

**CORPORATE REPUTATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMACY:  
A LITERATURE REVIEW**

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**Abstract**

Across the last four decades, a vast scientific literature has analyzed the relationship between corporate reputation and organizational legitimacy (Cornelissen, 2004; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Tost, 2011; Bartlett et al., 2013; Bitektine & Haack, 2015) to highlight differences and similarities.

This study aimed to analyze the scientific literature about organizational legitimacy and corporate reputation, employing a methodological design in three steps: literature refining through a systematic literature review, corpus selection, and conceptual universe delimitation. The systematic review was performed across the Web of Science and Scopus databases. The search equations were *organizational reputation* AND *legit* (legitimation/ legitimacy) within domains related to communications, sociology and business management. The final sample was established after filtering the queries by English language, open-access articles, and texts having both terms present in abstracts or keywords ( $n=71$  articles) for the final corpus selected articles being cited at least once ( $n=57$ ). A content analysis using mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) of the selected corpus and Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) Leximancer and Atlas.ti completed the systematic review.

The scientific literature published between 1994 and 2022 on organizational legitimacy and corporate reputation concepts showed that the theory of legitimacy and the sociopolitical approach were the prevailing themes. The most commonly used research method was qualitative (case studies, discourse analysis, in depth or directed interviews).

Companies and profitable organizations associate reputation and legitimacy through social norms and ideological constructs (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Organizations invest in

communication efforts, such as social media (Twitter, Instagram), business and sustainability reporting, and stakeholder communication management, to strengthen the relationship between these intangible assets (Rao, 1994; Sorenson, 2014; