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CORPORATE REPUTATION RESEARCH: CURRENT INSIGHTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This paper aims to systematize research trends on corporate reputation, identify key topics, research gaps, and future development directions.

Design/ methodology/ approach – The study uses bibliometric analysis based on Scopus data from 2016-2026 with 700 publications, combining techniques such as keyword analysis, co-citations, and international collaboration mapping.

Findings – The results revealed research lines revolving around four main axes: corporate strategy, finance and commerce, stakeholder behavior, and social responsibility. Simultaneously, the role of stakeholders is becoming increasingly important as reputation is a product of multi-dimensional interactions within the digital ecosystem.

Originality/ value – The study points out several limitations and gaps that need to be further explored, including: (1) a mismatch in research context; (2) reputation measurement methods still heavily rely on traditional surveys; (3) new topics have not been fully integrated into the research framework on corporate reputation, despite their increasing influence in practice.

Practical implications – These findings help guide future research and support managers in building sustainable reputation strategies, including: (1) strengthening contextual research; (2) innovating research methods through the combination of traditional and digital data; and (3) expanding the scope of research to new areas that more fully reflect the role of reputation in the digital economy.

1. Introduction

Corporate reputation (CR) is one of the most influential intangible assets in modern governance (Rose & Thomsen, 2004), as it is both the result of accumulated evaluations from stakeholders and a signaling mechanism that helps the market interpret the organization's capabilities, reliability, responsibility, and prospects. From a strategic perspective, CR is the cumulative result of signals about efficiency, norm-conforming behavior, strategic positioning, and interaction with interest groups. From an institutional perspective, it is a form of social evaluation; from a marketing and communication perspective, it is a perception formed, maintained, and adjusted through experience, communication, and market expectations. Fombrun and Shanley (1990) showed that the public constructs CR from market, accounting, institutional, and strategic signals.

Conceptually, theoretical overviews indicate that reputation is both tangible and elusive. Lange et al. (2011) identify three prominent interpretations: reputation as the degree of being known, as a predictor of future organizational behavior, and as a general assessment of trustworthiness. Rindova et al. (2005) further point out two fundamental components, being good and well-known, which help explain why a business may be very well-known but not necessarily highly regarded for its quality or ethics. This is key to understanding why research on corporate reputation is always linked to related concepts such as corporate image, corporate identity, legitimacy, CSR, trust, and brand value.

From a practical perspective, the importance of CR is increasing as the business environment becomes more digitized, transparent, and vulnerable to crises. Ali et al. (2015) pointed out that the relationship between reputation and its antecedents and consequences varies significantly depending on the country of study, stakeholder group, and reputation measure; this means that a single reputation model cannot be mechanized for all contexts. Recent digital reputation studies also show that stakeholders' perceptions of a company's digital footprint have a positive impact on financial and non-financial performance, and this is strengthened when the company genuinely demonstrates a commitment to sustainable development.

However, the rapid growth of the field has also exposed research gaps. First, there is the development of unexplored context, as Ajayi et al. (2022) point out that we still lack sufficient research on how reputation is understood in developing countries, and the dimensions of reputation derived from this context may differ significantly from measures primarily constructed in developed countries. Second, there is the application sector gap, particularly in higher education, where Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al. (2018) show a lack of understanding of how university reputation is formed among different stakeholder groups and geographic regions. Thirdly, there are gaps by industry and development goals, as topics such as agriculture, inclusive finance, and the digital legal framework do not appear in the prominent keyword group of the attachment, suggesting they remain peripheral rather than central to the current corpus (Scopus results on "Corporate Reputation", n.d.). This gap is important because CR, by its very nature, governs stakeholder trust, legitimacy, and acceptance, factors that are particularly decisive in education, agricultural value chains, financial services for vulnerable groups, and data governance in the digital economy (Ajayi et al., 2022; Barnett et al., 2006).

