A Synthetic Literature Review and Prognosis of Corporate e-Reputation

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Abstract

A synthetic critique of the literature on corporate reputation management and measurement, this paper employs an 'explaining', and 'predicting' approach from a post-modernist stance. The examination covers established definitions, and frameworks, by taking into account the utility in an online environment. The revisit explores central scholarly standpoints and demonstrates a gradual shift from traditional to a digital era of communication. Despite the growing importance of corporate e-reputation, the theory remains hazy and significantly incomplete. The authors also present a feasibility overview of adopting available academic knowledge and tools for reputation management purposes. By establishing a reflexive relationship between reputation and technological advances, this study rhetorically states the prognosis of the subject. Key points of the discussion are conferred in a logical succession. Results petition further conceptual evolution, empirical investigation, and adoption of management and measurement methods for increased practical usage.

Keywords : Reputation, E-reputation, Corporate reputation, Corporate e-reputation, E-WOM, ORM

I. INTRODUCTION

Reputation is the perception of an entity's characteristic. It is "a combination of the views and impressions of many different people, not unanimously held, but in general" [1]. The word keeps progressing with time to becoming a tactical and elusive organizational asset. Numerous definitions exist, providing unique and necessary explanations as to why some organizations are perceived to be better than others. Is it principally based on financial performance, societal standing, economic and strategic factors, social responsibility, product/service quality, recruitment image; an accumulation of all; or more than just this? Corporate reputation, an established feature of management science unceasingly endeavors to solve institutionally elemental questions. Events like Enron's reputation collapse, acclivitous eruditeness of stakeholders, globalization, rapid flow of information, competitive markets, rising demand for transparency, and social responsibility are some of the factors prompting a continuous revival of the concern for a sound corporate reputation [2]. At several big companies, reputation is now governed by executives in C-level positions. These individuals mainly engage amidst curious media and a peculiar public anxiously awaiting a fall or crisis.

The coming of internet-powered electronic communications (e-) made reputations more fragile. Despite the core principles remaining intact, digitization of communication has changed the techniques of reputation formation and management. Whether an organization intends to go digital or not, a discussion about it is most likely happening online. The cyberspace has afforded anti-corporations and individuals freedom for which the price is paid by the once all controlling, all mighty corporations [3]. An enormous mass, and a complex mix of upset consumers, preying journalists, rivals and competitors, notorious teenagers, and disgruntled ex-employees, actively seeking to tarnish reputations [4]. There are no codes of good and bad conduct. Merely the popular and exciting discussions flourish online. Controversy and crisis attract attention, making big news. In this turmoil, poorly guarded corporate reputations scatter in a matter of minutes.

Active indulgence in reputation management is now obligatory for all businesses. Even if it is not executed with intentions to reap long-term benefits, it must be done to evade adverse consequences [5]. Today,

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marketers diligently monitor online discussions, attempt to engage in dialogues, persuasively manipulate perceptions, extricate negative reviews, and ergo dive into an ocean of white, black, and gray techniques [6]. Structured scholastic guidance concerning e-reputation management is scarce. In this era of lightning-fast communications, corporate reputation management has become an art to be re-thought, re-understood, and re-mastered.

II. RESEARCH RATIONALE

A. Objective

This desk research is an outcome of the authors' academic and professional interest in the topic. Articulated contributions to corporate reputation can be dated back a few decades. Nonetheless, social communication technologies have taken such erratic strides in recent times, so as to entail a review directed at integrating the pertinent knowledge scattered across disciplines. This paper identified key issues connected to corporate reputation, in the light of digital advancements. Presently, there is an absence of a robust theoretical base for this topic. The authors investigated extensive literature to delve into what has been accomplished (synthetic review), and what is likely to be probed urgently based on the needs (prognosis). This synthesis targets expansion of knowledge, alongside an open prognostication of developments in the field. Thus, the study is conducted completely independent of any hypothesis or prejudiced academic position. This examination is an aggregate account of the connected exploration across disciplines with practical connotations.

B. Academic Implications

Lack of agreement on fundamental lexicon continues to hinder the swift progression of this subject [7, 8]. Contemporary communication trends have further bewildered the implications and functions of corporate reputation. The relevant information is dispersed across various business subjects and even confused due to varying terminologies within the same discipline. The present study subtly attempted to bring some order by pointing towards potential convergence of knowledge, identifies voids in literature, and triggers discussion about implications for organizational structures. Further, academia has largely failed to provide stable reputation measurement models for use in a digitally aided communication era [218]. Burkhardt [10] even pointed to limitations of offline models, which require enormous reductions in environmental intricacies to attain quantifiable measures. This leads to absurdities. However, present-day digital tools not only facilitate a possibility to concoct such scores [11]; advanced technology also presents luxuries of automation and increased objectivity. This paper provides an insightful work, serving as one of the first humble steps in the imminent direction of merging this abstract business notion with modern tools.

C. Managerial Implications

This study has slender commercial applicability. It is a contrast to applied research that attempts to solve specific problems [12]. How be it, the potential progression facilitated herewith has compelling implications for practitioners. Firstly, the digital marketing world is filled with irregularities, inconsistencies and gray areas [13, 14]. E-reputation management is the worst victim of this phenomenon. Service providers, human resource managers, even reputation executives themselves; all have differing definitions of corporate reputation management on the cyberspace, making this field a perfect example of disorientation within a single business function. A precise definition and scoping of corporate e-reputation management scholastically will lead to uniformity and order. This paper is virtually the first to advocate such a reform. Secondly, reputation guardians on the front-line have to take critical decisions often without the luxury of time to discuss tactics and get approvals from the senior management. Hence, it is essential for managers and executives to be equipped with a thorough understanding of corporate e-reputation management tactics [15]. This research lays substantial focus on examining the elaborateness or shortcomings of presently known strategies with regards to various business scenarios. The third is an alarming absence of reputation measurement models for digital use. This research looks at the flaws in current measurement scales and indices, and discusses the possibility of adapting those models in the online world. It also makes recommendations for the advancement of quantifying reputation.

