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Corporate reputation as social capital, strategic resource, and legitimacy mechanism: a literature review

Reputação corporativa como capital social, recursos estratégicos e mecanismo de legitimidade: uma revisão de literatura

La reputación corporativa como capital social, recurso estratégico y mecanismo de legitimidad: una revisión bibliográfica

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ABSTRACT: Corporate Reputation (CR) has long been studied in psychology, sociology, economics, politics, marketing, and management. Although much has been written on the topic, research on reputation remains fragmented. Thus, the literature frequently treats reputation as a social judgment, social capital, a strategic resource, a signaling device, and a source of legitimacy. This article provides a comprehensive literature review. In addition to tracing the development of the concept of reputation, the review examines its multidimensionality and its manifestation at the individual, organizational, and institutional levels. The review explores the relationships between corporate reputation, image, and branding in greater detail. Beyond reducing uncertainty for stakeholders, it also facilitates cooperation among them and serves as a strategic resource that can generate competitive advantage. In addition, it provides legitimacy for organizations, practices, and institutions. Finally, the review offers practical recommendations for reputation management and identifies five key lessons regarding the distinctions, strategic value, development, and contemporary relevance of Corporate Reputation.

Keywords: corporate reputation; corporate branding; corporate image; intangible assets; strategic resources.

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last four decades, Corporate Reputation (CR) has become one of the major subjects in management and marketing research. Organizational reputation is recognized as an asset that shapes stakeholders' perceptions and influences the organization's competitive position, financial performance, and long-term survival (Barney, 1991; Dowling, 2004;

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Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Therefore, in a highly competitive, globalized, and digitalized environment, organizations compete not only on their products and services but especially on the organizational credibility, quality, trustworthiness, and general image that stakeholders attribute to the organization.

Reputation originates in sociology and social psychology. Here, sociologist Norman Emler (1990) defined reputation as follows: "Reputation" is synonymous with "a set of judgments a community makes about the personal qualities of one of its members" (p. 171). Emler's definition of reputation is particularly relevant to studies of organizational reputation because it refers to a collective judgment of individuals or groups by other stakeholders in a community (as opposed to an individual's own perception of himself). These perceptions are based on stakeholders' experiences of an organization's actions over time. Hence, earlier work on social perception by Baumeister (1982) as well as Gamson's work on collective belief (1966) and the aforementioned work by Emler (1990) form a useful foundation for later studies of Corporate Reputation in the management and organizational studies field (Ferris *et al*., 1998, 1999, 2003; Ferris & Judge, 1991).

The study of reputation at the organizational level has received an increasing amount of attention over the last four decades (Ferris *et al*., 1998, 1999, 2003; Ferris & Judge, 1991; Ferris *et al*., 1998). In management and organizational studies, researchers have attempted to explain how stakeholders perceive organizations and how such perceptions can affect a firm's effectiveness and performance (Ferris *et al*., 1998, 1999, 2003). The organization-level study of reputation has been the cornerstone of the field of study of Corporate Reputation (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). In his original work, Fombrun (1996) conceptualized the Corporate Reputation system, and more recently the Global RepTrak TM survey (Fombrun *et al*., 2010).

As technology and digital communication develop and become more widely used, organizations have become more transparent. Consequences of organizational actions spread more quickly via digital media such as blogs, social media, and the Internet than ever before. This also creates new opportunities for a favorable Corporate Reputation, but it also increases the risk of damage to an organization's reputation (Deephouse, 2000; Dowling, 2004; Hannington, 2011).

In today's information era, organizations compete for resources and to achieve their strategic goals. Organizations with favorable reputations can enhance stakeholder confidence, build organizational resilience, differentiate themselves in the market, and gain competitive advantage. In contrast, a loss of reputation can lead to decreased stakeholder support, financial

losses, reduced credibility, and even erosion of organizational value over time (Deephouse, 2000; Dowling, 2004; Hannington, 2011).

Ambiguity around the term Corporate Reputation and its relationship with Corporate Branding and Image has led to considerable debate within the reputation field. Often in the literature, reputation, branding, and image are used interchangeably and, at times, this has led to fragmentation within the field of reputation studies. Greater clarification is needed on the theoretical underpinnings of each reputation concept and how researchers use them in terms of temporal dimension, reproduction, and impact on organizational performance. Understanding the distinction between Corporate Reputation, Corporate Branding and Image is crucial for advancing research in the field of reputation as well as for assisting practitioners and managers within organizations.