Another emerging gap relates to digital governance, digital responsibility, and metaverse themes. Mueller (2022) emphasizes that digitalization not only opens growth opportunities but also creates issues of privacy, algorithmic bias, data responsibility, and regulatory needs; therefore, a company's reputation today cannot be judged solely through traditional CSR but must also consider how the company behaves in the digital environment. Meanwhile, themes such as the metaverse, while not yet present in the core keywords of the attachment, are directly related to issues of digital presence, platform ethics, user experience, and brand governance in an immersive environment; thus, they can be seen as a frontier of CR research rather than a mature main axis. In other words, the "absence" of the metaverse in the current keyword map doesn't make it any less important; on the contrary, it shows that this is a gap that needs to be filled as businesses shift strongly towards more complex digital ecosystems. Empirical studies have pointed to this. Elliott and Copilah-Ali (2024) argue that corporate digital responsibility (CDR) expands on traditional CSR by focusing on new powers and responsibilities arising from the use of data and technology, creating a more transparent mechanism for evaluating performance and avoiding formal reporting, addressing "wicked problems" arising in the digital age, such as climate change and economic inequality. On the other hand, CDR needs to be considered separately from traditional CSR due to the explosive growth and constantly changing nature of technology, encompassing the entire lifecycle of data and technology, from creation and operation to impact assessment and improvement (Lobschat et al., 2021). The authors also analyze how to build a CDR culture through core values, specific rules, and employee practices. By fulfilling this responsibility, businesses can minimize privacy risks, build trust with customers, and create a sustainable competitive advantage. Furthermore, Tan et al. (2026) also stated that CDR promotes business performance through two main mechanisms: enhanced product quality control and strengthened investor confidence. This positive impact is stronger in businesses with extensive artificial intelligence (AI) applications, consumer-oriented industries, and in environments with low levels of social trust.

Based on this, this work pursues three clear academic objectives. First, to systematize the development of CR research through indicators of publication trends, prominent topics, countries, and leading academic centers. Second, to clarify conceptual, contextual, and methodological gaps that are limiting the field's ability to accumulate knowledge, particularly in developing economies and emerging application domains. Third, to lay the groundwork for a more interdisciplinary, digitized, and context-sensitive follow-up research program, so that CR research goes beyond simply describing an intangible asset and also explains how this asset is created, maintained, and transformed into socio-economic performance in a new competitive environment (Donthu et al., 2021; Veh et al., 2019; Walker, 2010).

This study applies a bibliometric analysis method based on Scopus data to systematize research trends on the metaverse in the economic field from 2015 to April 2026. The research aims to clarify prominent themes, international collaboration networks, and potential research directions regarding CR, thereby providing a solid theoretical foundation for scholars and managers in the process of planning organizational business strategies in the digital age.

2. Research methodology

This study uses bibliometric analysis to clarify the development trends of research related to CR. The Scopus database was used to search for journal articles published within a 10-year period (2016-2026) containing the keyword "corporate reputation", as a form of field research (Cornelius et al., 2006). The article selection process followed PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparency. Initially, 1,664 published results were identified from the Scopus database using keywords related to corporate reputation. Next, limiting the research timeframe to 2015-2026 and focusing on the fields of Business, Social Science, Economics, Articles, and English, a dataset of 1,150 articles was collected. The author downloaded the data, then removed duplicate and irrelevant publications, leaving 896 articles for further screening. Titles and abstracts were then reviewed to assess relevance to the research objectives. Finally, a full-text review was conducted, excluding studies that were not focused on the research topic, lacked bibliographic data, or had not been peer-reviewed. Finally, 700 articles meeting the selection criteria were retained for bibliographic analysis using VOSviewer software. This method is an approach aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the development history of fields, thereby supporting or validating research problems for scientists using mathematical statistics to analyze relevant publications (Raina & Gupta, 1998). Furthermore, mapping and visualizing the bibliography in a forward-thinking way can support providing an overview and systematically organizing research articles (Gillani et al., 2022). Within the framework of bibliometric analysis, five main techniques are classified, including citation analysis, co-citation analysis, bibliographic link analysis, keyword co-occurrence analysis, and co-authoring analysis (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). In this study, the authors focus on co-citation analysis and keyword analysis. Additionally, the article examines the scientific map of collaborative publications between countries. To perform the bibliometric analysis, the authors applied VOSviewer software *(see Appendix 1 online).*