D. Value of Paper

Compared to earlier work, this study adopted an alternate path in three ways. First, it provided an integrated theoretical reflection of corporate reputation and e-reputation rather than focusing on the centrality of each individually. Second, it ventured to consolidate information by defragmenting applicable knowledge across various fields. Lastly, it is imperative to audit the gaps between practice and study; and attempted to fill this void. Conducting such a scholarly study from a managerial lens aimed at highlighting functional implications and future research possibilities is of equal interest to academia and professionals.

E. Scientific Construct

Marketing is a victim of erroneous evaluation at many firms [16]. Inherently, reputation endures identical despair. Discussing the topic in explicit terms strictly through quantitative or qualitative approaches is problematic. A universal picture of such idiosyncratic matters can only be drawn by incorporating methods that aid subjectivity, interpretation, and flexibility [17]. Henceforth, this research type is identified as purely fundamental; principally dealing with the descriptive aspects. Analysis was done from diverse disciplinary viewpoints for which some generalizations have been made. Bryman [18] concured that social constructs are best understood in a general sense through this arrangement. The requirement for flexibility compels adoption of an inductive research approach combined with an interpretive philosophy. As the final component of the scientific construct, the research design selected was primarily exploratory with elements of constructive research. This allows formulation of conclusive hypotheses while building on theories in the absence of high levels of empirical solidity [19].

F. Process

Relying on the authors' profound understanding of the topic, some keywords were shortlisted as flag bearers of this review. Trackers were set in ABI/Inform, Business Source Complete, Emerald Insight, Sage Journals, and Science Direct databases, with a broad set of criteria. Only peer-reviewed work from journals with recent SJR journal rank of Q2 or above was selected. Additionally, information was acquired from plentiful books and web pages. Some material was found using 'snowballing' technique.

The collection was categorized into theories, critiques of frameworks, measurement models, model validations, and knowledge associated with other disciplines of business. The topic classification was done across brand image, crisis management, corporate identity, industrial marketing, marketing communication, reputation, and social media marketing. As the finalizing step of a non-linear method, the literature was synthesized.

A total of 575 articles were covered. This paper makes reference to 206 of those papers; with majority share from presently Q1 ranked journals. As this topic has seen much progress in recent decades, it was even necessary to include the latest related developments in academia, leading to diligent monitoring of new studies. 35% of the cited resources were published between 2012 and 2016; 42% belonged to the preceding ten years. This was deliberately done to draw the most up-to-date picture of literature.

III. THEORETICAL REFLECTION

Over the past 50 years, academics have contemplated various theories of corporate reputation. They do, however, differ widely regarding (1) conceptualization, (2) stakeholder implications, and (3) measurement. Online reputation, or e-reputation, is a comparatively new topic drawing momentous attention. This scholastic consideration is improperly divided between individual, brand, and e-business reputations. First, this section reflected on 'corporate reputation' and 'e-reputation' independently. Then the conclusion merged the topics as a single subject, 'corporate e-reputation'.

A. Corporate Reputation

Martineau [21] made one of the earliest academic remarks on corporate reputation, although under a different subject term. Immediately follows the conceptual separation into three broad streams [22]. Cohen [23] advocated that social expectations lead to reputation formation. A second theoretical derivation suggested personification of corporations [24, 25]. Trust and credibility formed the third theory, which is widely used in industrial contexts [26]. Reputation was studied from the external perspective of customers and general public from the 1950s to 1960s. Kennedy [27] introduced internal perspectives to understand the formation of perceptions better. A clear distinction between image, identity, and reputation was yet to emerge. Rindova [28] explained reputation as more stable and enduring than an image, and portrayed it as 'distilled over time from multiple images.' This view identifies images and identity as mere elements of reputation [29]. Croft and Dalto [30] saw the difference as 'corporate image can be created, but corporate reputation must be earned.'

An early, most widely-accepted definition of corporate reputation is 'a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describes the firm's overall appeal to all of its key constituents' [31]. Baranett, Jermier, and Lafferty [32] defined it as "observers' collective judgments of a corporation based on assessments of the financial, social, and environmental impacts attributed to the corporation over time." de Castro, López, and Saáez [33] proposed splitting organizational reputation into business reputation and social reputation. Many more definitions exist [34], and the meaning continues to be debated [35]. The most encompassing definition of corporate reputation in the authors' opinion is "a relatively stable, issue-specific aggregate perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects compared against some standard" [36].

Scholars and practitioners alike have unanimously accepted sound corporate reputation as being profoundly beneficial. Akerlof [37] mentioned the role of reputation in protecting organizational assets. Other influences of favorable reputation include differentiation [38], competitive advantage [39, 40, 41, 42], talent acquisition [43, 44], better partnerships and business alliances [45], customer retention and loyalty [46, 47], value creation [48, 49], and provision to charge premium prices [50, 51] . Hall [52] endorsed meticulous administration of reputation. Reputation being a compilation of various perceptions is uncontrollable [53] and difficult to manipulate [31]. Management can only consist of systematic activities focused on positively influencing reputation [10]. The six key components of reputation formation are (1) outgoing information; (2) audit data; (3) investment analysis; (4) journalistic insights; (5) hearsay/rumor; and (6) brand image [31]. A point of contention among researchers is whether reputation stems from media visibility, public prominence, or familiarity; or whether these terms are synonyms for the conceptual roots of reputation [54]. The confusion makes literature and practices vague and complicated.

