, including the framework used to formulate statements for the Q Methodology. Second, both the Q Methodology and participant selection are explained. Third, we present findings: the five profiles representing various viewpoints of employees on regulatory agency reputation acquisition and the exploratory linear regression. Finally, we discuss these results and their implications. We demonstrate how profiles could be used in future research through an illustrative discussion of their implications for debates on the role of the media in reputation acquisition for public service organizations.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Reputation and the role of agency employees

Reputation is here defined as “a set of symbolic beliefs about the unique or separable capacities, roles, and obligations of an organization where those beliefs are embedded in audience networks” (Carpenter, 2010, 45). Reputation is symbolic. It embodies associations and images stakeholders have with an organization. Thus, reputation is

related, but not identical, to *actual* organizational capacities, roles, obligations etc. (Carpenter, 2001, 5; Lodge, 2014, 65). In this regard, reputation is related to beliefs and attitudes audiences can hold about the legitimacy (Braun & Busuioc, 2020; Suchman, 1995) and trustworthiness (Verhoest et al., 2024) of organizations. Notably, organizations can have multiple reputations with different stakeholder audiences (Rindova et al., 2005). The organization's employees are an internal stakeholder audience, and one which can be heterogenous in its views.

Reputation *acquisition* and reputation *management* are distinct but interrelated. Reputation acquisition here refers to the process by which external audiences come to have certain widespread beliefs about an organization, and how those beliefs may come to change. Reputation management—broadly—refers to efforts by an organization to influence its reputation with audiences; using either, or both, substantive actions and communications to shape what audiences believe about the organization (Ayres & Braithwaite, 2009; Busuioc & Lodge, 2016; Maor, 2020). Beyond this broad definition, there are significant cleavages in the literature as to the nature of organizational reputation management (Pedersen & Salomonsen, 2023). Prominent debates concern: whether reputation management is necessarily about communications, or can involve substantive actions (Picci, 2014); whether reputation management is driven from external threats (e.g., Busuioc & Lodge, 2016; Maor et al., 2013; Moschella & Pinto, 2019) or proactive internal strategies (Christensen & Gornitzka, 2019; Christensen & Lodge, 2018); and to what extent an organization's reputation management can successfully influence the reputation it acquires (Boon, 2022). These cleavages are further detailed in our Analytical strategy. Regardless of precise definitions, reputation management is the organization's attempt to influence the reputation acquisition process. Reputation management is, though, also a reflection of the organization's understanding of that process. If organizations publish press releases to manage reputation, it implies they think a meaningful segment of their audience acquires their beliefs about the organization by reading press releases. The organization's "theory" of reputation acquisition—whether true or false—logically leads it to certain kinds of reputation management strategies and priorities (Pedersen & Salomonsen, 2023, 44). Ultimately, the reputation the organization acquires will change how the organization understands acquisition and approaches reputation management (Pedersen et al., 2023).

Organizational perceptions of the antecedents of their reputation are, thus, an important topic for theories seeking to describe, explain, and predict organizational reputation management behavior (Binderkrantz et al., 2023; Ravasi et al., 2018). Indeed, it is an important topic for theories of organizational behavior generally, given that reputational considerations often affect decision-making (Lee, 2022; Waeraas & Maor, 2014; Whelan et al., 2010).

The question of where reputations "come from" is a classic and fundamental one in corporate reputation scholarship (Fombrun, 2012, p. 95; Ravasi et al., 2018). Rooted in social construction theory, corporate reputation scholarship sees reputation as the shared understandings of organizations and their stakeholders, co-created in repeated interactions between internal (managers) and external (stakeholders) audiences (Fombrun, 2012). As an organization's strategic behaviors and communications shape stakeholder perceptions, both organizational managers and stakeholders have a role in reputation acquisition. Hence, reputation stems from both the quality of organizational performance and stakeholders recognizing that performance; from "being good" *as well as* from "being known" (Rindova et al., 2005). While informative, these findings about reputation acquisition from corporate reputation literature cannot be assumed to apply identically to regulatory agencies.

Public organizations generally acquire and manage reputation differently to private companies (Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). Whereas corporations have some autonomy to define their mission and strategy, public organizations must follow political edicts. Public organizations are similarly less free to choose how to communicate about their organization due to political oversight and interdependencies with other public organizations. Whereas corporations are designed to make profits in given markets, public organizations have multiple goals and tasks, which can give them a less consistent image. Public organizations thus often struggle to carve their unique identity out of the monolithic "bureaucracy" (Waeraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012).

Regulatory agencies have some unique features which distinguish them from both private companies and other public organizations. Prior research shows audiences see regulatory agencies as more "bureaucratic" compared to "service-delivery" or "redistributive" public organizations (Luoma-aho, 2008). Regulatory agencies attract more reputational "threats" than other kinds of public organizations (Verhoest et al., 2021). The main

reason for these unique challenges, Verhoest et al. argue, is the authoritative and coercive nature of the regulator's task. Regulatory agencies make authoritative decisions on "right" and "wrong" behavior and enforce compliance via—at times—threats and punishments (Baldwin et al., 2011). The benefits of regulation are diffuse; enjoyed by the whole society. Its costs are concentrated in a relatively narrow audience sector: regulatees. Regulatory agency decisions have serious consequences for certain regulated individuals, groups, or even entire sectors. With such high stakes, regulatory agencies are especially assiduous about decision-making procedures (Koop & Lodge, 2020), contributing to their reputation as "bureaucratic." The end result is that regulatory agencies tend to have highly vocal critics but not equally passionate defenders. Thus, while studies of other public organizations have relevance to understanding reputation acquisition, it is also necessary to study and theorize about regulatory agencies specifically.

Among studies of public organizations, there are two overarching ways in which scholars have sought to investigate how organizations think they acquire their reputation. The most common approach has been to analyze externally observable behavior. Scholars infer agency's understandings of, and approach to, reputation by analyzing what they do and say publicly (Bach et al., 2022; Christensen & Gornitzka, 2019; Christensen & Lodge, 2018; van der Veer, 2021). For example, by analyzing when (Maor et al., 2013), what and how (Blondeel et al., 2024; Busuioc & Rimkutė, 2020; Rimkutė, 2018) organizations communicate to audiences. In recent years, however, we have seen an increase in studies seeking to look inside the organization. Rather than inferring motivations and mechanisms from external behavior, they look to internal factors such as organizational procedures and employee attitudes (Gilad, 2012; Pedersen et al., 2023; Wæraas & Dahle, 2020). This study takes the latter approach. Insider sources offer a greater understanding of the detailed mechanisms and nuances of reputation acquisition. As the following overview of literature demonstrates, employees—especially—can offer expert insights on reputational acquisition. Indeed, employees themselves are often directly involved in processes of reputation management; attempting to cultivate a strong reputation and respond to threats in their day-to-day work.