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Research on CR from 2016 to 2026, using Scopus data with the keyword "Corporate Reputation" limited to journal articles, business, economics, social research, and English language, yielded 700 documents. The highest number of publications was in 2025, with 118 articles. The period from 2020 to 2022 saw a sharp increase from 79 articles, followed by a sudden drop to 54 articles in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating that businesses are facing a crisis of reputation and public trust. Therefore, the strong interest in CR is reflected in the significant increase in research from 2023 to 2025. The trend of research on CR is predicted to increase sharply in 2026, shifting from theoretical research to practical applications to support businesses in managing and enhancing their reputation in this volatile environment *(see Appendix 2 online).*

Regarding research areas, the results show that there are four main research axes belonging to the fields of *(1)* Business – Management – Accounting, *(2)* Social Sciences, *(3)* Economics – Economics – Finance, and *(4)* Environment. Thus, it shows that the Business – Management field remains the main research axis reflecting strategic assets in management and accounting. Furthermore, research in the field of social sciences also assesses consumer awareness and behavior related to the brand reputation of enterprises. In the field of Economics – Finance, research on CR shows that CR is not only a research concept but also a more clearly quantified corporate brand value. Finally, research on CR linked to the field of Social Environment indicates a new research direction on CR such as green CR and sustainable development linked to social responsibility.