Over the past two decades, corporate reputation has attracted ample academic and professional interest [55, 56, 57, 58]. Wartick [222, 59] spotted three major gaps in literature: '(1) lack of definition consensus, (2) weak and various methods used to operationalize the construct, and (3) paucity of theory development.' Reputation sciences are divided across three theoretical viewpoints. Some use institutional theory to explain the use of reputation to build credibility and acquire acceptance [60, 61]. The second school of thought utilizes signaling theory to inspect the relation between signals sent out by organizations' strategic choices, which lead to stakeholders forming perceptions. The third applies a resource-based view (RBV) and sees reputation as a valuable, intangible asset that blocks imitation, leading to differentiation and competitive advantage [62, 60] . According to Walker [36], the profusion of doctrines points to the "complexity and richness" of the subject. However, this diversity makes integration challenging, and also "highlights the insufficiency of a unifying conceptual framework."

B. e-Reputation

Growing prominence of digital communications has made reputation even more fragile [63]. The speedy information dissemination coupled with human attraction to controversy and scandal [64] results in bad news traveling much faster [65, 66]. It has evened the playing field between upset individuals and mighty corporations [67]. Failing to keep up with the pace and advancements of 'e-', certainly leads to higher vulnerability of reputation risk [68].

King, Racherla, Bush [78] identified six tenets of the internet that make it so powerful. First, the extensive spectrum of channels ensures a reach more massive than any traditional media. Greater volume translates to greater sales [70], and logically, greater potential for negative publicity. Second, interaction occurs across communities, which notably increases the dispersal of information. Third, information posted online is often deposited permanently [4], and becomes available 'on-demand.' Fourth, due to the greater scope for anonymity, online readers take positive commercial information with skepticism [71, 72, 73]. Public is now more attentive towards the quality of online information (Online IQ) [74]. The salience of valence is the fifth tenet of online communications: relying on numerical ratings is less prone to misinterpretation [75]. Lastly, community engagement has now become supremely globalized, with interactions occurring online between cultures and geographic locations [76]. An additional tenet, identified by Waddington and Earl [77] is the inadequate editorial rigor and fact-checking. This allows anyone to post anything about anyone.

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is universally sanctioned as the most efficient marketing tool [140]. People rely heavily on peer opinion to make purchase decisions [79]. Qualman [114] found that 78% of consumers trust peers while only 14% trust commercials. Online word of mouth (eWOM) creates the perfect platform for consumers and non-consumers to conduct interactions [81]. eWOM is defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet” [82]. Fertik [4] contended that cyberspaces massively remove social norms and ethics, allowing consumers to express themselves freely. Individuals feel empowered through accessibility to eWOM, leading to informed decision making, readiness to pay premium prices, and a willingness to become brand advocates [79]. Therefore, modern marketing practitioners strive to manage the eWOM rather than avoiding it [83].

Many businesses now adopt e-commerce models. For such, e-loyalty [84], and e-reputation are indispensable assets [85]. It is easier for e-customers to switch brands, yet difficult and expensive for companies to acquire and retain new customers. This reinforces the importance of e-loyalty [86]. At first, it was believed that website personalization and quality provided sufficient influence [87, 88, 219]. Per contra recent studies have uncovered a strong correlation between e-reputation and the behavior of online customers [90, 91, 92]. Right reputation not only improves customer emotion towards a brand but also reduces perceived risk [93] and positively influences cross-buying intentions [94]. A conceptual substructure of corporate reputation that deals with 'trust' becomes broadly evident in this context. e-Reputation leads to the formation of trust (or distrust) which ultimately leads to loyalty (or disloyalty) [95, 96, 97, 98].

C. Corporate e-Reputation

Digital stage provides an elaborate amplification to the corporate reputation-building blocks identified by Fombrun [31]. All necessary ingredients required by stakeholders to form perceptions are available online. The 'e-'medium can construct, sustain, and even (especially) destruct reputations just like its traditional counterpart; albeit at a much faster rate. Current playbooks need to be revised [99]. Increased public awareness about organizations' conduct, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), heightened expectations for transparency, customers' rigorous assessment of offerings of companies, increased influence of opinion leaders, and predatory attention from media top the list of a plethora of reasons [100]. Scholars maintain traditional media as having the greatest impact on brand awareness while digital channels influence brand image at a superior intensity [101]. The challenge is to combine these different modes of marketing to create marketing synergies.

Managerial aspects of e-reputation management have been looked at from a reactive, crisis control point of view [77]. Although the study of e-reputation and eWOM has provided substantial contributions to practice, several questions remain [78]. Current e-reputation tactics are not of equal utility in different business contexts. For instance, the majority of research has discussed reputation management from a business-to-customer (B2C) perspective; clearly neglecting business-to-business (B2B) implications of corporate e-reputation. Industrial buyers do look at intangible attributes like reputation, alongside more traditional markers such as price assessment and quality [101, 102, 104]. Furthermore, B2B buying decisions are more complex due to the number of people involved with each deal, combined with the long-term nature of the relation [105]. The implication for sellers is to impress numerous decision-makers on a variety of criteria, such as financial standing, customer support, and product quality, among others [107]. As stated earlier, most of this information is retrieved digitally.

All touch points where stakeholders interact with a business have an influence on reputation building [108]. In an ever growing digital landscape, reputation management is tougher [109], and more critical than it ever was [110]. Veil, Petrun, and Roberts [66] look at it in a positive light, suggesting that although organizations never had complete control over their reputations, online media allows even the small players to participate in a level playing field. The literature, however, has fallen short of providing balanced insights into how organizations' reputations are built, managed, and/or destroyed online. For corporate reputation measurement, many have tried to formulate new models by taking advantage of digital advancement. However, "what they've drawn though, really, is a web of confusion," said Waddington and Earl [77]. Much like the initial academic contributions to the study of corporate reputation, the state of corporate e-reputation knowledge is disseminated across a wide array of management disciplines. Due to the non-existence of a rigid theoretical foundation for corporate reputation, the academic soundness of corporate e-reputation literature is nascent, if not 'baseless'.