2.2. How agency employees understand reputation acquisition: Empirical literature

The question of how agency employees, especially in leadership positions, understand reputation acquisition was explored in foundational case-studies on regulatory agency reputation. In developing the original tenets of Bureaucratic Reputation theory, Carpenter's in-depth study of the US Food and Drug Administration drew heavily on observations and interviews with FDA employees (2010). While he observed general tendencies in how employees understood reputational dynamics, he also observed differences between employees. For instance, those higher in the hierarchy and with longer tenure were more sensitive to, and committed to maintaining, the organization's reputation.

More recent research on public service organizations has built on insights from such case studies, and other areas of scholarship, to examine employee viewpoints on reputation via medium- to large-N surveys. In a survey of employees of Danish regulatory agencies, Pedersen et al. (2023) found that external organizational reputation management influenced employee perceptions of the organization's reputation. Bustos (2023) surveyed employees of autonomous agencies in Mexico, finding that a positive agency reputation increased employee retention. Looking more specifically to employee views on reputation acquisition, Kolltveit et al. (2019) surveyed Norwegian civil servants to examine how concerned they were about the reputation of various political actors, including their agency, sector, and ministry. Boon et al. (2020) surveyed Chief Executive Officers of Flemish public service organizations to examine how they prioritize different audiences as targets for reputation management. Closely related to reputation acquisition is literature on civil servant views on "mediatization" using interviews (Garland, 2017), ethnography (Figenschou et al., 2023), and surveys (Salomonsen et al., 2016; Schillemans, 2019; Schillemans et al., 2019). These mediatization studies show civil servants are increasingly sensitive about media as source for reputation (see also, Klijn et al., 2016) and apply a "news logic" in their daily work, which can extend to changes in behavior (such as "politicization").

The above studies support that civil servants are typically sensitive to their organization's reputation and consider it to be crucial to maintain that reputation (Wæraas & Dahle, 2020). Civil servants seem to care more about the reputation of their organization and its political leadership than other actors in the political system (Kolltveit et al., 2019). These studies, too, support that an employee's level of reputational sensitivity, mediatization,

politicization, and prioritization of various audiences is affected by individual and environmental factors. These are, notably: national context (Schillemans, 2019), department size (Boon et al., 2020), employing department (central vs. non-central), and their role and seniority (Salomonsen et al., 2016). Further, Figenschou et al. (2023), drawing on interviews with Norwegian communication professionals, find nuanced different “ideal types” of employees in regard to their reputation management values and behavior.

Our study extends this literature to regulatory agency employees. As discussed, prior research suggests that, due primarily to their role in enforcing the law, regulatory agencies differ from the political actors typically studied. Employees in regulatory agencies may have distinct viewpoints on reputation acquisition. Understanding those viewpoints would help to explain and predict patterns of agency behavior. In contributing to this effort, this study expands upon extant work on the development of theoretical “ideal types” of public sector organization employees regarding their understanding of reputation management.

2.3. Analytical framework

Theory presents a range of perspectives as to how public service organizations in general, and sometimes regulatory agencies in particular, acquire their reputation with external audiences. This presents a challenge in anticipating potential employee viewpoints. As will be seen, there is a potentially endless range of factors employees may consider important. A meaningful analytical framework requires a degree of simplification to compare empirical reality to theory (Swedberg, 2018). For Q Methodology specifically, mutually exclusive, distinct theoretical perspectives on a question are necessary for the generation and analysis of survey items (Warsen et al., 2020). Actual theoretical perspectives on reputation acquisition are diverse, nuanced, and overlapping. Thus, for this study, “ideal type” perspectives on reputation acquisition were constructed (see Table 1) to serve as simplified, heuristic versions of real theoretical perspectives (Swedberg, 2018). It is not that we expect to find these ideal types in reality, but rather that the use of ideal types: (1) informs the creation of survey item statements that will be comprehensible and distinct for respondents, and (2) enables a subsequent analytical comparison of varied

TABLE 1 “Ideal type” theoretical perspectives on how reputation is acquired

Theoretical perspective	1. Reputation is acquired via regulatory action	2. Reputation is acquired via direct interactions	3. Reputation is acquired via media and intermediary reporting	4. Reputation is acquired via institutional conditions
Main driver of reputation	Agency actions, communications, and performance	Interactions between regulatory agency and its regulatees and citizens	What media and intermediaries choose to report about agencies	Institutional conditions, especially agency mandate
Who is key in process	Regulatory agency	Regulator staff	Mass media, social media platforms, and other “intermediaries”	Indirectly: those actors with most influence over agency mandate
Possibilities for agencies to manage reputation	Substantial; regulatory agencies have some autonomy in choosing their actions and communication strategy	Relatively substantial; agencies have some autonomy in policies, staff recruitment, and training	Limited; media (and intermediates) determine what they report about the agency	Limited; changing formal institutional conditions is difficult and often controlled by ministries and politicians
Theoretical sources	“Political” perspective on reputation including Bureaucratic Reputation theory, Game theoretic perspective, Public relations perspective and branding theory	Street level bureaucracy, Inspector style, Regulatory interactions literature; micro-cognitive perspectives on reputation formation	Mediatization theories, Social-constructivist perspectives on reputation building	Institutional theory, “Organizational” perspective on reputation

respondent viewpoints against specific theoretical understandings. As will be elaborated in the Methodology, employees were presented with a relatively wide range of possible factors (in the forms of survey items) they might consider relevant to reputation acquisition.

To create our ideal types, we drew primarily on theoretical frameworks and conceptual models which have previously summarized perspectives in corporate (Fombrun, 2012; Ravasi et al., 2018; Rindova & Martins, 2012) and public organizational (Waeraas & Maor, 2014) reputation scholarship. We, additionally, looked to literature more specifically on dynamics affecting regulatory agencies, including scholarship on regulatory trust (Six & Verhoest, 2017) and regulatory interactions (Loyens et al., 2019). Finally, we drew on theory from scholarship concerning media, communications, and public relations (Klijn et al., 2016). The remainder of this section describes the ideal type perspectives and explains their theoretical origins from these literatures.

2.3.1. *Reputation is acquired via regulatory action*

In this ideal type perspective, a regulatory agency's actions are the main driver of the reputation it acquires with external audiences. Regulatory agencies themselves are the main actors in the acquisition process. In forming their impressions of an agency, external audiences look to what the agency does at the organizational level. Audiences may look to the agency's substantive actions: behavior, policies, and performance (Carpenter & Krause, 2015; Maor & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2013; Rindova et al., 2005). They may also look to its communications: what the agency publishes about itself (Gilad et al., 2016; Maor et al., 2013). This ideal type most closely resembles what Waeraas and Maor (2014) call the "political science" approach. This approach prominently includes Bureaucratic Reputation theory (Carpenter, 2001; Gilad & Yogev, 2012). This ideal type closely reflects, too, "game theoretic" perspectives in corporate reputation literature. There, reputation acquisition is conceived as a process wherein the organization's deliberate actions signal unobservable attributes to stakeholders (Fombrun, 2012; Ravasi et al., 2018; Rindova & Martins, 2012). Both the "political science" and "game theoretic" approaches contend that organizations can significantly influence their reputation as choosing their actions determines what reputational signals they send (Rindova & Martins, 2012). Further, that audiences can and do form reputational beliefs based on largely rational evaluations of how well organizations meet their demands (Rindova & Martins, 2012, 20). This ideal type also has much in common with public relations literature and branding theory, which stress that organizations communicate a desired image by highlighting performance (Klijn et al., 2016; Lees-Marshment, 2009; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014).