However, although a large body of literature has been developed on CR, many challenges and issues remain. The concept of corporate reputation remains fragmented. It requires greater definition of its different dimensions and aspects. The interrelationship between CR, Corporate Branding, and Corporate Image has not yet been fully understood or researched. Contemporary changes and developments within the external organizational environment, particularly in digital communication, sustainability, governance, and stakeholderism, create new challenges and new areas of research into how Corporate Reputation is constructed, managed, and evaluated under these circumstances.

This article provides a comprehensive literature review of Corporate Reputation and, in greater detail, the relationship between this construct and Corporate Branding and Image. Theoretically, this review aims to synthesize several lines of research on these issues and clarify the principal points of convergence and divergence, while offering an in-depth analysis of the many ways these constructs are used in organizational studies.

This review examines how previous research has constructed Corporate Reputation and how this literature relates to Corporate Branding and Image. The research question for this review is therefore: How is Corporate Reputation conceived and how does it relate to Corporate Branding and Image? The review aims to bring together most of the literature on CR, CB, and CI and examine it through a strategic management lens to see how it may be used in an organization.

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2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A strong body of research describes corporate reputation as an intangible organizational asset, a valuable resource within the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1991). Given that it is built up over a long period and based on an organization's history and the experiences of stakeholders, this kind of asset is valuable, rare, inimitable, and cannot be substituted by other resources (Hall, 1992, 1993; Petrick *et al*., 1999; Teece *et al*., 1997).

However, Corporate Reputation has frequently been associated with two other corporate concepts: Corporate Branding and Corporate Image. Although these three terms are often used as if they were equivalent, important theoretical differences exist between them. Corporate Branding is all those activities which a company conducts to create and communicate optimally a set of images which in turn distinguish it from its competitors in the marketplace (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Corporate Reputation, as explained above, focuses on stakeholders' perceptions of a company based on its past behavior, performance, and communication. In this sense, Corporate Reputation transcends the company's management and communication (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004; Fombrun, 1996).

Another aspect of reputation related to branding is Corporate Image. Dutton and Dukerich (1991) view image as how others perceive an organization at any point in time. Bromley (1993) characterizes image as relatively fragile compared with reputation and subject to many influences. Gioia *et al*. (2000) view the image stakeholders hold of an organization as current perception, while reputation is a broader construct that encompasses an organization's history. Thus, an organization's image can influence reputation, but the two are not the same.

Corporate Reputation has also been linked to a variety of other organizational outcomes. Marketers have investigated how favorable Reputation influences brand equity, customer purchase intentions, customer loyalty, and stakeholders' trust (Aaker, 1991; Biel, 1992; Cobb-Walgren *et al*., 1995; Keller, 1993). Strategists have associated Reputation with competitive advantage, organizational resilience, and long-term organizational performance (Barney, 1991; Hall, 1992, 1993; Teece *et al*., 1997). Work on organizational identity, organizational legitimacy, organizational credibility and stakeholder relationships has also included Reputation as an important variable (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Gioia *et al*., 2000; Suchman, 1995).

In recent years, considerable attention has been focused on the association between Corporate Reputation and a range of sustainability, governance, innovation, and digital-related areas such as Competitive Intelligence, Sustainability Initiatives, Governance Structures, and

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Healthcare Systems (Araujo & Dias, 2026; Azar & Dias, 2026a; Bastos & Dias, 2026b; 2026c; Dias *et al*., 2026; Moraes & Dias, 2026). Furthermore, the relationship between the company's reputation and several key indicators such as ESG performance, digital governance, and organizational adaptability within an environment characterized by speed, uncertainty, and complexity has also been analyzed (Zhu *et al*., 2026).

CR is an organization's most important intangible asset. It is affected by an organization's Corporate Branding and by how stakeholders perceive the organization's image. However, a corporation's reputation forms primarily through stakeholders' long-term evaluations of the corporation's behavior, communications, and actions, and how they perceive its overall performance and ethics over time.