IV. ANALYSIS

A. Evolution from Traditional to Digital.

Most studies thus far have looked at corporate reputation from a traditional angle. Today, eWOM is the most far-reaching and decisive factor influencing reputation. Some practitioners hold an adamant viewpoint in support of digital media while branding traditional media as outdated and ineffective. Yet, academia by large has remained of a balanced opinion, proving the varying effectiveness of both forms of media in different contexts [111]. Digital communication channels, such as social media networks, are necessary (but mere) tools that aid organizations' efforts to perform marketing functions and reach customers [112, 113, 114]. The significance of traditional factors on corporate reputation has reduced in favor of an even balance between traditional and digital factors. Still, both forms continue to affect reputation building, equally [115]. Offline reputations and online reputations, although distinct in existence, are extremely complementary, and together form a corporate reputation.

In 1988, Weigett and Camerer [116] had indicated that reputation-building required academic contributions to formalize concepts. Twenty-eight years hence, and strangely, basic conceptual questions remain about corporate reputation constructs [117]. A similar situation as of 1988 appears to exist, only this time, concerning e-reputation management for corporations. Lewellyn [118] remarked the vital importance of professionals agreeing on lexicons, valuation, measurement models, functions, and implications of reputation on other areas of business. Presently, researchers are in the elemental stage of exploring appropriate definitions of 'public' [119], and 'engagement' [120]. The changing landscape warrants such necessary exploration. Additionally, it principally explains the infancy of digital reputation understanding across academia and practice. However, information pertinent to corporate e-reputation is present across disciplines of management, such as crisis management, organization theory, corporate social responsibility, industrial management, total quality management, social media marketing, marketing communications, public relations, and accounting and finance. A crucial step for academic and practical progress is the culmination of relevant knowledge under an umbrella term, 'corporate e-reputation', which will serve as a fundamental subset of 'corporate reputation'.

B. Relation Between Reputation Theory and Technological Progress

The comprehension of reputation is subject to temporal changes (in time and space) between observers [121]. Such a science will constantly evolve as technological progression transforms communication. Although some researchers adopt a reflective narration method to explain reputation, most scientists, and professionals curiously attempt to comprehend the contemporary mechanism. The reciprocity of the relationship between reputation and technological progress ('e-') make it of a reflexive nature [19, 122]. Such an ethos connotes that this science will develop through continuous questioning, and multiple answers [222]. In essence, the duty of corporate reputation theory is to be relevant, rather than be timeless. Therefore, to create a thorough theoretical foundation, a two-way advancement is required: (1) the adaption of present theories in online scenarios, and (2) revision of established conceptions considering the implications of digital media on corporate reputation.

To advance the theory, it is valuable to incorporate the time-tested framework provided by Whetten [106]. The emerging theory must explicitly draw on: (1) new relevant variables; (2) the nature of the relationship between variables and corporate reputation; (3) explanation of the causality, and rationale of the construct; (4) clearly defined parameters; and (5) proposed value to epistemology and managerial implications. Additionally, a distinction between the concept of reputation and corporate image must be ensured. Often, practitioners are found guilty of either confusing the different subjects or purposefully accepting both as a single concept [124, 125].

C. State of e-Reputation Management Strategies

Under the subject of e-reputation management lie two subsets of measures. A set of proactive tactics to be employed beforehand, to prevent or weaken any potential threats; and a set of strategies dealing with reactive measures. Professionally, reputation management is often viewed from a reactive sense of situation [126]. Academia validates this attitude through the bulk of advisory delivered in the tone of crisis management. Nonetheless, an emerging group of scholars and experts is taking the standpoint of using proactive strategies that are not only more productive in reputation building but also financial rewarding [4, 127].

Proactive strategies include (1) vast presence on various digital networks; (2) capitalization on social interactions to gain customer insights [68]; (3) encouraging brand evangelism [128, 93]; (4) publishing an abundance of positive brand content; (5) investing in a professional website and search engine optimization; (6) training front-line employees and creation of response policies [129, 130]; and (7) creating a corporate character based on virtue [131] among many others. However, Waddington and Earl [77] pointed to an underlying obscurity about what kinds of organizations should be present on which media; citing the example of retail banks deliberately avoiding Twitter to stay clear of sheer complaint volumes. This may appear to be in direct conflict with the scholastic prescription towards accommodative crisis communication methods [132, 133, 44]. In-depth understanding of both recommendations confirms the total absence of any contradiction, but the majority of practitioners remain unclear about the core concepts. Consequentially, most end up using the wrong tactics in the wrong context.

Rhee and Valdez [134] insisted that reputation repair is generally more difficult than reputation building. The reaction mode chosen in threatening situations can often aggravate reputation risk [135, 136]. In some instances, response choices have been poor enough to be condemned as 'mission against reputation' [137]. Helm and Tolsdorf [221] perceived that firms with sizable (and favorable) reputation have more to lose during a crisis (due to high expectations) than firms with a bad reputation; while other authors have even pointed to a 'limited' utility of massive reputations [139]. In other words, better the reputation, tougher is its protection. Professionals' clarity of reputation management guidelines becomes particularly essential while resolving issues which can escalate virally if handled with insufficient care [66]. Academics have approved many reactive strategies to minimize crisis damage. Some of these are (1) use of force multipliers [148]; (2) using credentials and track record as bail [224]; (3) responding to negative posts quickly [99]; (4) not reacting to threats [66]; (5) taking legal action against false accusations [4]; (6) avoiding use of force [148]; (7) publicly acknowledging mistakes [139, 140]; (8) totally denying responsibility [141]; and (9) increasing charitable contributions [141]. This list is by no means absolute, yet, contradictions 'seemingly' exist.

This emphatically urges the creation of a definitive guide for training practitioners about the usage of strategies [142]. Coombs [143] conceded that every crisis is unique, calling for an exclusive reaction each time. Yet, O' Rourke [144] mentions the necessity of having insights of historical patterns and crisis characteristics. This aids professionals in taking informed decisions. A systematic, practical framework is required to standardize and reliably guide reputation managers with identification, categorization, and evaluation of various proactive and reactive strategies [79, 48].

