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10 Public relations as image and reputation management

Abstract: A general call for overcoming the distinction between the concepts of image and reputation seems to be emerging in the public relations field. The recurring counter-position of the two concepts is part of the larger debate over the symbolic communication-based function versus the behavioral function of public relations. The aim of this chapter is to conciliate the two perspectives by reviewing the literature about image and reputation management. The chapter highlights the role of public relations in managing image and reputation and illustrates its contribution, but also identifies opportunities and risks that professionals could face in the current competitive environment. The chapter has four main parts. The first section examines the concept of image. The second addresses the concept of reputation. The third section guides readers beyond the distinction between the two concepts and discusses the implications for and the contribution of public relations professionals in managing and evaluating image and reputation. The final section explores possible future trends in public relations and communication research.

Keywords: corporate image; corporate reputation; image management; reputation management; online reputation; image measurement; reputation mechanisms; corporate perceptions; intangibles; identity

1 Introduction

Among key public relations functions, image and reputation management are central to public relations' daily activities because they represent the starting-point for stimulating and affecting stakeholders' opinions and behaviors, as well as for supporting mutual understanding between organizations and their stakeholders. Yet the term *corporate image* has developed a negative connotation within the competitive environment. Various public relations and marketing scholars have emphasized the ephemeral and manipulative nature of corporate image management and related it to the construction of public impressions that appeal to an external audience (Bernstein 1984; Caillouet and Allen 1996; Williams and Moffitt 1997). Public relations and communication professionals have been oriented toward image-building or image-enhancing processes in order to construct, improve, or manipulate an organization's public appearance (L'Etang 2009). If images are manipulated, bolstered, and boosted by public relations professionals, then the function might deal "with shadows and illusions rather than reality" (Grunig J. 1993: 124–125), taking on aspects of propaganda and spin-doctoring (L'Etang 2009).

Such a negative view has been reinforced by the recurring counter-position of the concepts of image and reputation. The distinction between the two concepts can be viewed as part of the larger debate over the symbolic communication-based function (public relations as image building) versus the behavioral function (public relations as relationship management). According to J. Grunig (1993), “symbolic and behavioral relationships are intertwined like strands of a rope” (1993: 123), and

when symbolic (communication-based) relationships are divorced from behavioral relationships (grounded in actions and events), public relations practitioners reduce public relations to the simplistic notion of image building [which] offer[s] little of value to the organizations they advise because they suggest that problems in relationships with publics can be solved by using the proper message – disseminated through publicity, or media relations – to change an image of an organization. (Grunig J. 1993: 136)

Consequently, a call to overcome the distinction between the concepts of image and reputation has emerged in both academic and professional circles. This chapter aims to transcend this debate by conciliating the two perspectives and to provide useful insights for public relations professionals, who are increasingly required to simultaneously play the roles of image-maker/visual communication manager, reputation manager, and relationship builder. Hence, this chapter reviews the literature on image and reputation management to outline the role of public relations in managing corporate image and reputation; it is structured as follows. The first section examines the opportunities and risks of image management for public relations scholars and practitioners. The second explores the role of public relations professionals as reputation managers. The third discusses the implications for and the contribution of public relations functions to managing image and reputation. The final section discusses potential future trends in research.

2 Opportunities and risks of image management by public relations

Image can be explored as one of the dimensions of reputation, public esteem – the degree to which a firm is liked, trusted, admired, and regarded (Carroll 2009). Image can be described as external publics’ perceptions about organizational behaviors, activities, and achievements. From this perspective, image can play a vital role in projecting corporations and their objectives, visions, missions, and strategies into stakeholders’ minds. Organizational scholars have emphasized the informational content of a corporate image and its function as an organizational signal (Riordan, Gatewood, and Bill 1997; Hatch and Schultz 1997), focusing on the communicative impact of organizational *skin*, *bones*, and *soul* (Fairholm 2009) and the internal issues related to

the concept of image, which can be described as “the way ‘organizational elites’ would like outsiders to see the organization. This orientation highlights top management’s concern with projecting an image of the organization that is based (ideally) on identity” (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000: 65–66).

The organizational view allows us to highlight the positive influence that image can have on organizational processes and members at different levels. If we consider image as strongly linked to organizational culture and identity, effective image management can benefit an organization in the following ways: First, *by focusing on external constituencies, image can serve as an organizational signaling element with strong informative power*, helping an organization position itself within the competitive markets by conveying “information about otherwise unobservable characteristics of the organization, which are important to the market choices of potential stakeholders” (Riordan, Gatewood, and Bill 1997: 402). Image projects the essence of the organization to its various constituencies in order to achieve organizational objectives (Olins 1995). Images can shape organizational understanding and sense-making (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994) by affecting stakeholders’ decisions with a consequent impact on quality, satisfaction and loyalty (Andreassen and Lindestad 1998; Nguyen and Leblanc 2001; Lai, Griffin, and Babin 2009).

Second, *by focusing on internal constituencies, corporate image can help employees better understand which activities are proper and coherent with the organizational portrait members have developed* (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000). Images can support employees in understanding themselves and their role within an organization, as well as in aligning their decisions and behaviours to serve the same purpose (Hatch and Schultz 1997). Images can also make organizations more or less attractive to current or future employees. As Turban and Greening (1997) noted, by signaling favorable information about organizations, images can help attract more and better qualified employees.

As effective image management could positively impact organizations, public relations and communication professionals are required to develop an intimate understanding of what image is. In doing so, however, they risk being considered part of a pseudo-managerial profession who manage “pseudo-events, pseudo-action and pseudo-structures, i. e. phenomena which have the purpose of producing effects on people’s impressions and definition of reality” (Atvesson 1990: 373).

The following table summarizes the definitions and categories of corporate/organizational image from different perspectives.

Table 1: Definitions of corporate/organizational image (Source: adapted from Carroll 2008)

Labels	Definition	Authors
Construed external image	Mental associations that organization members believe others outside the organization hold about the organization	Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000
Defining image	Central images in an organization, such as root metaphors and archetypes, that give definition to the organization	Carroll 1995; Merrin 2005
Desired future image	Mental associations about the organization that organization leaders want important audiences to hold	Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000
Perceived Image	The perceptions held by insiders or outsiders	Barich and Kotler 1991; Balmer and Greyser 2006
Projected Image	The nonverbal image emitted by an organization	Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000
Refracted Image	The image passed on by third parties such as the news media, advertising agencies, government regulators, analysts, and pundits through some form of medium	Rindova and Fombrun 1999

Considering the different labels and definitions, we can observe that some of the definitions of images (*refracted*, *desired future image*, and *projected*) are communicatively built, meaning that they follow certain communication combinations and schemata settled by organizations. In such cases, corporate image could be defined by taking into account its functional components, i. e. measurable and tangible elements such as the reliability of products and their quality or price (Kennedy 1977; Martineau 1958; Stern, Zinkhan, and Jaju 2001).

The last three definitions of image (*perceived*, *desired*, and *construed*) are more cognitive, based mostly on mental associations and perceptive schemata or on emotional components such as stakeholders' perceptions, beliefs, or interpretations (Stern, Zinkhan, and Jaju 2001). From this perspective, image is the sum of interactions from experiences, impressions, opinions, and feelings of stakeholders vis-à-vis the organization (Worcester 2009).

Thus, corporate image is a multidimensional concept: "rarely will a single factor completely reflect the 'personality' of an organization. Also, it is unlikely that all the groups with which an organization interacts will have the same image at a particular point in time" (Dowling 1986: 112). The multidimensional nature of the concept compels public relations and communication professionals to explore (a) what are the different dimensions of corporate image, (b) what determinants contribute to the formation and management of corporate image, and (c) which

techniques can be used to evaluate the dimensions of corporate image (Spector 1961).