3 METHODS

This study conducts a qualitative literature review of corporate reputation and its relationship to corporate branding and corporate image. The purpose of a literature review is to provide a comprehensive and thorough analysis and summary of current research on a topic (Saunders *et al*., 2009). A qualitative literature review is the most suitable method for analyzing the development of conceptual ideas about corporate reputation and how it relates to corporate branding and corporate image. This review draws upon seminal as well as current research from management, marketing, organizational behavior, and corporate communication, as well as strategic management (Aaker, 1991; Barney, 1991; Bromley, 1993; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Fombrun, 1996; Keller, 1993). It also incorporates more recent research on the applications of Corporate Reputation within sustainability, corporate governance, innovation, health care, negotiation, digitalization, and within the ESG parameters (Araujo & Dias, 2026; Azar & Dias, 2026; Bastos & Dias, 2026b, 2026c; Dias & Bastos, 2026; Moraes & Dias, 2026; Pedroza & Dias, 2026).

The concepts of Corporate Reputation, Corporate Branding and Corporate Image were analyzed through thematic synthesis and conceptual categorization (Gioia *et al*., 2013). The analysis followed the interpretive procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). First, the study identified and analyzed all concepts, theoretical themes, and conceptual relationships in the reviewed literature. The studied concepts were then grouped into broader analytical categories, including: (1) reputation as an intangible asset; (2) reputation as a strategic resource; (3) corporate branding; (4) corporate image; (5) organizational identity; (6) stakeholder perceptions; and (7) organizational performance. These categories enabled the study to present

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an integrated framework, structuring divergent streams of previous research to improve understanding of contemporary research on Corporate Reputation in organizations. However, like any literature review, this study has limitations, mainly the scope of publications considered in the analysis and the qualitative, interpretive nature of the analysis; however, it was conducted thoroughly to increase consistency.

4 DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

4.1 Corporate Reputation, Corporate Branding, and Corporate Image: Conceptual Distinctions

This section considers the key concepts of Corporate Reputation, Corporate Branding and the Corporate Image and explores the relationships between them and distinguishes between them where appropriate. A few points in the literature on corporations remain persistently confusing, particularly the differences between Corporate Reputation, Corporate Branding, and the organization's Image. Even though these three concepts are often used as synonyms by researchers and practitioners alike (e.g., Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004), there are several quite persistent differences. These differences can and should be analyzed in detail (Bromley, 1993; Bromley, 1993; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun, 1996; Gioia *et al*., 2000; Gioia *et al*., 2000).

Corporate Branding can be defined as the sum of the many different activities a company undertakes to create, communicate, and manage stakeholder perceptions of it. It is about how an organization wants others to view it and can create an identity that differentiates it from competitors. Therefore, Corporate Branding is essentially a management function (Aaker, 1991; Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004; Keller, 1993).

The Corporate Image of a company refers to the perceptions that stakeholders hold of a company at any point in time (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). It reflects how stakeholders perceive a company right now and is influenced by recent events, media coverage, advertisements, and other stimuli stakeholders are exposed to. Corporate Image is perceived to change quickly because recent communications and events influence stakeholders' perceptions, whereas corporate reputation is perceived to remain relatively stable over time (Bromley, 1993; Gioia *et al*., 2000).

The term Corporate Reputation differs from the aforementioned terms Because It refers to a long-term evaluation of a corporation, shaped by stakeholders' experiences, observations,

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and evaluations of the corporation's actions and behavior over time (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). Corporate Reputation is not created only by corporate communication, nor does it consist only of stakeholders' current perceptions of a corporation. A corporation's ongoing behavior is the main factor in creating corporate reputation, which is based on the organization's past behavior. This construct differs from image and branding because it is more stable than image but less controllable than branding (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004; Dowling, 2004).

Thus, from a time-based perspective, there is a difference between the future orientation of Corporate Branding (and the goals which are to be pursued by the image with respect to the expectations of stakeholders), the present-oriented image (perception of stakeholders with respect to the organization), and the past-oriented corporate reputation (credibility of the organization with respect to its value promise, which is given by its behavior over time).