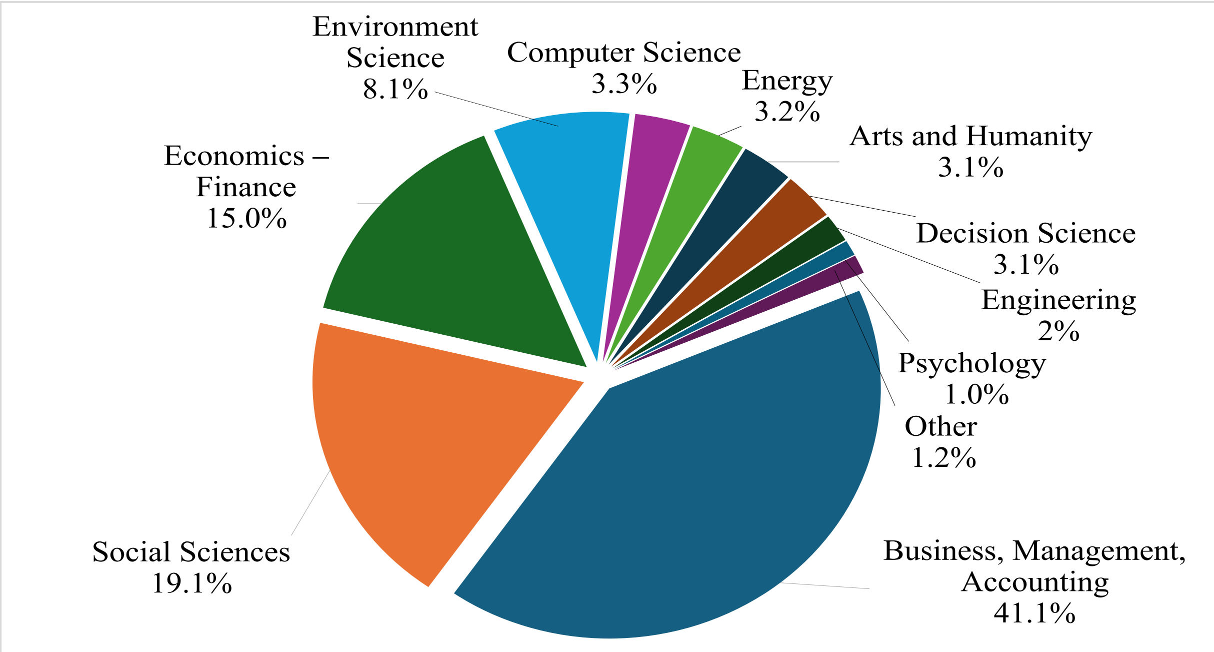

Figure 1. Research areas related to CR

Studies on CR reveal a multi-polar distribution across countries, most notably the US (118 papers) and China (105 papers), reflecting the leading role of these two powers in developing both theoretical research and practical management of CR. In Europe, the countries primarily researching this topic including Spain, the UK, and Germany, with 66, 41, and 32 studies respectively. European countries focus on CSR, the relationship between reputation and social responsibility, particularly in the energy and environmental sectors. Emerging Asian countries including India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Malaysia are showing an increase in research, indicating the need to build reputation in developing markets and expanding the scope of research to adapt to the context of globalization *(see Appendix 3 online).*

This distribution reflects a research field that has become more globalized than before but still has a very clear "center". Within the broader Scopus context, Mohd Sofian et al. (2023) show that the United States accounts for nearly half of long-term publications on CR, with New York University being the most productive; this is understandable given that Charles Fombrun – one of the pioneering scholars of reputation research – is closely associated with NYU and with modern CR measurement programs. Because the attached file does not publish detailed author/ institution rankings, this introduction views Fombrun, Barnett, Walker, and recent review authors as "intellectual points of reference" within the field, rather than asserting absolute output rankings within the attached corpus itself.

3.2. Results of bibliometric analysis

The keyword co-occurrence analysis reveals the main research trends on the topic of CR (Table 1). In terms of the content, current research revolves around several dominant thematic axes *(see Appendix 4 online).* The top keywords that appear most frequently include corporate social responsibility (48), corporate reputations (23), sustainability (23), corporate strategy (21), perception (19), sustainable development (17), stakeholder (16), human

(14), China (13), and commerce (10) (Scopus results on "Corporate Reputation", n.d.). This allows us to identify at least four major research threads: reputation associated with CSR and sustainability; reputation as a strategic asset; reputation from the perspective of stakeholder perceptions and behavior; and reputation in the digital economy, commerce, and media. This structure strongly resonates with the theoretical assessments of Veh et al. (2019), according to which research on corporate reputation both originates from economics, organizational studies, and marketing, and continues to be influenced by conceptual inconsistencies; and in recent public communication overviews, topics such as social media, crisis communication, and stakeholder trust are identified as important extensions of the corporate reputation field (Karakaya et al., 2025; Veh et al., 2019).

Topic 1: Corporate governance, strategy, and innovation

This topic focuses on business strategy linked to modern management practices, consumer behavior, and innovation. It reflects the shift from traditional management to multi-stakeholder management with the participation of stakeholders. This is the foundation for businesses to maintain their reputation and competitiveness, where business reputation plays a crucial role as an intangible asset. Businesses build reputation through long-term strategies, product/service innovation, digital marketing, and sustainable development, characterized by the use of quantitative models to measure and forecast CR.

Topic 2: Economics, finance, and commerce

This trend assesses the impact of globalization and e-commerce on CR, using financial analysis and regression models to measure corporate prestige, including the role of social media in shaping corporate images. This group focuses on the relationship between trade, socio-economic impact, finance, and sustainable development, with CR research linked to sustainable development as a long-term corporate strategy.

Table 1. The main research topics on CR

Keyword	Topic	Occurrences	Total link strength
consumption behavior	1	9	22
corporate reputations		23	42
corporate strategy		21	43
Innovation		9	32
management practice		7	20
Marketing		9	20
numerical model		7	21
Pakistan		5	20
performance assessment		6	13
Sustainability		23	63

Keyword	Topic	Occurrences	Total link strength
Commerce	2	10	33
economic and social effects		6	18
Finance		7	18
regression analysis		7	19
social media		6	10
sustainable development		17	42
Adult	3	5	19
Article		9	26
decision making		8	22
Human		14	46
Humans		7	33
Perception		19	53
Business	4	6	18
China		13	33
corporate social responsibility		48	108
industrial performance		8	22
Organization		8	26
Stakeholder		16	42

Topic 3: Perception and decision making

This topic focuses on human factors, social perceptions, and decision-making behavior. It analyzes consumer behavior, which influences decision-making based on perceptions, emotions, and information. Meanwhile, studying consumer behavior helps businesses design more effective marketing and CSR strategies. Thus, CSR is a result of social beliefs and personal experiences.