Corporate image dimensions. Corporate image has been described as the total sum of perceptions of corporate personalities and features that stakeholders develop by experiencing the organization (Spector 1961). However, stakeholders may perceive the same features of an organization even if they have different experiences of it, and conversely, different groups of stakeholders may have the same experiences with the organization but may develop different perceptions of its corporate image (Spector 1961). Thus, it is necessary “to isolate the salient image dimensions for each group of interest to the organization” (Dowling 1986: 112). The following table synthesizes some examples of corporate image’s dimensions.

Table 2: Corporate image dimensions (Source: personal elaboration 2019)

Dimensions	Features	Authors
Attitude and behavior	Positive feelings; sentiment or affect; behaviors; status	Tran et al. 2015; Carroll 2008
Dynamism	Pioneering approach; flexibility; activism and goal orientation; modern; investments in R&D; new product development	Spector 1961; Dowling 1986
Cooperation	Being friendly and well liked; cares about local community; degree of familiarity	Specto, 1961; Dowling 1986; Tran et al. 2015
Reliability	Being persuasive; business wise and well-organized	Spector 1961; Dowling 1986
Ethics	Being ethical; reputable and respectful; equal opportunity employer; socially and environmentally responsible; protecting jobs of local workers	Spector 1961; Dowling 1986; Tran et al. 2015
Successfulness	Control of finance and high self-confidence; competent management; sound financial condition; regular dividend payments; sound financial investments	Spector 1961; Dowling 1986

Attitude and behavior are linked to the positive feelings and behaviors corporate images could refer to as well as to the status and sentiment images stimulate in stakeholders (Carroll 2008). *Dynamism* relates to a firm’s pioneering or innovative approach. *Cooperation* refers to a firm’s capacity to be familiar with and close to local communities. *Reliability* is linked to being perceived as well-organized and wise in the ways of business, while *ethics* refers to being perceived as ethical and respectful toward internal and external environments. Finally, *successfulness* is related to a firm’s ability to manage finance, employees, and investments. If companies seek to derive any value

from research on their image, communication professionals should know which are the “meaningful characteristics that reflect the dimensions the respondents use when they evaluate the corporations’ image” (Spector 1961: 47).

Image determinants and formation process. Corporate images are based on stakeholders’ experiences and perceptions of organizations or on organizational media communication (Kennedy 1977; Dowling 1986). More precisely, “sources of a company’s image are extensive, and they are both person determined (people observing the company will selectively perceive different aspects of the company’s communications) and object determined (people are simply forming their image of the company based on their reality of that company)” (Kennedy 1977: 110). To create or modify a corporate image, the first step is to focus on the *object-determined criteria*, meaning the information shared by organizations with their publics. Thus, organizations need to clearly define their *objective company criteria* (Kennedy 1977: 124) or *formal company policies* (Dowling 1986: 111), which are attributes or facts within an organization that could be identified by anyone looking for information about it. These terms refer to that information which is not open to personal interpretations by publics, such as that related to products, prices, corporate policies, and physical conditions (Dowling 1986). The second step consists of taking into account the *person-determined criteria*, meaning *company personnel’s perception* (Kennedy 1977) or *employees’ image* (Dowling 1986), and the *external group perception* (Kennedy 1977) or *external groups’ image of the company* (Dowling 1986). *Person-determined criteria* refer to the different perceptions and interpretations of stakeholder sub-groups (internal or external). Different interpretations of the corporate image could reflect the communication that employees receive from the internal environment or their needs, norms, and values (Dowling 1986). Additionally, external groups of stakeholders contribute to modifying corporate image by evaluating corporate products and behaviors. Product usage and media communication, for instance, could positively or negatively influence stakeholders’ experiences (Kennedy 1977).

In the image formation process, communication, corporate personality, and corporate identity are strongly linked (Abratt 1989; Tran et al. 2015). Organizations first define their personality and identity. Personality should be defined “before the company is formed by deciding on what it is to do, what it shall believe in, [and] how it shall operate all factors which constitute a corporate personality” (Abratt 1989: 67). Corporate identity can be defined as “an assembly of visual cues – physical and behavioral by which an audience can recognize the company and distinguish it from others and which can be used to represent or symbolize the company” (Abratt 1989: 68). Then the organization must translate personality and identity into “understandable tangible and intangible corporate image variables” (Tran et al. 2015: 102).

Corporate image evaluation. Since corporate image can be seen as an intangible asset, communication professionals need to implement effective evaluative tech-

niques for measuring it. Van Riel, Stoeker, and Maarhuis (1998) articulated six different measurement techniques related to corporate image, as summarized in the following tables.

Table 3: Measurement techniques for corporate image (Sources: Carroll 2008; Mohan 1993; Treadwell and Harrison 1994; van Riel, Stroeker, and Maathuis 1998)

Measurement Techniques	Output	Usefulness
Attitude scales	Ranking of attributes capturing stakeholders' comparison between the organization and its competitors	Useful for collecting data that are representative of specific stakeholders' groups and comparable over time.
Content analysis	Media portrayals in terms of topics and favorability	Useful for determining audiences' likely degree of trust, admiration, and respect for an organization
Q-Sort	Deep insights into respondents' feelings about the company	Useful to investigate coherence between organizations' announcements and stakeholders' opinion
Photosort	Photographs symbolizing organizational values and the degree of stakeholders' appreciation	Useful as a projective technique with briefing aims
Laddering	Stakeholders' unstructured thoughts and mental links with the company	Useful for the study of the corporate image
Kelly Repertory Grid	List of attributes of corporate images	Useful for eliciting attributes of corporate image
Natural grouping	List of words associated w corporate image	Useful to measure the overall associations induced about the organization
Surveys	Perceptions of attractiveness or agreement with the image, or construal of other people's views	Allows for description and correlations of antecedents and outcomes

Measurement techniques for corporate image could differ depending on the type of collected data or the type of statistical procedure. Dowling (1988), for instance, distinguishes between attribute-based scaling procedures and non-attribute-based scaling procedures.

Attribute-based scaling procedures are useful to measure corporate image using a detailed set of attributes that respondents rate. The most common measurement techniques include snake plots, factor analysis, and joint space multidimensional scaling

(MDS). Non-attribute-based scaling procedures can be used to describe organizations by creating a list of attributes.

The most common measurement techniques include unstructured interviews, focus groups, object scoring methods, ordered scaling, the Kelly Repertory Grid, and simple space multidimensional scaling (MDS) (Dowling 1988; van Riel, Stroecker, and Maathuis 1998).

3 Public relations professionals as reputation managers

After exploring the concept of image, investigating reputation and the role of public relations as a reputation management function can help professionals to face current and future trends within the field. Image and reputation are interrelated concepts. As mentioned above, image can be considered a component of reputation, but reputation is also considered a type of image (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Carroll 2009).

Organizational reputation refers to what is generally said about an organization that “defines” it – what it is about, what it stands for, what it does, with whom it associates, and/or how it deviates from (or exceeds) social expectations – or what it is material to know (Carroll 2016). The concept of reputation has been explored by a wide range of academic disciplines which have examined different dimensions from their own perspectives. While this multi-perspective approach has stimulated an increasing interest in the concept of reputation among researchers and professionals, it has also emphasized its definitional problem. Reputation can be explored according to seven different disciplinary areas (Carroll 2013; Fombrun and van Riel 1997): accountancy, economics, marketing, organizational behavior, sociology, strategy, and communication.

Accountants view reputation as an intangible asset with financial worth that can play a relevant role in creating competitive advantage for the organization (Rindova and Fombrun 1999; Romenti 2016). *Economists* consider reputation an informative signal of organizational attractiveness, or of the quality of products and features, addressed to all stakeholders (Kreps and Wilson 1982; Fombrun and van Riel 1997; Romenti 2016). *Marketers* consider reputation synonymous with corporate image, as it is based on the pictures stakeholders create in their minds from the information at their disposal (Lippmann 1922; Balmer 1995; Romenti 2016). *Organizational scholars* view reputation as strictly linked to the concepts of organizational culture and identity. According to them, reputation is based on the sense-making experience of employees, which, in the case of a strong culture and identity, could affect how internal stakeholders perceive and interpret the organizational reality and how they present themselves and the organization to external stakeholders (Dutton and Duk-

erich 1991; Fombrun and van Riel 1997; Romenti 2016). *Sociologists* view reputation as an indicator of legitimacy, since it is based on the satisfaction of the social expectations expressed by multiple stakeholders and on the interactional norms characterizing the institutional field in which the organization-stakeholder relationships occur (Fombrun and van Riel 1997; Romenti 2016). *Strategists* have underlined the dual nature of corporate reputation: it can be viewed as an intangible asset but also as a barrier to imitation by competitors, since reputation is based on a firm's specific and unique internal features (Fombrun and van Riel 1997; Romenti 2016). Finally, *communication scholars* define reputation as what is generally said about an organization (Carroll 2013, 2015). It is nurtured by direct experiences with the company, the word of mouth, and direct communication implemented by the organization (Fombrun 1996; Romenti 2016).

Continued work on defining reputation has unfolded in two directions, one still focused on perceptions – lending itself to quasi-analytic, multivariate modeling – and the other focused on reputation as claims (Whetten and Mackey 2002), with a focus on content and what people say.

In the first direction, organizational reputation can be thought of as a multidimensional concept comprising five dimensions: public prominence, public esteem, properties/attributes, plexes and positioning (Carroll 2010, 2015; Lange, Lee, and Dai 2011). Organizational prominence concerns an organization's top-of-mind awareness, publicity, and familiarity among the public. Before a firm can be said to have a reputation, people must be familiar with it. This raises the question of whether all firms even have reputations; some do not. Public esteem is the degree to which an organization is liked, trusted, admired, regarded, or respected by the public. The third dimension, properties/attributes, concerns what the organization has a reputation for. Although some organizations are known for being known (often termed "celebrity"), this third dimension concerns organizational traits or performance levels. Reputation attributes can be thought of in various ways, the most common of which deal with organizational performance or competencies, such as executive leadership, workplace performance, corporate social responsibility/citizenship, products and services, and financial performance. This list of attributes has been expanded in recent years to include governance, ethics, innovation, efficiency, dependability, quality, and reliability. Corporate social responsibility has also been broken down into several areas such as workforce diversity, environmental performance, and philanthropy. Concerning the fourth dimension, plexes, Carroll (2015) argues that plexes are the network connections an organization has to the larger reputational ecosystem. Plexes are similar to corporate associations. Plexes can also be an organization's connections to public issues and current events; its supply chain or its place in the industry; its stance on social, economic, and political issues; and how well the organization treats (and is treated by) others. The concept of plexes focuses on an organization's linkages. Finally, the fifth dimension, positioning, refers to how all of these other elements connect together as a whole in a particular sequence, as well as how that sequence is timed.

In the second direction, focusing on reputation as claims, the AC4ID Framework (Carroll, Greyser and Schreiber 2011) identifies several types of organizational reputation that are often juxtaposed with one another. The *actual reputation* captures the perception-based dimension of the first direction, as observed by individual stakeholders. The *communicated reputation* refers to the reputation promoted or communicated by the organization itself, either through controllable media (advertising, marketing, public relations, or sponsorships) or uncontrollable media (word of mouth, news reports, commentary, or social media). The *conceived reputation* refers to the co-constructed view of reputation as constituents “make sense” of an organization’s reputation publicly. *Construed reputation* refers to what top management believes other people think (or another stakeholder thinks) is the organization’s reputation. The *covenanted reputation* refers to the reputation created by the brand’s promises or stakeholders’ expectations. The *ideal reputation* refers to what market research reveals as the organization’s optimal positioning of itself, given the economic, industry, or political realities the organization faces within its market; the ideal reputation is based on data. The *desired reputation* refers to the aspirations of organizational leaders, regardless of what the data or others tell them is feasible. Both views of reputation today place a greater focus on assessments, estimation, judgement, and opinions as social facts more than mere perceptions, and point to the multiple nature of reputation, which is evaluative, perceptual, and communicative.