2.3.2. *Reputation is acquired via direct interactions*

Face-to-face interactions between regulator staff and citizens and/or regulatees are the main driver of reputation acquisition in this ideal type perspective. Individual staff members are the key actors in the acquisition process. External audiences form their impressions of the agency by focusing on how either they personally, or other citizens/regulatees, are treated in these interactions. Reputation is affected by how often and "closely" staff interact with external audiences (Overman et al., 2020; Pautz & Wamsley, 2012). Further, the nature of these interactions (especially characteristics like staff toughness, fairness, and friendliness) affect impressions of the agency as a whole (Fahy, 2022; Loyens et al., 2019; Nielsen & Parker, 2009; Rorie et al., 2018). This ideal type is based on street-level bureaucracy, inspector style, and regulatory interaction literature, as well as corporate reputation scholarship stressing the relevance of individual, direct experience and micro-cognitive assessments (Ravasi et al., 2018). These literatures center individual organizational staff as ambassadors of the organizational "brand." Through better staff management (e.g., hiring, training, complaints procedures), such perspectives imply, organizations have some power to influence the reputation acquisition process.

2.3.3. *Reputation is acquired via media and intermediary reporting*

What is publicly reported about agencies in the media and/or by other intermediaries, in this ideal type perspective, is the primary factor in reputation acquisition. The key players are mass media organizations, social media platforms, and intermediaries with a formal role in evaluating the agency (notably: courts, auditors, ombudsmen, and supra-national regulators). These third parties have the influence and/ authority to sway public opinion about a regulatory agency. In forming their impressions, external audiences look to what is reported about these agencies in the media or by intermediaries. What gets reported is not necessarily based on objective events, but rather influenced by the incentives and "logic" of the third-party organization. In the case of the media,

regardless of the contents of a report, stories will be selected and framed in ways that make news more attractive (typically, in a personalized, dramatic fashion) (see Bennett, 2016; Klijn et al., 2016). Reputation thus arises from media and intermediary construction of events rather than events themselves (Klijn et al., 2016). This perspective is most directly derived from stakeholder theory and media and communication scholarship in both corporate (e.g., Pollock et al., 2008) and public sector organization (Boon et al., 2019) reputation literature. It is also reflected in the corporate reputation scholarship on institutional intermediaries (Ravasi et al., 2018; Rindova et al., 2005) and broader social-constructivist perspectives on reputation acquisition (Maor, 2015; Rindova & Martins, 2012; Verhoest et al., 2015). In these literatures, organizations are posited to have only limited influence over the reputation acquisition process. Rather, audience beliefs are driven by media, intermediary rankings and evaluations, and collective social interpretations of the meaning of events affecting regulators. While organizations may try, they cannot entirely control these narratives, evaluations, and interpretations, and therefore cannot entirely control their reputation (Rindova & Martins, 2012, 22).

2.3.4. Reputation is acquired via institutional conditions

In this final ideal type perspective, reputation acquisition is primarily shaped by the institutional context and conditions an agency faces. Especially relevant for independent regulatory agencies are conditions to do with mandate: the nature of an agency's task (the kind of work it does), its assigned resources, and its independence (i.e., autonomy from the political/ministerial hierarchy) (Boon et al., 2020). It is the largely unalterable mandate of a regulatory agency which determines its reputation. When forming beliefs about an agency, audiences are not evaluating its specific performance or decisions. Rather, they look at the kind of organization, what kind of task and role it fulfils, and how it fits into the sectors in which it operates. For example, agencies required to work on more politicized tasks will necessarily have a more controversial reputation with stakeholders (Boon et al., 2021). Agencies whose mandate requires they supervise certain industries can experience negative reputational "spillovers" if those industries harm the public (Barnett & Hoffman, 2008; Yue & Ingram, 2012). This ideal type is derived from institutional theory (what Waeraas and Maor [2014] refer to as "the organizational approach") and corporate reputation literature with a macro perspective on industry reputations across organizations (Abrahamson & Fombrun, 1994). According to both theoretical perspectives, reputation is acquired based on largely immutable, structural factors, limiting an agency in what it can do individually to manage its reputation.

There are nuanced debates within and between the theoretical perspectives ostensibly grouped together in these ideal types. Debates highlight the relative importance to reputation acquisition of: different audiences (like regulatees vs. citizens) (Boon et al., 2020); micro and macro levels of analysis (Ravasi et al., 2018); substantive versus symbolic action (Maor, 2020); enduring performance versus recent scandals (van Erp et al., 2020); various kinds of media and opinion makers (Boon et al., 2019); various aspects of regulatory staff interactions (May, 2005); and courting media attention versus pursuing more substantive strategies (Moynihan, 2012). Further, reputation scholars have argued it is very likely public organizational reputation is acquired through a range of interacting factors; both structural and agential (Boon, 2022). As much as reasonably possible, we have sought to represent these debates in choice of the items in the survey presented to respondents.

3. Methodology

This section provides an overview of Q Methodology and the Q sort statements developed for this study. It then elaborates on our participant selection.

3.1. Q Methodology statements and survey

Q Methodology, a method developed for psychological research, aims to analyze nuanced opinions of individuals on a topic (Watts & Stenner, 2012). This method has been increasingly used by public administration scholars to systematically analyze and compare varied opinions held by individuals within and about public organizations (e.g., Warsen et al., 2020). Participants in a Q Methodology study (the "P-set") are presented with a set of statements (the "Q-set") representing the range of opinions in a population on a topic. Participants sort these statements into a distribution representing how strongly they agree with each statement. From this distribution,

researchers extract and interpret factors (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Each factor represents a group of respondents who rank statements in a similar fashion and therefore hold a shared, similar opinion.

Q Methodology is well-suited to the goals of this study. It allows us to combine and compare ideas on this topic derived from across the theoretical spectrum. Q Methodology allows respondents to express their opinions about possible combinations or interactions of factors. Further, as it is highly systematized it allows us to compare views held between different sub-samples of employees.