D. eWOM in B2B and B2C

Literature developed with the objective to guide corporate e-reputation management is focused on B2C contexts. Academic work on eWOM considerably identifies individuals as perpetuating a positive or negative view of brands. Academics have disproportionately overlooked industrial buyers' eWOM. Quite like the B2C consumers, industrial customers discontent with a product or service may (1) ask for improvement; (2) turn towards others suppliers; (3) continue maintaining the loyalty or; (4) end relations with an organization, and spread negative word-of-mouth [146]. This can potentially lead to loss of credibility, smeared reputations, and substantial financial losses [147]. Because of greater financial commitments, and involvement of more people in an industrial transaction, upsetting a business customer has greater consequences than in B2C cases. Organizations should provide a systematic and efficient way for customers to voice complaints. This allows (1) a possibility to improve the product or service; (2) the company to provide a reason to avoid switching suppliers and; (3) preventing the customer from voicing negative feelings to third parties, or worse, to the general public [132]. Research in this field has looked at the subject from a traditional view, while there is a limited study of business customers using digital channels to spread WOM. Ferguson and Johnston [148] called for research aimed at exploring B2B negative eWOM.

E. Reputation Management Across Business Contexts

A single guide does not fit all business contexts. Different stakeholders require different kinds of messages [149]. A significant share of e-reputation management guides deal with personal e-reputation management tactics relevant to individuals only. For them, e-reputation is important as recruiters and admission officers at universities scan the web for digital footprint of applicants [150, 151]. The advocacy for a positive e-reputation led to the belief that scarce online presence gives a negative impression of the individual. This prompted people to excessively a create self-online presence. Managers not only adopted such reasoning in organizations but have even incorporated tactics suitable for personal reputation management into corporate strategies. This can be detrimental for corporate reputation management, which is a totally different ball game.

Furthermore, corporate e-reputation management is overly focused on B2C functions, than B2B; and even the established science is tremendously unorganized [152, 153]. The adoption of digital channels by B2B firms has been slow, and the vast gap in tools usage by industrial businesses is reported by Michaelidou, Siamagka, and Christodoulides [154]. It is necessary to note the unique set of challenges faced by B2B when using digital communication channels [155]. Some scholars have taken early steps to study cyberspace from B2B perspective [156, 157, 158]. Yet, more empirical investigation is vital to uncover several aspects of e-reputation management. A similar shortcoming of current literature is pertinent to the different function of e-reputation management in small and large businesses. Even though the interest to understand a business function at grand stages is understandable, both from an academic and managerial perspective; a dedicated playbook for small, medium, and large enterprises will be of interest to a wide audience.

Bruhn et al. [111] recognized the importance of altering implementation strategies on social networks, and other digital channels, on the basis of industry characteristics. Their study showed that extremely varied consumer expectations and online information quality (Online IQ) perception depended on the industry type. Pharmaceutical companies are expected to facilitate conversations between subject matter experts and public, while tourism and telecommunication industries lead more towards consumer-to-consumer interaction platforms. It is hence, necessary for companies to employ strategies that fit their respective sectors [159]. Additionally, tactics differ across cultures [90]. The online world is incredibly dynamic, creating the need for cross-cultural awareness in diverse contexts [160].

F. Digital-More than Websites and Social Networks

Website quality and content attracts customers [161], creates brand equity [162], and favorably shifts perceived risk and purchase intentions [93]. Social networks enhance the ability to address crisis in real time [163], foster improved relationships [164], allow increased engagement [165], provide wider exposure for brands [166], create brand equity [167], and facilitate knowledge acquisition [168]. Digout, Décaudin, and Fueyo [169] insisted that although websites and social networks play a crucial role in online information transfer from organizations to public, there are also several other digital channels of importance. These include, but are not limited to, search engine presence, blogs and forums, review portals, video sharing sites, emails, and mobile platforms. However, most practitioners excessively count on websites and social networks to create and maintain reputation, as evident in several works [170, 171, 15, 172, 173]. Perhaps, the confusion is partially aided by the synonymous use of the term 'social media' and 'social networks' [174].

Online anonymity has led to widespread cases of content being sponsored by organizations. Therefore, consumers receive positive information about brands with much skepticism. Depending on the source of information, consumers attribute online information quality (Online IQ) judgment to content. Although considerable scholarly contributions have been made to Online IQ in the past decade [175], there are still significant gaps in literature. Until recently, Online IQ was perceived as users' perception of information on a website [176]. Ghasemaghaei and Hassanein [177] called for more research to understand the relationship between various influencing factors and perceived Online IQ.

From a practical perspective, employees and resources should be allocated towards a variety of digital communication channels, with specific emphasis on the necessity to adopt a holistic approach in e-reputation monitoring, measurement, and management. With the websites, and social networks constituting only a minor chunk of the vast digital landscape, a dedication of balanced managerial attention is imperative. Kaplan and Haenlein [178] proposed specifically selecting the right networks of interest for the targets and integrating the media plan across various channels. Also, organizations will eventually have to shift focus from distributing positive content about themselves, towards encouraging brand advocates, and customer base, to participating online, and promoting the organization on their own [220].

G. Curious Case of Measurement Models

William Thomson, as quoted in [9] said, "when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meager and unsatisfactory kind." If so, then currently, corporate reputation is barely manageable. It is vital for practice to have some standard computation method and representation of reputation. Several attempts have been made over past decades to formulate a measurement framework [217]. Due to inconsistencies in definitions and conceptualizations, the measurement models vary significantly [181]. The three common approaches to reputation measurement are (1) assigning numeric value; (2) listing companies in rank tables and indices; or (3) assigning personalities. This discussion proceeds on the basis of Walker's [36] definition, "a relatively stable, issue-specific aggregate perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects compared against some standard." The authors conducted a cluttered inspection of the three measurement approaches on the following criteria: (1) stability; (2) issue-specificity; (3) aggregation of various stakeholder perceptions; (4) comparative nature of reputation and; (5) usability at small, medium, and large organizations alike.