Thus, a relationship of complementarities rather than exclusivities characterizes the three related constructs. The processes and efforts related to the organization's branding aim at conveying messages that stakeholders can associate with the organization, its activities, and services. The image represents stakeholders' perceptions of the organization's branding messages, communicated through various messages and channels at different times. Lastly, an organization's reputation reflects stakeholders' perception of its credibility based on whether it delivers what it has promised and performs consistently in line with its values and claims over time (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004; Fombrun, 1996; Gioia *et al*., 2000). Table 1 summarizes the main differences.

Table 1 - Conceptual Distinctions Among Corporate Reputation, Corporate Branding, and Corporate Image

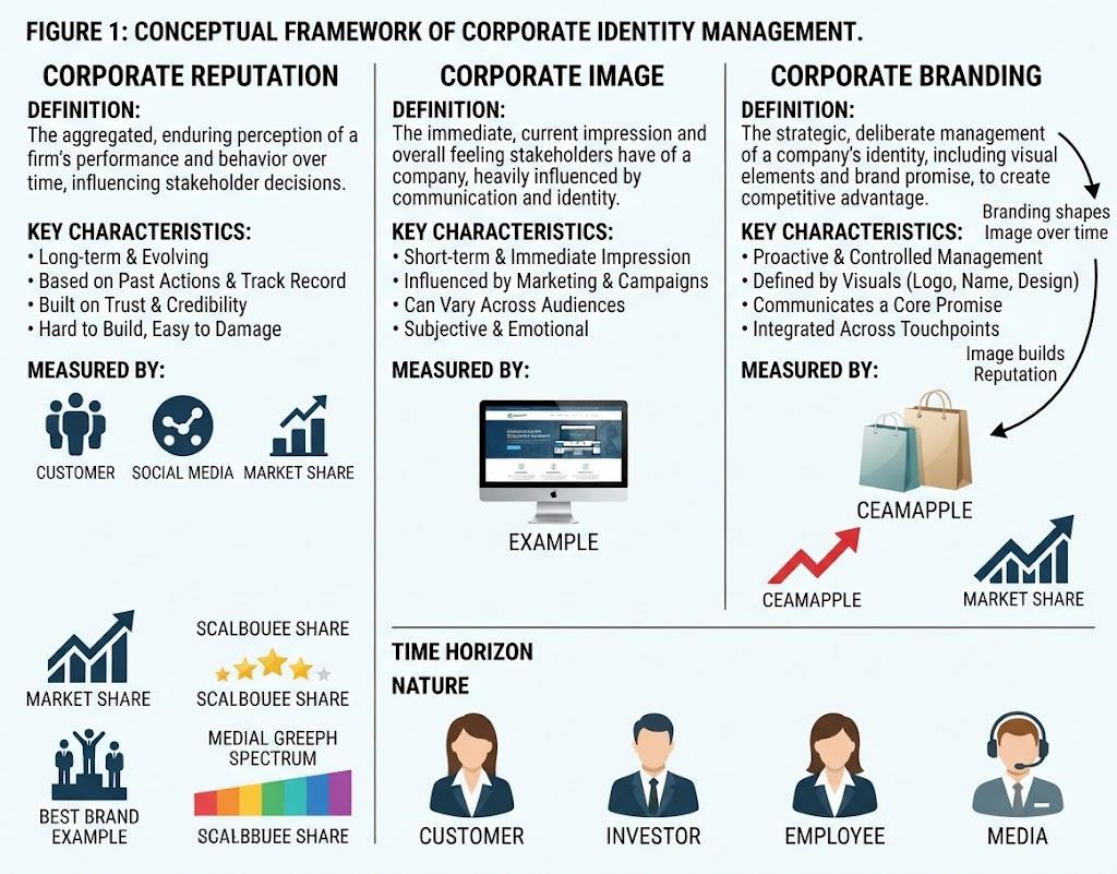
Construct	**Primary Focus**	**Time Orientation**	**Managerial Control**
Corporate Branding	Strategic communication and differentiation	Future-oriented	High
Corporate Image	Immediate stakeholder perception	Present-oriented	Moderate
Corporate Reputation	Cumulative stakeholder evaluation	Past and long-term oriented	Indirect

Source: Adapted from Aaker (1991), Argenti and Druckenmiller (2004), Bromley (1993), Dutton and Dukerich (1991), Fombrun (1996), Gioia *et al*. (2000), and Keller (1993).