The evaluative nature of reputation and the increasing interest in its measurement. First of all, reputation has an evaluative nature, as it is considered one of the “most important strategic resources” of an organization (Flanagan and O’Shaughnessy 2005: 445). Like other intangible assets, it plays a competitive role, as it helps organizations distinguish themselves from competitors, affects stakeholders’ perception of quality, reduces information asymmetry, improves market prominence, and contributes to value creation (Boyd, Bergh, and Ketchen 2010). It represents the deep evaluation (respect, esteem, estimation) of an organization’s image, and more specifically, it amounts an evaluation of the organization’s strategic type by specific groups of stakeholders such as customers or alliance partners (Rindova et al. 2005). Its value is determined through the interactions and interrelationships among multiple attributes, both internal and external to the firm (Barney 1991; Roberts and Dowling 2002). Due to its evaluative nature, it is possible to identify several antecedents to the dimensions of reputation previously discussed.

The quality of products, and consequently the perceived quality dimensions, can be affected by organizational inputs used in the production processes and by the quality of the organization’s productive assets (or knowledge assets). Prominence can also be affected by certifications from institutional intermediaries, such as media rankings, and by affiliation with high-status actors (Rindova et al. 2005). As an intangible asset, reputation can vary in terms of prominence (level of accumulation) and in terms of quality (level of stock).

The evaluative nature of reputation has stimulated academic and professional research into its measurement, and specifically into defining reliable paths for measuring its value. As Helm and Klode (2011: 87) noted, corporate reputation can be considered as a “driver of corporate performance”; but, in order to be managed, corporate reputation must first be measured (Gardberg and Fombrun 2002).

The perceptual nature of reputation. Second, reputation has a perceptual nature. Similar to corporate image, corporate reputation refers to the perceptions of an organization, but differently from image, it is “built up over a period of time and it focuses on what it does and how it behaves” (Balmer 1998: 971). As Wartick (2002: 374) described the process, “some individual, group, or larger human collective gathers and processes information about past actions of a business and draws conclusions (i. e. overall appeal) about a business’s future prospects”. Reputation can be considered an aggregation of individual impressions, characterized by three main features: the role of perception and impression, the importance of time, and the relevance of interactions.

The crucial role of perceptions means that “reputation can develop somewhat independent of reality, and is thus socially constructed” (Walker 2010: 369). In this regard, Highhouse, Brooks, and Gregarus (2009) have developed an illustrative model of the individual impression development process applied to corporate reputation with the aim of explaining how the individual’s impression of an organization is formed and how it constitutes corporate reputation when it is aggregated with other individual impressions. As the following table shows, the model is based on three main phases: cues signaling corporate attributes; images in the minds of constituents; and finally, impressions of corporations.

Table 4: An illustrative model of the individual impression development process
(Source: Highhouse, Brooks, and Gregarus 2009)

1. Cues signaling corporate attributes	2. Images in the minds of constituents	3. Constituents impressions of corporation
– Organizational investments	– Market Image	– Respectability
– External factors	– Employer image	– Impressiveness
	– Financial Image	
	– CSR image	

According to the model, it is possible to identify specific cues signaling corporate attributes. These could be manipulated directly by organizations through actions such as organizational investments in social capital, human capital, product development, and diversification, but also through advertising, public relations, and CSR policy. Cues could also be beyond organizational control and be related to external factors, such as word of mouth and media exposure. Cues could affect the different images of a company in the minds of its different constituents, such as its market, employer,

financial, and CSR images. By taking into consideration the aggregate perceptions of all stakeholders, the perceptual perspective on reputation emphasizes two relevant features: reputation is a social and a collective concept. Viewing reputation as an aggregate perception invites communication professionals to consider two main elements: reputation is often issue-specific, and it can vary according to stakeholder group (Walker 2010). In managing perceptual reputation, then, it is crucial to ask which issue reputation is related to and according to whom (Lewellyn 2002).