1) Reputation as a Number: Shamma [100] categorized numeric measures of corporate reputation as (1) single-faceted generic measures; and (2) multi-faceted specific measures. The single-faceted approach attempts to aggregate perceptions of different stakeholders and represent reputation as a total sum. This approach goes against the majority of academia which maintains that all stakeholders of reputation are not equally important for business. Consider the case of Marlboro, which bears bad reputation in general public due to its association with tobacco. However, their reputation among tobacco consumers is stable, which has been sufficient for the company's growth over several decades [99]. The multi-faceted measures provide a balanced overview, across multiple aspects. It relatively adheres more to the stakeholder-specific approach, which leads to the idea of multi-dimensionality.

Reputation, unlike the widely held belief in practice, is more than good, or bad [182, 183]. Mostly, the reputation of an organization is a mix of positives and negatives attributed to diverse areas; which will has differing implications for various stakeholders [184]. Consumers look at the quality and customer support; employees focus on employee relations, and treatment of women [44]; the general public is more interested in corporate social responsibility [185]; while investors tend to gauge financial performance. Walsh and Beatty[158] proposed a 5-dimension construct: (1) reputation among customer base; (2) employer reputation; (3) financial strength; (4) product or service quality; and (5) social and environment responsibility.

Using scales like Reputation Quotient 'SM' (RQ), reputation for each stakeholder group can be determined. This scale uses 20 items across eight sub-scales; ultimately averaging the subcategory ratings to attain the final quotient. Some scholars disagree with such benchmarking, use of rating averages and ratios [187]. Other researchers have taken strong exception to assigning numeric values to reputation [188].

2) Reputation as a Correlative: Many academics and practitioners have seen corporate reputation as a comparative valuation. This comparison for long remained limited to competitors only. Wartick [59], among other scholars, proposed widening of scope. The extensive comparison landscape can include (1) the past performance of the company; (2) industry benchmarks; (3) reputation milestones, and beyond [189]. Wider comparison necessitates a discussion of the selected comparison entities, each time corporate reputation is measured. This can lead to serious deviations in practice. Fill nd Roper [1] cited the example of Ryanair, which despite being persistently bombarded with negative eWOM (for customer service) continues to maintain an excellent success story. They operate in a market where consumers forgive particular shortcomings of a budget carrier. However, the expectations from British Airways (a legacy carrier), competing in the same market are not the same. Also, even though both airlines cater to a largely overlapping target audience, the expectations of customer stakeholder group differ. In such a complex construct, some might question whether the reputation of both airlines must be compared with one another. This reasoning progressively brings to doubt the utility of industry reputation indices and tables.

Reputation rankings like Fortune's 'Most Admired Companies' and 'Britain's Most Admired Companies', rely on very narrow external stakeholder perspectives [1, 190] . These league tables are overly represented by top managers and financial analysts, studying only large, publicly traded companies [191]. Such indices are in contrast with definitions provided by Fombrun [31], who called for measuring perceptions of external and internal stakeholders. Further, studies have shown that customers form reputation perception primarily based on the quality of offering and innovation [57]. They also found that less than five percent of the top 183 reputation lists focus on innovation or product (service) quality. The bulk of reputation lists either excessively portray workplace quality (employer reputation) or provide a general, overall reputation ranking [192]. Additionally, the volatility is so deficient that some big corporations seem to have 'sticky reputation' [193].

3) Reputation as a Personality: Also, corporate reputation, in relation to corporate identity and image is seen as a stable and enduring intangible [183, 194, 28]. Walker [36], citing the example of Enron's reputation taking an instant nosedive, stated that reputation is only 'relatively' more stable. In total contrast, many numeric or comparative methods produce volatile results [1]. The personification of reputation comes handy in producing more consistent results. This method is also very valid and stable, cross-culturally [195]. Some scholars have pointed to the inability of personality based evaluation as falling short of producing facts, and also lacking a theoretical explanation of factors [22, 181]. However, the argument appears feeble on recalling that reputation is a representation of perceptions, not of facts [31].

Lewellyn [118] proposed the following considerations when measuring reputation: (1) reputation "for what"; (2) "according to whom"; (3) and purpose of the investigation. The challenge is to maintain the 'right' reputation [196]. A reputation of being 'experimental' may be good for tech-based software companies, but the same might backfire on a pharmaceutical, where consumers demand concrete certainty of product quality and performance. The goodness depends on the traits attributed to a firm and the suitability of those attributes within the operational domain of the company. Non-personified computations have been unable to provide such reputational attribute and trait ascriptions. Character based inspection might just hold the key.

4) Need for Convergence of Measurement Ideologies: Essentially, three points must be noted for further exploration. First, corporate reputation is not a single metric. Second, based on stakeholder-specific approach, several reputations must be assessed [171]. Third, the overall reputation must be determined by conducting a weighted aggregation of reputation across stakeholders, based on the specific importance of each group to the organization and its industry. From an operational perspective, this is unattainable as shown by Cable and Graham [36, 197].

Little consensus on construct and multi-dimensionality continues to hinder convergence [198]. Modern scales, specifically RepTrak™ Pulse, show trends in this direction [223]. The scale, deeply rooted in signaling theory, shows necessary promise of convergence while also considering cross-cultural factors. It separates constructs from reputational drivers, the latter being quite divergent across cultures. Scientific validation across countries has shown the model's ability to measure multiple reputations, connected with different stakeholder groups [199].