The first step of a Q Methodology study is to design the Q-set. Our four ideal type perspectives formed the starting point for developing statements. We developed a long initial list of statements representing the ideal type perspectives and debates within them. Eight pilot interviews with regulatory agency experts helped to refine the statements. We presented the long list of statements to liaisons working in regulatory agencies. They provided written and verbal feedback as to which statements were likely to resonate most with employees, and how statements should be worded. On this basis, we refined the statements and reduced the Q-set to 24. Following Dryzek and Berejikian (1993), for each ideal type perspective we have three formats of statement expressing different aspects of the perspective (summarized in Table 2). As shown in Table 2, we organize statements into a 3×4 grid. This ensures that all perspectives have an equal number of statements and uniformly formatted statement types (Nederhand et al., 2019).

Statements were presented to respondents in a self-administered online survey (using QsorTouch). They were asked to reflect on how their agency acquires its reputation with external stakeholders, and on that basis, sort the statements into a grid, ranging from “most” (+3) to “least” (−3) agree. Respondents saw the statements in a random order. Only a set number of statements could be chosen for each ranking level (see Table 3). This required respondents to indicate how relatively strongly they agree or disagree with each statement. After sorting, respondents were shown their completed grid and allowed to rearrange statements. They were also presented with open-field text questions to elaborate on why they had placed statements in the most agree (+3) and least agree (−3) positions.

Finally, the survey asked respondents demographic questions about their job function, tenure (Kolltveit et al., 2019), and level of contact with citizens and regulatees. They were also asked to rate their perception of how politically sensitive and interesting to citizens the work of their agency is (see Boon et al., 2020; Christensen & Lodge, 2018 for possible relevance of these factors).

3.2. Regulatory agency selection

This study recruited participants from eight Dutch independent regulatory agencies via an ongoing consortium-based research project in the Netherlands. These organizations vary in the sectors they regulate, size, age, and whether they operate at the national or provincial level (see Table 4). This study focused on market, industry, and safety regulators.

3.3. The P-set: Participants

The population for the study was employees of the eight participating regulatory agencies. Given study goals, our sampling strategy was to recruit a variety of employees likely to be knowledgeable about, and experienced with, the regulatory agency, its function, and its reputation. The precise sample was created in consultation with liaison staff from participating agencies. We asked liaison staff to invite a diverse mixture of agency management and team leaders from a range of divisions (inspection, legal, advice, policy, communications etc.).

Most Q studies find 25–40 respondents sufficient to determine shared, subjective viewpoints on a topic (Brown, 1980). Q Methodology uses small-medium P-sets, first, because smaller samples are required for meaningful analysis of the qualitative data which forms part of the method. Further, Q Methodology analyzes nuanced, varied viewpoints on a topic rather than just dominant, mean views of a group. This is achieved through a form of factor analysis which requires small-medium samples. Finally, Q Methodology explores and identifies various viewpoints in a group, rather than validating that certain viewpoints exist at certain rates in the actual population (Watts & Stenner, 2012, 120). To include as many agencies as possible and enable comparisons, for this study we allowed 20–50 respondents per agency.

TABLE 2 Statement grid

Perspective	[THE REGULATOR]'S reputation is based on...	Stakeholders form certain impressions of [THE REGULATOR] because...	To improve its reputation ...
<p>P1 Regulator actions A regulator's reputation is acquired primarily based on its substantive actions and communications</p>	<p>1. how the regulator presents itself in press releases and other communication. 2. how it behaves in regard to its most recent, visible activities</p>	<p>9. they look to the effect the regulator is having on society over the long term. 10. they base their judgement on information provided by [THE REGULATOR] about its activities in press releases etc.</p>	<p>17. [THE REGULATOR] should demonstrate better performance and act more equitably. 18. [THE REGULATOR] should develop a good, powerful communications strategy.</p>
<p>P2 Direct interactions A regulator's reputation is acquired via direction interactions between staff and citizens/regulatees</p>	<p>3. direct interactions between regulatory employees and citizens, like information provisions or react to complaints and other contact. 4. direct interactions between regulatory employees and regulatees, like inspections and sanctions.</p>	<p>11. they look to whether regulatory employees treat regulatees fairly. 12. their personal experience as a citizen in contact with regulatory employees.</p>	<p>19. [THE REGULATOR] should have good complaints procedures in place in the organization, and manage contact from citizens well. 20. [THE REGULATOR] should make sure that all regulatory employees have the expertise, skills and communication proficiencies to serve the needs of regulatees.</p>
<p>P3 Media and intermediaries A regulator's reputation is acquired via how it is evaluated and reported on in traditional and social media, and by authorized actors like auditors.</p>	<p>5. how positive or negative media messages about [THE REGULATOR] are. 6. how other public organizations—for example courts, ombudsmen, EU and international organizations—judge them.</p>	<p>13. (social) media determines their image [of the regulator]. 14. they listen to what other public organizations like courts, ombudsmen, or EU-organizations have to say about the regulator.</p>	<p>21. [THE REGULATOR] should avoid the media, it has no control over how the media will report on it. 22. [THE REGULATOR] should communicate clearly that it is more independent and expert than all other websites, apps etc. that offer consumers reviews of restaurants, financial products etc.</p>
<p>P4 Institutional A regulator's reputation is acquired due to institutional conditions: what kind of work it has to do, and the power, independence, and resources politicians have granted it.</p>	<p>7. the extent to which their assigned tasks let them act independently of politics. 8. what the law says the regulator must do—it is difficult to get a good reputation is you have too little or controversial powers.</p>	<p>15. some sectors are more political, complicated, or fraught than others, and this affects how stakeholders see the regulator responsible. 16. the relationship between regulator and regulatee is always tense and so the regulator will always be criticized.</p>	<p>23. [THE REGULATOR] should just do the task it was set up to do. 24. politicians should stop making critical remarks about regulators and respect their independence.</p>

TABLE 3 Number of statements per rank

Ranking value	-3 (Least agree)	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3 (Most agree)
Number of statements at this rank	2	3	4	6	4	3	2

TABLE 4 Number of respondents by participating agency

Agency	Central task (from websites Dec 2022)	Respondents
Authority for Consumers & Markets	“Ensures fair competition between businesses, and protects consumer interests.”	20
The Human Environment and Transport Inspectorate	“Improving safety, confidence and sustainability in regard to transport, infrastructure, environment and housing.”	20
Radiocommunications Agency ^a	“Responsible for obtaining and allocating frequency space and monitoring its use. The work of the agency covers the entire field of wireless and wired communication.”	21
The Dutch Mining Authority	“Ensuring the safety of people and the protection of the environment in energy extraction and subsoil utilisation, now and in the future.”	24
The Dutch Emission Authority	“Implements and monitors the market tools available that contribute to a climate-neutral society.”	25
DCMR Rijnmond Environmental Service	“Committed to a clean, healthy and safe living environment for ... inhabitants of the Rijnmond region.”	27
The Inspectorate of Justice and Security	“Contributes to a just and safe society ... by supervising the implementing organisations of the Ministry of Justice and Security.”	27
The Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority	“The safety of food and consumer products, animal welfare and nature.”	41
	TOTAL	205

^aThis was the name of the agency, and its mission, at time of data collection. However, soon after it was renamed “The Dutch Authority for Digital Infrastructure.”