The communicative nature of reputation. Finally, reputation has a communicative nature. The concept of reputation is linked to stakeholders' expectations of organizations and to the ability of organizations to cultivate, nurture, and maintain effective relationships within the competitive scenario. In this regard, three operative terms can be linked to reputation: expectations, diversity, and competition. Carroll, Greyser, and Schreiber (2011: 460) argued that "reputation is what stakeholders say about the expectation of an organization's value vis-à-vis an organization's peers and competitors". Carroll, Greyser, and Schreiber (2011) took into consideration the expectations of value expressed by stakeholders; the non-monolithic character of reputation, which is stakeholder-group specific; and finally, the competitive nature of the concept, which helps an organization to build value and to take value from its competitors.

The relational nature of the term has stimulated research into the role of emotions in attributing legitimacy to an organization and developing trust and loyalty towards it (Kim and Lennon 2013; de Albornoz, Plaza, and Gervás 2012). If organizations ignore or disregard stakeholders' expectations, their behavior could affect emotional aspects of the organization-stakeholder relationship, negatively impacting corporate reputation (MacMillan et al. 2005). According to Alsop (2004), the emotional bond between organizations and their stakeholders is crucial to the most enduring reputations. Emotions can affect organization-stakeholder relationships and behaviors, as "a consumer's emotional attachment (...) induces a state of emotion-laden readiness that influences his or her allocation of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral resources toward a particular target" (Park and MacInnis 2006: 17). Being able to recognize and manage stakeholders' emotions could represent a challenge for reputation managers, as it affects how communication professionals could and should interpret their publics' behavior and how they can help organizations to develop empathic communication initiatives.

4 Beyond distinctions: implications for and contribution of the public relations function

If we can move beyond the recurring distinction between image and reputation, image and reputation management can change and shape our thinking of public relations as profession. Transcending the traditional distinction between image and reputation

means that communication professionals can turn their focus to three main issues: understanding whether image and reputation can be managed and how; exploring whether image and reputation can be engaged directly or indirectly; and finally, recognizing that a professional needs to be in charge of managing corporate image and reputation within a company.

As to the first issue, some scholars have expressed the possibility of managing both image and reputation as strategic assets of an organization; from this perspective, image and reputation are viewed as both liability and capital, and thus are owned by organizations. This view contrasts with that of organizational communication scholars who view image and reputation as co-constructed by different constituents, such as an organization, its members, external audiences, and other stakeholder groups.

Regarding the second issue, reputation should be engaged directly or indirectly. The direct approach is based on organizational-public relationships that are reputation-based and reputation-mediated; the indirect approach implies that organizations are not involved in managing reputation but rather in developing relationships that could indirectly affect the corporate reputation.

Concerning the third issue – the recognition of a person in charge for managing, developing, and protecting organization's reputation – this responsibility is shared among different roles: the chief executive officer (CEO), the board of directors, the chief communication officer (CCO), and every member of the organization. In any case, communication and public relations professionals need to be aware of the impact of organizational image and reputation on their aims and performance. Effectively enhancing organizational reputation requires professionals able to strategically manage image and reputation as intangible assets of an organization (Dowling 1993; Rindova, Williamson, and Petkova 2010). They also need to carefully manage organizational reputational intelligence concerning the internal or external environment (Carroll, Greyser, and Schreiber 2011), taking into account cognitive, affective, and behavioural information about the various stakeholders and publics who play relevant roles in image and reputation-building strategies. Finally, communication professionals need to nurture interdependencies and cultivate complex relationships, as both image and reputation are socially constructed concepts based on relational and interactional dynamics (Boyd, Bergh, and Ketchen 2010). Given this scenario, the public relations function could contribute to the management of organizational image and reputation at different levels.

First, in managing the image formation process, the PR function helps organizations in transforming personality and identity into coherent corporate image components. It also provides support in converting corporate image from awareness to familiarity, then to favorability, and finally, to trust and advocacy (Tran et al. 2015). Its role is to assure consistency and congruency between the corporate image and reality (Abratt 1989).