Even though the various models of measurement have significantly evolved in the subject over the past two decades [1], no method fully encompasses the (1) vast comparative nature; (2) multi-dimensionality; (3) issue-specificity; and (4) relative stability and low volatility of reputation [36]. Indexing and ranking predominantly cater to large multinational corporations that have massive prominence and brand awareness. Scales require construct alterations that limit global standardization of measurement practices. The personification of reputation, although providing the most utility to small-medium size businesses, falls short of facilitating comparison. Only a convergence of these diverse approaches can lead to a reputation measurement model that (1) represents reputation broadly, in non-aggregated terms; (2) allows comparison with more than just competitors or industry benchmarks; and (3) cover multi-dimensionality, issue-specificity, and cross-cultural criteria [200].

H. Inclusion of 'e-' in Reputation Measurement

Almost all corporate reputation measurement constructs have overlooked online drivers. Exceptionally, Dutot and S. Castellano [201] attempted the creation of an e-reputation measurement scale based on 15 items. They introduced dimensions of SEO, social networks, website quality, eWOM, community engagement, and online advertisements among others. However, the scale being in an early developmental stage falls short in many areas. Firstly, it pays excessive attention to customer stakeholder group. Secondly, it admittedly doesn't fully explain the weighted importance of various items on the scale. Thirdly, it awaits validation across industries and cultures. Lastly, it only measures e-reputation, which is a mere subset of corporate reputation. The progress made by the study clearly outlays a direction for future research.

1) Influence, Prominence, and Familiarity-not

Reputation: Online metrics such as 'Klout Score', 'Peerindex', and 'Kred' are used by practitioners to get an impression of e-reputation based on digital footprint. Most of these tools claim only to provide an 'influence' score, which is derived from reach and engagement measures. Reputation, as clarified in literature, is different from prominence or awareness. Take for example the recent top rankers of Klout Score. First is Barack Obama, followed by Justin Bieber, with actress and singer, ZooeyDeschanel, on the third spot. To assume that the accounts managed by these three have the best reach (digitally) is reasonable. However, the implication of Justin Bieber having the second best online reputation is entirely unfounded; considering him being a favorite subject of online jokes. This subdues the utility of present influence metrics.

Also, advanced metrics make derivations from social network engagement (examples - the number of likes, followers, comments, shares, and re-tweets) [202]. A major limitation of such engagement until recently remained the sole emphasis on positive sentiments. Trends are emerging towards a wider range of emotions. Facebook has recently introduced the option to like, love, weep over, and annoyed for posts. Such variety is expected to disperse across to other social networking channels also. Moreover, engagement with the posted content does not necessarily translate to a good reputation [203]. Similar is the case of online reviews and eWOM that provide key insights into e-reputation [204]. More reviews do not emphasize likeability of a brand. To explore the emotion associated with the content, sentiment analysis is required. Once the text is categorized, weighted averaging must be done to derive the overall feeling. This is as per the findings of Bennett and Gabriel [205], who noted 'one negative weighs more than one positive.' For brands to grasp a better picture of the sentiments associated with them, automated sentiment analysis is the way [206, 207].

2) Automating Sentiment Analysis Through Big Data: The bulk of big data is an untapped gold mine for corporate reputation measurement seekers [208, 209]. Research has shown eWOM to be a major driver of e-reputation. This makes information on the internet an important area to explore for insights. Through the use of advanced software, it is possible to collect text regarding an organization, run sentiment analysis algorithms on it, and discover traits associated with corporations. This is a key to formulating personified reputation measurements [210]. Digital tools can also compute the digital influence and prominence of a brand. A collection of big data, sentiment analysis, and influence score determination can be automated [77]. However, a qualitative human intervention will always be required at various stages. Human input will include information about associated reputations, the importance of different stakeholders, and identification of competitors or foreign bodies to compare reputation with, among other things. Also, humans cross checking sentiment analysis results will always be important [77].

The progress of sentiment analysis and big data technology is a catalyst for measurement models progress. Currently, only word-level analysis of text is possible. However, the real emotion is expressed through the elaborate explanation of the experience. Academics are taking steps towards commonsense knowledge integration with sentiment analysis. This will lead to more accurate results [211]. Also, most of the big data is limited to text, at the moment. As audio, video, and other formats of media start getting fully incorporated into big data, the scope of leveraging (reputation) signals will grow exponentially [212]. Furthermore, professionals have pointed to the inefficiency of automated sentiment analysis across non-Latin origin languages [213]. Currently, most software only produce acceptable results for English, and other European languages, Additionally, Pérez-Tellez, Cardiff, Rosso, and Pinto [214] found that consumers do not always mention the brand name in a common format. There are vast differences in how a brand is mentioned online by different people. For example, few different mentions of Cathay Pacific Airways on eWOM include Cathay, Cathay Pacific, Cathay Pacific Airways, Cathay Pacific Airlines, CPA, and CX. Necessary clustering methods are currently under development to address this issue. In summary, the progress of e-reputation measurement is tied to numerous technologies. An integrated progress across various fields is needed to advance reputation measurement capabilities of organizations.

I. Associated Reputations and Multi-levels

Much scholastic attention has been given to the influence of CEO reputation on the respective organizations' reputation [215]. Gaines-Ross[138] stated, "CEO reputation is linked with the reputation of the firm and CEOs are now far more in public eye." The reputation of associated-owners, leaders, boards-heavily influences the organization's reputation [216, 217]. To reinforce, Apple's reputation was associated with Steve

Jobs and Virgin Group's with Richard Branson. The leaders' credibility, reliability, and personality are attributed to the organization itself. Additionally, the employees' portrayal of the organization significantly impacts reputation, especially in service industries. This necessitates improving internal reputation as opposed to solely focusing on external reputation [218].