TABLE 5 Sample characteristics

	N	%
Job function		
Inspection	97	47
Knowledge and expertise	35	17
Management	30	15
Strategy and policy	21	10
Communication or public relations	7	3
Legal	5	2
Other	10	5
Years worked		
1–2	69	34
3–9	75	37
10+	61	30
Frequency of contact with citizens		
Daily	11	5
Weekly	31	15
Monthly	35	17
A few times a year	54	26
Never or almost never	74	36
Frequency of contact with regulatees		
Daily	25	12
Weekly	70	34
Monthly	58	28
A few times a year	23	11
Never or almost never	29	14

Employees were invited to participate via an email sent by the regulatory agency liaison, followed up by two reminders over 5 weeks. Data were collected between June and October 2022. The final P-set was 205 respondents. Table 5 summarizes sample characteristics.

3.4. Analysis

The data were subjected to multiple stages of analysis. First, we created descriptive statistics. These summarized sample characteristics, average scores per statement, and which statements were most commonly ranked in the most and least agree positions. We then conducted a factor analysis.

In Q Methodology, factor analysis for larger numbers of Q “sorts” (i.e., more than 70 respondents) requires special procedures to maintain sensitivity to the true diversity within the group. Watts and Stenner (2012) recommend, when analyzing larger groups of sorts, one begins with smaller-scale analyses of particular sub-groups of one’s population. In this study, the population was the employees of eight Dutch agencies, which we accordingly analyzed in two stages. To ensure a sound number of sorts per analysis, we grouped agencies into pairs for initial analysis (with 40–70 employees per pair). This analysis showed similar factors arising between the four pairs. We used the findings of this analysis to interpret findings of the second phase, especially how much variance was lost between phases.

In the second phase, all respondent sorts were analyzed in a single factor analysis conducted in the software package PQMethod (Schmolk & Atkinson, 2023). We extracted and compared solutions for 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 factors, using centroid analysis with Varimax rotation. We excluded factors with fewer than two loading sorts and employed the Kaiser–Guttman criterion of minimum eigenvalues of 1.00 (Guttman, 1954; Kaiser, 1960). Beyond this, we evaluated solutions with the goal to create factors which comprehensively and logically reflected the data, while remaining comprehensible for the purposes of theory building and practical application (Watts & Stenner, 2012, 105). Solutions with higher explanatory variance and more sorts loaded to factors were generally considered more comprehensive. We also, however, conducted “crib sheet” analysis on the various factor solutions to examine whether the emerging factors were comprehensible (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

A crib sheet uses quantitative and qualitative analysis to describe the nature of a factor. An example is provided in Figure A1 in our Supporting information. Quantitatively, the crib sheet summarizes the similar ways respondents in a factor rank statements and which statements are ranked distinctively high or low by compared to other factors. Qualitatively, the sheet describes themes in written comments from open-text survey questions. Together, this provides a detailed description of the viewpoints on reputation acquisition the factors represents. Crib sheets were refined and discussed in consultation with several researchers with expertise in reputation and regulation, along with discussions with the regulatory agency liaison staff.

Through an iterative process comparing explanatory values, included sorts, and crib sheets, we found that solutions over six factors began to produce factors with only minor, nuanced differences between them. The 5-factor solution avoided this problem, while also having relatively high explanatory variance and included sorts. As an additional exploratory step, we then conducted a linear regression for each factor to examine differences between employee sub-samples (see Supporting information, Appendix B).

As is common for Q-methodology (Watts & Stenner, 2012, 110), a portion of the respondents did not have high enough scores on any one factor to qualify for membership in a factor. While data from those respondents did not contribute to creating our factors, all 205 respondents were used for descriptive statistics and linear regression. For descriptive statistics, the mean for each statement in the Q-set is calculated using all respondents. For the linear regression, we calculated a “profile score” for each respondent. Profile score is a measure of the extent to which a respondent’s viewpoints on reputation acquisition align with that of each of our extracted factors.¹

4. Findings

4.1. Factor analysis: Five profiles on regulatory agency reputation acquisition

The factor analysis resulted in the extraction of five factors. 49% of the 205 participants are significantly associated with one of these factors ($p < 0.01$) and the total explained variance of 47%, both of which are sufficient (Watts & Stenner, 2012, 199). Since each factor represents a group of participants holding shared, similar

TABLE 6 Overview of the five profiles

	Profile 1: Image managers	Profile 2: Agency promoters	Profile 3: Customer servers	Profile 4: Client servers	Profile 5: Fatalists
Summary of perspective on reputation acquisition	Regulator reputation is primarily based on how skillfully the regulator can sway its image with the media and politicians.	Regulator reputation is primarily acquired by promoting real agency performance to the media and influential intermediaries.	Regulator reputation is primarily based on the quality of interactions between regulatory staff, citizens, and regulatees.	Regulator reputation is a product of how well regulators perform, especially in regard to working with their regulatee clients.	Regulator reputation is primarily a product of institutional mandate and media messaging, both of which the regulator is unlikely to be able to influence.
Implied perspective on reputation management	Regulator reputation is primarily improved by using savvy communications to shape media messaging about the agency.	Regulator reputation is primarily improved by performing well and making that performance visible to the public via direct communications, the media, and positive evaluations from intermediaries.	Regulator reputation is primarily improved by improving customer service.	Regulator reputation is primarily improved by improving client service.	Regulator reputation is primarily shaped by external factors, which the agency itself can do little to manage.
Eigenvalue	16.7	2.8	26.5	16.3	13.8
Explained variance (%)	8	11	13	8	7
Significantly associated respondents ($p < 0.01$)	15	24	38	14	7

opinions on regulatory agency reputation acquisition, we call these factors “profiles” from here on. Table 6 shows a short and simplified overview of characteristics of the five profiles. It shows: (1) a summary of the profile’s perspective on reputation acquisition, (2) the implied perspective of employees in those profiles on reputation management, (3) the Eigenvalues and variance explained (statistical measures summarizing how much variance between Q sorts is contained within the profile), and (4) how many respondents are significantly associated with this profile (for detailed results, see Supporting Information, Tables A1–A3).

The remainder of this section describes the profiles in detail. Illustrative quotes from respondents significantly associated with the profile are provided, alongside quantitative data about how statements are ranked within that profile (e.g., “3: +3” refers to statement 3 being ranked as +3, or most agree).

4.1.1. Profile 1: Image managers

“Image Managers” think reputation is principally shaped by mass media messaging (3: +3, 11: +2) and, more than all other profiles, by public attacks on the agency from politicians (24: +1). As one respondent summarizes: “reputation is mainly shaped by public and political opinion” (R183).