Topic 4: Corporate social responsibility and stakeholders

CSR has become a major topic related to CR. In the future, the relationship between CSR, CR, and stakeholders will become a multidimensional ecosystem, in which CR will be shaped by core CSR development strategies aimed at building CR. This trend reflects a shift from maximizing corporate profits to optimizing social value and environmental concerns. In this context, research is expanding to include the large economy of China as a primary research context.

Table 2. Top 10 most frequently appearing keywords

Keywords	Occurrences	Total link strength
corporate social responsibility	48	108
corporate reputations	23	42
Sustainability	23	63
corporate strategy	21	43
Perception	19	53
sustainable development	17	42
Stakeholder	16	42
Human	14	46
China	13	33
Commerce	10	33

The frequency of appearance of the 10 keywords above accurately reflects the current trend in research on CR, which focuses on core concepts related to corporate governance, sustainable development, and social behavior. In this context, CSR is considered the foundation for businesses to build reputation and social trust. CR has emerged as a crucial intangible asset for businesses, playing a strategic role in marketing activities and brand value building. Furthermore, the role of businesses in the circular economy must be linked to environmental responsibility; CR is integrated into long-term strategies, multi-stakeholder governance, and organizational performance, emphasizing the role of stakeholders in shaping CR. Additionally, research on CR is expanding to the national and global trade context, focusing on the impact of globalization, e-commerce, and international supply chains on CR.

As can be seen, research on the topic of CR has been conducted following key trends, including *(1)* CSR and sustainable development; *(2)* Corporate strategy linked to innovation and customer behavior; *(3)* Awareness of the relationship between theory and practice of corporate governance; and *(4)* CR and digital communication becoming global competitive factors. However, future research on CR could focus on green reputation (CR linked to ESG, global environmental and economic social responsibility), reputation in the digital and AI age, measuring credibility with big data through the development of transparent and standardized credibility indices, and expanding to developing countries as well as focusing on ethical values in consumer behavior.

4. Future research directions

The first approach is to contextualize corporate reputation in developing economies. This is not merely a technical "sampling expansion" requirement, but a theoretical one. Existing studies show that reputation dimensions in developing countries can differ significantly from those in developed countries. Therefore, future research should design contextually sensitive reputation measurement models that incorporate multi-stakeholder surveys, qualitative data, and local data sources. A suggested research question is: In emerging economies, which component of corporate reputation is prioritized – competence, ethics, job creation, or community contribution? And how do these components change with the level of institutional development? Future research is promising in exploring how different components of CSR are prioritized in developing economies. For example, researchers might investigate whether competence, ethical issues, job creation, or community contribution carry more weight in shaping reputation, and how these priorities shift with the level of institutional development. Such contextual analysis not only enriches theory but also provides practical insights for managers operating under resource constraints in developing economies.

The second approach is to redesign how reputation is measured in the context of the big data and artificial intelligence era. A 2025 overview of AI-based reputation measurement points to four key limitations: the scope of AI applications remains narrow, scalability is limited, data is complex, and ethical concerns persist; furthermore, only about 2% of current research utilizes image analysis. These limitations open a clear research agenda: the need to develop hybrid reputation metrics that combine traditional survey methods with behavioral/digital data; standardize terminology; integrate dynamics between trust and reputation; and build real-time measurement models instead of relying solely on snapshots. Therefore, a relevant research question arises: Can a CR index combining survey data, social media comments, and image data predict stakeholder behavior better than the traditional RepTrak model?

The third approach is to link reputation to ESG, supply chain, and digital responsibility, rather than just CSR in the narrow sense. Existing literature has demonstrated the central role of CSR in the CR structure; however, reviews of the supply chain suggest this field still lacks a chain-based perspective. Simultaneously, corporate digital responsibility and digital governance are emerging as two adjacent research areas but are not yet firmly integrated into CR. Therefore, future research should address questions such as: To what extent can CR be transferred across the supply chain; How do digital governance mechanisms – from blockchain to AI auditing – impact trust and reputation; and what digital legal frameworks help businesses mitigate the risk of reputational crises caused by data and algorithms?