Figure 1 compares Corporate Reputation, Corporate Image and Corporate Branding main features:

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Figure 1 - conceptual framework of corporate identity management



Source: Adapted from Aaker (1991), Argenti and Druckenmiller (2004), Bromley (1993), Dutton and Dukerich (1991), Fombrun (1996), Gioia *et al*. (2000), and Keller (1993).

4.2 Managerial Recommendations on How to Build Corporate Reputation

The literature review indicates that organizations should treat corporate reputation as a strategic organizational asset worth more, in added value, than Communication. As stated previously, Corporate Reputation originates from stakeholders' long-term evaluations of the organization, based on its behavior and performance, consistency, and credibility (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004; Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Consequently, tackling Corporate Reputation is not just a matter of running Corporate Branding campaigns in isolation. A comprehensive Reputation Management approach that integrates Communication with performance, governance, and stakeholder relations is required. Organizational actions and Corporate Branding initiatives have to be aligned. While branding initiatives may set stakeholder expectations, the organization's performance over time creates lasting reputational value. Thus, while creating branding-based expectations might be fairly easy, managers must focus on fulfilling stakeholders' expectations in the long run (Aaker, 1991; Argenti &

Druckenmiller, 2004; Keller, 1993). Reputation is created when an organization's actions align with its communicated identity (Aaker, 1991).

In addition, it is very important to distinguish between a company's image and its reputation. A company's image can be shaped and promoted through advertising and public relations, changing stakeholders' perceptions in a short time (Bromley, 1993; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). However, the image created does not necessarily translate into a good reputation. To create a good reputation, managers should focus on building long-term relationships with stakeholders, promoting ethics in business, ensuring high standards of services, being transparent, and ensuring that the organization delivers what it promises, i.e., good performance (Dowling, 2004; Fombrun, 1996). Finally, firms need to pay attention to the management of corporate reputation in the digital era as they face increasing levels of exposure through social media, digital platforms, and other online media channels and thus are at risk of having their reputational risks increased and spread very fast (Bastos & Dias, 2026c; Deephouse, 2000; Hannington, 2011). Monitoring, tracking, and responding to organizational stakeholders' perceptions and behavior to prevent reputational crises is therefore crucial.

Our study also emphasizes the importance of linking Corporate Reputation with sustainability practices, good governance, and innovative strategies. ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) practices, organizational transparency, good governance, and corporate sustainability have become fundamental for building strong Corporate Reputation (Araujo & Dias, 2026; Azar & Dias, 2026a; Zhu *et al*., 2026). Managers need to understand the link between reputation building and sustainability/governance innovation. To create value, Corporate Reputation should be integrated into other organizational functions to ensure that strategies developed across departments deliver a positive effect on reputation in the long run.

4.3 Five Lessons on the Strategic Management of Corporate Reputation, Branding, and Image

4.3.1 Lesson 1: Corporate Reputation is Not the Same as Corporate Branding

The literature shows that Corporate Reputation and corporate branding are closely related but distinct concepts. The corporate branding process aims to manage a company's image through different communication tools, emphasizing the values the company pursues and how stakeholders perceive it (Aaker, 1991; Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004; Keller, 1993). In turn, a company's corporate reputation reflects stakeholders' perceptions of the organization

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based on their overall assessment of its behavior (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). The organization cannot manage this overall assessment in the same way it manages corporate branding.

4.3.2 Lesson 2: Corporate Reputation is More Durable than Corporate Image

From a theoretical perspective, Corporate Image refers to stakeholders' perceptions and assessment of an organization at a specific point in time (Bromley, 1993; Gioia *et al*., 2000; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Reputation, as used in this review, typically refers to an organization's historical stock of behaviors, manifested in a temporal structure. Hence, managers attempting to manage Corporate Reputation cannot rely on short-term image management and must adopt a medium- to long-term approach, even though they likely face short-term expectations.

4.3.3 Lesson 3: Corporate Reputation as a Strategic Organizational Asset

Corporate Reputation is a valuable asset for any organization. As stated by the Resource-Based View (RBV), reputation is not only valuable, but also rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. This means a company with a strong reputation can have an upper hand over the competition. Organizations that build a positive reputation often also see better performance and increased stakeholder confidence. Reputation can influence many factors essential to an organization's development and growth.

4.3.4 Lesson 4: The Organization's Actions are more Important than Communication in Building Corporate Reputation

Thus, stakeholders care far more about a company's actions than about how it communicates. The way stakeholders view a company therefore depends above all on how it behaves. From this, it can be concluded that corporate reputation depends largely on how a company conducts itself vis-à-vis the promises it makes through its branding and communications. If a company's actions do not meet the promises it communicates, its corporate reputation will suffer. A company's conduct must therefore align with its communications.

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4.3.5 Lesson 5: Corporate Reputation in Today's Organizations

In an environment where organizations are more visible and accountable than ever before, such as in digitally interconnected environments, their reputation increasingly influences organizational legitimacy, performance, and stakeholder support. Hence, managing an organization's reputation is not confined to marketing activities, but rather constitutes a strategic task that must be pursued consistently within several different contexts (Araujo & Dias, 2026; Azar & Dias, 2026a; Bastos & Dias, 2026b, 2026c; Moraes & Dias, 2026; Zhu *et al*., 2026).

5 CONCLUSION

Corporate Reputation (CR) has become an important topic in management, marketing, and business. In this literature review, we distinguish CR from Corporate Branding and Corporate Image, although all three are related. Corporate Branding refers to the strategic and managerial efforts a company undertakes to create and communicate desired perceptions of the organization among its various publics. Corporate Image refers to stakeholders' immediate perceptions of an organization. Corporate Reputation is a stakeholder perception benchmark derived from assessments of an organization's behavior, performance, communication over time,e and credibility (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004; Bromley, 1993; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Fombrun, 1996; Gioia *et al*., 2000).

Moreover, the literature recognizes CR as a valuable intangible asset that can generate sustainable competitive advantages. From a Resource-Based View perspective, reputation has attributes competitors cannot imitate because it develops over time through an organization's history and stakeholder experiences, and thus it has credibility (Barney, 1991; Hall, 1992, 1993; Petrick *et al*., 1999; Teece *et al*., 1997). Organizations with a good reputation can strengthen stakeholders' trust, and thus their resilience, and continue to perform better.

In general terms, the Corporate Reputation research has been increasingly spread across different environments, be they digital, transparent, sustainable, etc., and consequently has started to permeate several different fields of governance such as health, innovative ecosystems, sustainability/ESG performance, and above all strategic planning within different digital governance frameworks (Araujo & Dias, 2026; Azar & Dias, 2026a; Bastos & Dias, 2026b, 2026c; Moraes & Dias, 2026; Zhu *et al*., 2026). In summary, assessing corporate reputation is based on stakeholders' accumulated evaluations of an organization's consistency between

actions, performance, values, and promises over time. Corporate Reputation is considered one of the most valuable organizational assets for companies worldwide. Therefore, understanding, managing, and preserving it are important to companies' long-term success.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research is encouraged in delve into more detailed theoretical distinctions between Corporate Reputation, Corporate Branding and Corporate Image. So far, the many decades of research on reputation have not led to sufficient progress on this point (Azar & Dias, 2026; Bromley, 1993; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). The field must move beyond work that only acknowledges differences between these terms on paper and instead test and apply refined measurement models, conduct longitudinal studies, and compare corporations across countries. High-quality research on these topics can help develop the field of reputation research and apply it successfully in different contexts.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DISCLOSURE

The authors disclose that artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely as support instruments during the preparation of this manuscript. Figure 1 was developed with the assistance of **Google Gemini**, which was used to support the graphical design process and the visual organization of information. Additionally, **Microsoft Copilot** was utilized as an auxiliary tool to facilitate literature organization, brainstorming, language refinement, and the structuring of ideas throughout the writing process. The use of AI technologies was limited to editorial and organizational assistance and did not replace the authors' intellectual contributions at any stage of the research. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, interpretation, and originality of the manuscript. All analyses, conclusions, arguments, and scholarly contributions presented in this article are the sole work of the authors, who retain complete authorship and accountability for the final published content.

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