More than all others, those in this profile think reputation comes from recent, high-profile incidents involving the regulator (2: +3) and not long-term regulatory performance (9: –3) (“the public only [see] what was last visible” [R130]). Public opinion is also shaped by perceived independence, which can be undermined when

politicians publicly criticize the agency (“it is important the regulator can position itself as independent from politics” [R116]; “[AGENCY X] must become separated from the [ministry] to be seen as an independent regulator” [R128]; “independence as a regulator is very important” [R130]).

Image Managers believe regulators can and should influence their public image through savvy communication (1: +2, 18: +2, 19: -3). As one respondent expressed, exercising “control over media messages [is only possible] if you actively publish accurate messages about yourself” (R130).

Image Managers disagree, more than all others, that a regulator’s reputation comes from how it treats regulatees in interactions like inspections (6: -1, also 13: -1) but agree, somewhat, that citizen experiences matter (5: +1, 14: +1).

4.1.2. Profile 2: Agency promoters

More than Image Managers, Agency Promoters believe regulator reputation depends on actual regulator performance. Respondents in this profile say reputation is shaped by “[the regulator’s] own actions” (R186), “doing the right things” (R137), “what you do” (R137), “the way we act” (R8), “value delivery” (R92), “transparent...decision-making and enforcement processes” (R131), “that we have the right knowledge to do our job well ... [because] ... blunders [and] lawsuits ... harm reputation” (R122). More than all others, they are open to the idea that reputation arises from a regulator’s long-term impact on society (2: +1, 9: 0). However, as one respondent summarizes, performance is not enough: “what isn’t visible can’t affect your reputation ... you need the media” (R137).²

Like Image Managers, Agency Promoters see mass media as important to reputation (3: +3, 11: +3), and believe agency communications influence media narratives (1: +2, 18: +2, 19: -3). Unlike Image Managers, and more than all others, they think that what intermediaries (like ombudsmen, EU agencies, and courts) say about the regulator also matters (4: +2, 12: +1). Regulator reputation comes from how well agencies craft a “clear and understandable story” (R122) for “media and authorities” (R186) “showing” their real achievements rather than simply “shouting” about them (R6; R92).

Finally, Agency Promoters are neutral or negative about all statements expressing that institutional mandate influences reputation. They especially disagree reputation is determined by a regulator’s legal powers (8: -3) and, more than all others, that all regulators can do for their reputation is perform the task for which they were created (23: -2). Regardless of mandate, regulators can influence their reputation through good performance, effectively communicated to (and through) the mass media and intermediaries. As one respondent concludes: “an organization does not earn respect by doing what it has to do, but by rising above it” (R188).³

4.1.3. Profile 3: Customer servers

Customer Servers think stakeholders form their views of regulators based on how well they treat citizens (5: +3, 14: +2) and regulatees (6: +3, 13: +2) in face-to-face interactions.

Customer Servers are focused on the importance of good customer service, saying reputation is based on the quality of “one’s own experience” (R141) and “the conversation” ... “listening and listening again” (R173). They disagree that inherent tension with regulatees makes it hard for regulators to develop a good reputation (16: -2). Some respondents focus on the importance of fairness in interactions, whereby reputation depends on “transparency and honesty” (R162), “acting fairly, not dogmatically ... showing what you do and why” (R167) and acting in the “spirit of the law” (R93). Others focus on staff demonstrating “expertise” (R143) in direct encounters with regulatees or citizens. Reputation depends on staff members “knowing what they are talking about ... [being] a substantive expert (R87), and being ‘up to standard’ as an employee of a ‘knowledge organization’” (R148). These respondents point out expertise is most important when interacting with regulatees, as they are typically subject-matter experts. Despite these nuances, all those in this profile agree: “direct interaction between staff with stakeholders ... largely determines reputation” (R146).

More than all others, Customer Servers see the media and intermediaries as relatively unimportant (3: 0, also 11: -1), but not to the extent they think regulators should not engage in the public sphere (19: -3). The regulator has little influence on the media (“you have no direct influence on how the organization is described in the media” [R151], “we have no control” [R148], “you need to be able to tell a solid and if necessary nuanced story and that is not always what is heard or wants to be heard” [R173]). Yet, engagement with the media is unavoidable (“complaining about the media is like complaining about the weather” [R151], “[A regulatory agency]

cannot avoid the media ... because it is actively approached by media on a regular basis” [R148], “from the point of view of accountability and ... transparency, it is important to inform the public” [R196]).

4.1.4. Profile 4: Client servers

Like Customer Servers, Client Servers think reputation is heavily influenced by the quality of interactions with regulatory staff. Unlike Customer Servers, though, they only see interactions with *regulatees* as truly significant to reputation (6: +2, 22: +2), and interactions with citizens marginal at best (5: -1, 14: -1, 21: 1).⁴

Client Servers highlight that reputation depends on the “connection with supervised parties” (R169), “knowledge and skills of ALL inspectors” (R75), “fast and adequate complaint handling” (R205), “treating companies equally” (R101), and “more active and assertive signaling [with] focused and smart—sometimes varied—intervening, evaluating and monitoring” (R168). More than all others, they believe the kind of sector regulators govern (its complexity, political controversies etc.) will inevitably influence agency reputation (15: +1). Yet, they reject that these issues create inherent tension with regulatees that would make it impossible to improve reputation (16: -2).

Consistent with this, they think reputation reflects substantial agency performance (2: +1). Like Agency Promoters, Client Servers believe improved performance leads to improved reputation (17: +3)⁵: “reputation starts with solid performance” (R169), “ultimately, it’s about doing what you do as well as possible” (R168), “just doing what you have to do is simply best” (R29), “[we must] transparently do what we are charged with doing” (R29). Client Servers, though, place far greater emphasis on day-to-day quality client service: for example, “the [regulator] is the shop floor, not the management” (R46, emphasis added).

This emphasis on performance also helps to explain why Client Servers are neutral on one statement about interactions with regulatees: statement 13: “stakeholders form their impressions [of the regulator] because they observe whether regulatory employees treat regulatees fairly.” For Client Servers, reputation arises more from regulator *performance* in interactions (effectiveness, efficiency etc.) than fairness.⁶

Such a stance also illuminates why Client Servers out of all the profiles disagree the most that to improve regulator reputation politicians must stop criticizing agencies (24: -3).⁷ A regulator truly focused on improving reputation should be listening to criticism and responding with improved performance: “politicians...are simply allowed to be critical of the actions of inspectorates, this does not compromise their independence” (R205), “[we need] more transparency, not only highlighting the good sides but also daring to show the not so good sides” (R89), “everyone should be allowed to talk, also critically ... the quality of our performance is what counts: that’s what gives you confidence to make it public, and that’s what people talk about” (R169).

They also think regulator communications affect reputation, like Image Managers and Agency Promoters (18: +3, 19: -3). Unlike those profiles, however, Client Servers are more ambivalent about the extent to which the media and intermediaries define regulator reputation (3: +2, 4: 0, 12: -2): “I am convinced that it is not the other public organizations that make up [AGENCY X’s] reputation but [AGENCY X] itself” (R29), “be good and advertise it remains the basis of good PR (*but in that order*)” (R101, emphasis added).