Corporate reputation is further interdependent on many reputations including “industry reputation [219], competitor reputation, country reputation [216], and other environmental factors [100]. The leaders of any industry form an industry reputation, which contributes back to the corporate reputation of all players participating in that industry. This can benefit or hurt new entrants that do not have a strong reputation [183]. National reputation also plays an influential role. This is apparent in the automobile industry, where car manufacturers from Germany are highly regarded across the globe. Chinese manufacturers are associated with low-quality, low-cost goods. Japanese are known for advancement in the field of robotics, whereas some East Asian firms get the reputation of being environment unfriendly, due to their national reputation. Clearly, the associations extend to an organization's suppliers, sponsors [221], ambassadors, and beyond.

Bromley [187] also mentioned the possibility of organization reputations existing at varying levels of impression, based on whether the perception is personal (primary level), acquired from kins (secondary), or heavily reliant on mass media (tertiary). George, Dahlander, Graffin, and Sim [222] further added to the dynamic by mentioning various layers of reputation such as product level, individual level (example - CEO), organization level, and other. Barnett and Leih[145] also argued that most reputation perceptions held by individuals are actually opinions borrowed from others. These are not as important as self-formed perceptions.

These areas remain vastly unexplored, and knowledge extension here will be of much utility to academia and practice. Although scholars agree on the existence of this phenomenon, the concept of associated reputations existing at different levels requires scholarly attention; and incorporation into measurement models. Boivie, Graffin, and Gentry[123] had taken the first steps to explore how multiple reputations integrate. Contemporary measurement models at large have overlooked the implications of associated reputations on corporate reputation. Perhaps, with the use of digital automation, reputation computations may be able to assess associated reputations and their impact on corporations.

J. Future Roles and Organization Structures

The function of reputation management entails coverage of a wider business spectrum than communications, and public relations management can scope. The question of 'which department, or individual should monitor and manage reputation' remains unanswered [30]. Although corporate communications managers along with other supporting C-level executives can greatly assist the management of reputation, a dedicated department headed by a competent reputation manager is needed to guide the process. This is concurrent with the recommendation of [179], 'reputation management must be seen as a collective effort enforced across the company.' Due to sensitivity of reputation and deep association with the business vision, culture, policies, and strategy, it is of absolute vitality to in-source the function; activities carried out actively by all employees [220] directly under management supervision [104]. Companies have started incorporating dedicated departments and reputation executive roles within their organization structures [186]. Neil and Moody[48] observed how social media management can be spread across a company. Further, scholarly studies and contributions from practice are required to identify how the task of corporate e-reputation management can be conducted, and distributed within an organization.

An essential question that emerges is 'who should be the chief commander of reputation?' Shamma [100], like many others, proposed that the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) oversees the work of reputation in-charge. This is rather absurd, given the academic standing on the influence of a CEO's reputation on corporate reputation [26]. The key influencer of corporate reputation, can't, and shouldn't be the final assessor of corporate reputation management. Should it be the CEO alone to evaluate the contribution and results of his/her actions? Rationally, not. In theory, it is essential that a third-party examine and audit reputation. Should it be a Chief Reputation Officer (CRO) working in close relation with the other departments? If so, which position will eventually be on top of organization structures? The authors believe that this as an interesting area to explore.

V. CONCLUSION

Research has shown the proportionate relation of social media interactions with stock prices of firms, even in short-term [20]. Such is an example of how digital communication channels have made corporate reputation more integral to organizations [69]. However, complexities have brought ingenious opportunities for those marketers who are ready to grasp [80]. Our paper serves as a genesis in developing corporate e-reputation science through pragmatism.

The main topic of interest is corporate reputation, as covered in the paper. However, in terminology, it was necessary to use 'e-' for differentiation purpose. The bulk of contemporary corporate reputation literature does not give adequate attention to the online aspects. The authors expect (in the near future} a full immersion of digital implications in the persona of the term 'corporate reputation management.' Until then, the use of term 'corporate e-reputation management' for clarity and distinction is recommended.

This paper presents a myriad of salient and intricate points associated with the craft of corporate reputation management. First is the discussion on the inseparability of offline and online reputation [103], followed by identification of a thorough absence of corporate e-reputation literature. The authors call for a shift from a reactive mindset to pro-actively thinking reputation management strategies. Also, a need for comprehensive reputation management playbooks is mentioned. Such an effort is needed to guide managerial actions in varied contexts, across companies, industries, and cultures. The authors have also insisted on the adoption of a holistic approach to the digital scenario that does not get fixated on websites and social networks only. The discussion asserted further investigation into eWOM and Online IQ. In the area of measurement, a vital convergence of ideologies, with technological advancements is observed. Additionally, light is shed on the role of associated reputations, and its implications for corporations. Conclusively, the authors question and challenge the supremacy of CEO position in organization structures.

A limitation of this study is the overlap of concepts. Although the overlap is unavoidable, each discussion point merits a dedicated section, and warrants focused further scholarly attention. Another limitation is the absence of information acquisition from industry conferences, white papers, and scientific surveys. To stay within the norms of the word limit, and to adhere to the essence of reflecting scholarly work, this was necessary. Also, the discussion presented in this paper discusses numerous points. Some of those points have been touched very briefly. More research is needed to explore the topics fully.

The assessment and prognosis are done from a post-modernist stance, employing rhetoric as a tool. Reflecting the nature of a philosophical mindset guiding this paper; many questions were asked. The purpose was to provide conceptual underpinnings and an agenda for future academic exploration. Although the paper has not led to substantively conclusive results, the objective has been accomplished. The study shows an imprecisely expanding literature across various business and technological disciplines. As per the framework of theory classification presented by Gregor [89], we performed the tasks of (1) analyzing, (2) explaining, and (3), predicting to a considerable extent. A logical progression is needed from academia in the subsequent category of 'design and action'. Grand scale culmination of information and regular reform to practice are necessary for the development of this business function. Certainly, no claims are being asserted of wholly covering the scenario in the present study. This is a modest step to draw attention towards topics about which much remains to be unraveled.

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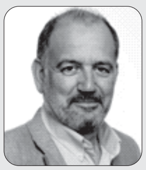

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