The fourth approach is to expand CR to areas with limited research but high governance significance. In higher education, studies and reviews have shown that reputation is an intangible asset that determines competitiveness and legitimacy; in hospitality/tourism, reputation is beginning to intersect with identity, CSR, and online reputation; but in agriculture, financial inclusion, and sustainable development-related industries in the Global South, the intersection with CR remains very sparse. Therefore, research designs could follow an interdisciplinary approach: the reputation of agribusiness in the green supply chain; the reputation of fintech in promoting financial inclusion; or the reputation of universities in international competitiveness and knowledge transfer. These are research areas with both academic value and policy significance.

The fifth direction is innovation in methodological design. Much of traditional CR research relies on cross-sectional surveys. Meanwhile, current data allows for the combination of panel data, event studies, sentiment analysis, topic modeling, co-citation networks, and even machine learning for crisis prediction. If the goal is to close the loop from strategy to reputation and effectiveness, then future studies should adopt a multi-methodological design: bibliometric review to identify the topic, qualitative interviews to clarify the mechanism, and quantitative longitudinal models to test the impact. Aria and Cuccurullo (2017) and Donthu et al. (2021) both demonstrate the power of combining science mapping with theoretically grounded interpretation; in the field of CR, this is particularly useful because the concept remains fragmented.

5. Conclusion

Research on CR has undergone significant development, shifting from clarifying the concept to analyzing the strategic role and practical impact of reputation in the modern business environment. Analysis of Scopus data from 2016-2026 reveals a marked increase in the number of publications, particularly in the post-Covid-19 period, reflecting a growing awareness of the role of CR in maintaining social trust and competitiveness.

One of the key findings is the convergence of research streams around four main axes: corporate strategy, finance and commerce, stakeholder behavior, and social responsibility. Among these, CSR and sustainable development emerge as central pillars shaping CR. This indicates a shift from a purely profit-oriented business model to a multi-dimensional value-creating model, where CR is linked to social, environmental, and ethical business responsibility. Simultaneously, the role of stakeholders is becoming increasingly important as reputation is no longer the result of one-way communication but a product of multi-dimensional interaction within the digital ecosystem.

However, the study also points out several limitations and gaps that need further exploration. *First*, there is an imbalance in the research context, with most studies focusing on developed countries, while emerging economies – where CR may have a different meaning – remain understudied. *Second*, reputation measurement methods still rely heavily on traditional surveys, failing to effectively utilize big data, artificial intelligence, and real-time analytics. *Third*, new topics such as digital responsibility, data governance, artificial intelligence, and the metaverse have not yet been fully integrated into the research framework on CR, despite their increasing influence in practice.

Based on the above analysis, the study suggests several important future directions. *Firstly*, it is necessary to strengthen contextual research, especially in developing countries, to build reputation models that are appropriate to their specific socio-economic characteristics. *Secondly*, research methodology needs to be innovated by combining traditional and digital data, applying modern analytical techniques such as machine learning and sentiment analysis. *Thirdly*, the scope of research needs to be expanded to new areas such as ESG, sustainable supply chains, inclusive finance, and digital responsibility, to more fully reflect the role of reputation in the digital economy.

In summary, CR is not just an intangible asset, but also a central mechanism linking strategy, trust, and operational efficiency of an organization. In the context of digital transformation and sustainable development, understanding and effectively managing CR will become a decisive factor for the long-term survival and growth of a business.

The limitations lie solely in its reliance on publications in the Scopus database and English-language sources. While this method ensures consistency and facilitates data comparison, it excludes significant contributions published in other languages and lacks publications in other databases. Therefore, the research findings may not fully reflect regional content and other non-English-language academic perspectives.

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AI Usage Statement

The authors declared no generative AI tools were used in research or writing.

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