4.1.5. Profile 5: Fatalists

More than all others, Fatalists agree reputation is determined by a regulator’s legal powers (8: +2) and all regulators can do for their reputation is perform the task for which they were created (23: +3). Like Image Managers and Agency Promoters, they believe that what the media and intermediaries say about regulators affects reputation (3: +2, 4: +1). However, they are pessimistic about the regulator’s ability to influence what is said about them through either communications (18: -2, 20: -3) or good performance (9: -2, 7: -2).

Fatalists do think, though, that reputation is somewhat based on regulator performance during recent, high-profile incidents (2: +1) and face-to-face interactions with citizens (5: +2). They strongly believe the regulator should not give up on engaging with the media (19: -3). Thus, while Fatalists are the most pessimistic about regulators’ ability to affect reputation, they are not entirely without hope.

These different profiles raise the question of *why* employee viewpoints on reputation acquisition differ. Is an employee’s tendency toward certain profiles predictably explained by what sort of employee they are, or what agency they work for? While a definitive answer is beyond the scope of this study, we conducted exploratory linear regression to provide some insights.

4.2. Additional linear regression: Variation between agencies and employees

Appendix B of our Supporting Information outlines the method and complete results of linear regressions. Our dependent variable was profile score. Our independent variables were demographic factors: employing agency, job function, political sensitivity of work, citizen interest in work, tenure, degree of citizen contact, and regulatee contact.

Results are summarized in Table 7. Significant p -values indicate a significant association between respondents holding viewpoints aligned with a profile (P1-5) and having a certain demographic characteristic. The analyses show statistically significant differences in profile scores based on employing agency, job function, and degree of contact with citizens.

These results imply that employees' opinions on reputation acquisition are affected by their role, how much contact they have with the public, and which agency they work for. Results also imply different regulatory agencies may be predominantly staffed by employees oriented more toward certain profiles, and therefore with different views on how reputation is acquired (see Fig. B1 in Supporting information). As such, our results question common assumptions found in reputational theory about how agencies approach reputation management, something we will delve deeper into Section 5.

5. Discussion and conclusion

How do regulatory agencies acquire their reputation according to their employees? This study finds five different profiles of opinion on this question among our sample. These are that reputation is acquired primarily based on: (1) how well agencies manage their image in the media (Image Managers); (2) how well agencies perform and then report that performance publicly (Agency Promoters); (3) the quality of customer service for both citizens and regulatees (Customer Servers); (4) the quality of client service for regulatees alone (Client Servers), and (5) institutional and media factors outside agency control (Fatalists). Nearly two thirds of those respondents who fall into a profile are either Customer Servers or Agency Promoters.

As expected, the emergent profiles do not directly correspond to the "ideal type" theoretical perspectives used to craft the survey. Nor do the five profiles represent inherently diametrically opposed points of view. Rather, profiles represent nuanced viewpoints, each combining different elements from different perspectives. Indeed, looking at the factor array we observe several similarities between the five profiles (Table A2 in Supporting information). Some statements are consistently ranked as neutral or positive. These are that reputation is based on: how the regulator has performed regarding its recent, visible activities (statement 2), media messages about the regulator (3), the quality of customer service for citizens (5, 21) and the political complexity of the regulator's task and sector (7, 15). Across profiles, employees disagree that, to improve reputation, regulators should seek to avoid the media (19). These similarities are generally supported by the descriptive analysis of mean scores on all statements for all employees (including those not significantly loaded to a profile) (see Table B5 in Supporting information).⁸

Collectively, these results suggest the average regulatory agency employee in our sample thinks recent performance, media messages, customer service for citizens, and the political complexity of regulator tasks and sector are the most relevant factors for reputation acquisition (Lock & Jacobs, 2024). Yet, the five profiles developed in this study represent meaningful empirical differences in employee viewpoints on reputation acquisition. As demonstrated by the factor analysis, there are significant differences between employees as to which of these factors, and in what combinations, are most relevant. These profiles provide a framework for more comprehensive analysis of how employees understand, and may act to manage, regulatory agency reputation. This is valuable for both future theory and research. To illustrate the value of the profiles, we will briefly discuss potential implications of our study for one area of debate: the role of media and communications in regulatory agency reputation acquisition.

Within and between agencies, our study finds employees have different viewpoints on the relative importance of the media to reputation, and how agencies might influence media reporting via communications. Some employees (Agency Promoters, Image Managers) see the media as a valuable channel through which to build the agency's reputation; by reporting on performance and shaping how the public understands certain regulatory issues (Gilad et al., 2016). Others (Customer Servers, Fatalists) see the media as having its own logic behind what

TABLE 7 Difference in profile score by respondent characteristics

	Profile 1: Image Managers		Profile 2: Agency Promoters		Profile 3: Customer Servers		Profile 4: Client Servers		Profile 5: Fatalists	
	Coefficient	<i>p</i>	Coefficient	<i>p</i>	Coefficient	<i>p</i>	Coefficient	<i>p</i>	Coefficient	<i>p</i>
Contact with citizens (with “never” as reference)										
Daily	0.006	0.683	-0.183	<0.001**	0.004	0.633	-0.026	0.879	-0.118	<0.05*
Weekly	-0.088	0.141	-0.043	0.177	-0.095	0.228	-0.076	0.159	0.066	0.501
Monthly	-0.054	0.468	0.106	0.101	-0.002	0.501	0.005	0.632	0.041	0.910
Yearly	0.023	0.204	0.099	0.078	-0.068	0.409	-0.005	0.766	0.098	0.080
Job function (with “inspector” as reference)										
Management	0.012	0.973	0.059	0.107	0.104	0.412	-0.035	0.503	-0.050	0.442
Knowledge and expertise	0.003	0.868	-0.059	0.479	0.078	0.739	-0.016	0.803	-0.035	0.642
Strategy and policy	0.121	<0.05*	-0.100	0.208	0.123	0.299	-0.016	0.803	-0.032	0.752
Other	-0.060	0.169	0.054	0.188	0.085	0.691	-0.013	0.870	-0.050	0.359
Agency (for each profile, reference is agency with highest mean profile score for that profile)										
A1	-0.166	0.966	[REF]	<0.001***	-0.249	0.817	-0.033	0.486	-0.014	0.234
A2	-0.188	0.545	-0.352	<0.001**	-0.326	<0.05*	-0.036	0.387	-0.119	0.278
A3	-0.185	0.652	-0.238	0.692	-0.340	0.046	[REF]	0.127	[REF]	0.832
A4	-0.077	0.063	-0.278	0.261	-0.221	0.806	-0.083	0.770	-0.079	0.953
A5	[REF]	<0.001***	-0.199	0.761	-0.378	<0.001**	-0.168	<0.05*	0.000	0.112
A6	-0.274	<0.05*	-0.256	0.479	[REF]	<0.001***	-0.103	0.476	-0.102	0.597
A7	-0.233	0.199	-0.125	0.136	-0.166	0.259	-0.092	0.658	-0.090	0.794
A8	-0.023	0.592	0.000	0.136	0.110	0.063	0.076	0.856	-0.098	0.445