Second, public relations can act as a bridging function, helping the organization to understand how individuals place the organization in specific categories, such as

marketing or product categories, specific industries or organizational forms, or even organizational positions on critical issues.

Finally, the reflective function of public relations can help professionals support an organization in evaluating the management of its reputational risk (Brivot, Gendron, and Guénin 2017; Graafland 2017). The concept of reputational risk is becoming not only “a strategic management category but also a logic of organizing” or “an important cognitive frame and reflexive orientation” (Power et al. 2009: 309). The reflective function of public relations is crucial, as it assists in selecting information from publics that could help organizational members balance their behaviors and initiatives.

5 Future research

Communication scholars exploring the concepts of image and reputation will have multiple future streams of research they can follow (Carroll 2017). These include (a) the link between image, reputation, and organizational communication routines; (b) the management of the dark side of reputation; (c) the ethical issues related to reputation management; (d) the moderating role of organizational culture and its impact on corporate image and reputation; and (e) the effects of online dynamics on the concept of reputation.

The link between image, reputation, and organizational communication routines. Communication scholars have underestimated the impact of image and reputational issues on ordinary communication activities, and vice versa. Reputation, for instance, has been investigated in relation to exceptional communicative scenarios such as crisis management. A possible stream of research could focus on analyzing how to exploit the communicative resources at the disposal of professionals for routine communication behavior, with the aim of implementing image and reputation-building processes.

Managing the dark side of reputation. Recently, some companies have implemented aggressive reputation-management tactics, such as creating fraudulent reviews by exploiting less-resourced individuals or manipulating online information processes to hide the truth. These companies, called “brand bullies,” are expert in demolition rather than in enhancement of reputation. Research in this area could focus on specific concepts such as executive hubris, fake news management, and political influence.

Ethical issues related to the reputation management process. Increasingly, corporate reputation has been related to ethical and moral issues: to build a good reputation, a pattern of ethical behavior is crucial. Some examples come from the internal context and more specifically from employee-management strategies and tactics. Reputation has been explored as an intangible asset useful in attracting a talented

workforce, but little attention has been paid to the workforce compensation, leaving the impression that a good corporate reputation justifies poor pay systems (Carroll 2013). Relevant to this, communication scholars could focus more on the linkages among reputation, accountability, and ethics.

The moderating role of organizational culture and its impact on corporate image and reputation. The perceptual nature of reputation has encouraged analyses of the moderating role of the culture in the image and reputation management process (Flatt and Kowalczyk 2008; Bartikowski et al. 2011). Most of the research has focused on the role of organizational culture, identifying culture as a factor that can significantly influence the development and management of reputation (Flatt and Kowalczyk 2008). Since organizational culture impacts organizational strategy definition and implementation, it could also influence image and reputation-building strategies (Weigelt and Camerer 1988). Few studies have examined the role of individual culture in the image and reputation development process. Cultural values, habits, and issues could affect how individuals perceive corporate reputation and develop their impressions over time. Communication scholars could deepen our knowledge in this area by conducting empirical research comparing how these processes work in different cultures.

Effects of online dynamics on reputation. Current measurement models have focused on offline reputation, underestimating the effect of online dynamics and the concept of digital reputation. Romenti et al. (2015: 261) have defined digital reputation “as the quantity and quality of coverage of different organizational issues in the digital environment, as threats of online discussions among relevant nodes of networks, or as a reflection of real (offline) reputation.” Models and methods for measuring online reputation have been predominantly developed at the professional level (for instance, the RepTrak® Pulse score by the Reputation Institute) and few scholars have focused their attention on the topic (Romenti et al. 2015). Therefore, communication scholars could focus on developing models, measurement techniques, and methods that integrate offline and online reputation.

To sum up, we invite communication scholars to move beyond traditional research avenues in order to take into account new theoretical and practical phenomena such as the link between reputation and communication satisfaction, internal stakeholders’ empowerment, stakeholders’ well-being, and routine communication processes such as listening and feedback management.

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