Note: Significant codes: 0 *****, 0.001 ***, 0.01 **, 0.05 *

it reports, which the agency can do little to influence (Boon et al., 2019). Still others (Client Servers) question whether media reporting has a meaningful impact on agency reputation compared to other factors (Byrkjeflot, 2014). Some employees (Agency Promoters) believe the media can only be swayed to report what agencies “really” do (Picci, 2014), while others (Image Managers) imply the media can be swayed by merely symbolic displays (Alon-Barkat & Gilad, 2017). Employees in several profiles draw a contrast between empty, cynical “spin” and responsibly communicating the nuanced realities of their work (Figenschou et al., 2023). Even those employees who find futile agency attempts to shape media reporting, believe media engagement is obligatory (Customer Servers, Fatalists). Media engagement is simply expected from regulatory agencies and/or is legally or ethically necessary (even where it will likely hurt the agency’s reputation).

A further implication of our study is that attitudes toward the media and communications are not universal between agencies. The exploratory linear regression most notably implies that different regulatory agencies are dominated by employees in certain profiles. Some agencies had a significantly greater percentage of employees aligned to the more pro-media Image Manager and Agency Promoter profiles, others to the more media-skeptical Customer Server profile. These results are consistent with prior scholarship suggesting that the varying nature of mandate and task between regulatory agencies influences the reputational landscape its employees face (Boon et al., 2021; Christensen & Gornitzka, 2019; Garland, 2017).

As this example demonstrates, the five profiles allow for a structured, fine-grained analysis of existing debates within the black box of the agency. *Fine-grained* in that the profiles allow for an analysis of differences in viewpoints within agencies. *Structured* in that employee viewpoints are organized into prominent camps which can be used to evaluate theoretical expectations and quantitatively compared (within and between agencies). Further, the determinants of profile membership can be statistically analyzed to better understand potential differences in viewpoints arising from individual, organizational, situational, and institutional variation. The profiles could be employed not only to study views on reputation acquisition, but also to potentially help to explain different patterns of reputation management within and between agencies.

The five profiles are most directly applicable in the design of future research with employees in regulatory agencies, and potentially other public organizations. Employed in studies in other contexts applying different methods, these profiles could provide more precise insights into how employees understand reputation acquisition and seek to act to manage reputation. In qualitative research, the profiles could provide an analytical framework for interviews with, or observations of, employees, and potentially allow systematic comparisons to the viewpoints of external audiences (like regulatees or citizens). In quantitative research, the profiles could help inform the development of survey indices. The profiles are also potentially useful as a heuristic tool for practitioners to interrogate viewpoints among employees in their agencies—as we have already experienced in practitioner meetings following this research. These profiles could also have application for research regarding other kinds of perceptions of regulatory agencies which are closely related to reputation, notably trust (Verhoest et al., *Forthcoming*).

This study, however, has limitations that need be considered by future researchers or practitioners seeking to build on its findings. First, the eight regulatory agencies in the study are all Dutch. Earlier research suggests respondents are influenced by national cultures (Warsen et al., 2020). The focus on market, industry, and safety regulators, too, excludes the views of employees of agencies in the social domain. Second, our factor analysis included a relatively large number of respondents. This necessarily reduces the nuanced analysis possible with fewer respondents, more common for Q Methodology. We have sought to address and report this loss of nuance through a two-stage analysis. Third, a large portion of respondents do not have high enough scores to be considered “members” of any one profile. This is quite common in Q Methodology (Watts & Stenner, 2012, 110), but is potentially relevant to those seeking to interpret and apply our results. We were, fourth, not able to confirm our sample was representative of the population of employees of the eight agencies. While this is not crucial for Q Methodology, it may limit the application of these results in other contexts. Partially due to this limitation, finally, our linear regression analysis does not represent an attempt to model reputation acquisition views between sub-samples. Rather, it is an exploratory effort using single linear regressions. Future research can build on, and empirically evaluate, the framework and findings from this study. To work toward more comprehensive theoretical models will require similar studies to be conducted in a range of contexts, notably in different countries and domains. Even if it is established that certain kinds of agencies are predictably dominated by employees

in certain profiles, it does not necessarily follow that agencies would have predictably similar reputation management. As Waeraas and Dahle (2020) describe, much external reputation management is firmly controlled from the organizational center. Again, further research would be needed to determine when employee views on reputation translate to agency action.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

- ¹ Profile score is thus a continuous, interval measure. By contrast, whether a respondent is significantly associated with a profile is a binary (in or out) measure. This combination of measures has been used in prior studies to conduct linear regression on the results of factor analysis (e.g., Warsen et al., 2020).
- ² Indeed, for this reason, several respondents in this profile discuss the importance of unique agency branding in everything from organizational logos (R188) to uniforms for inspectors (R30).
- ³ This profile is bipolar, but with only one sort loading significantly negatively (R42). This means that one respondent is significantly *negatively* associated with this profile, but this is within acceptable limits for this kind of factor analysis (Watts & Stenner, 2012).
- ⁴ Some respondents in this profile say that this is because their agency has no direct interactions with citizens (R168; R75).
- ⁵ Though, consistent with the trend, they see recent performance as far more influential than long-term societal impact (9: -2).
- ⁶ Indeed, the respondent in this profile who discusses treating regulatees equally clarifies that this will not lead to regulatees having a better view of the regulator: “Fair is subjective. As a regulator, you should treat companies equally, but the supervised will often find that unfair” (R101).
- ⁷ This statement reads “to improve reputation, politicians should stop making critical remarks about regulators and respect their independence.” Thus, strong disagreement could be read as being against silencing politicians or that regulator reputation is not important to reputation. However, those in this profile agree that political independence is important for reputation (7: +1). Thus, it is fair to interpret this ranking as about whether politicians should speak out about perceived regulatory failures.
- ⁸ Here, too, we see consistently high scores for statements about the importance of recent performance (2, Mean = 1.23, SD = 0.4), media messaging (e.g., 3, Mean = 0.98, SD = 0.48), and customer service for citizens (e.g., 5, Mean = 0.79, SD = 0.59), and low scores for the statement on avoiding the media (19, Mean = -2.18, SD = 0.37). Statements about institutional factors tend to receive lower scores than those from other theoretical perspectives. However, consistent with the factor array, the highest ranked of the institutional statements are those about the political complexity of regulator tasks (7, Mean = 0.17, SD = 0.58) and sector (15, Mean = 0.13, SD = 0.27).

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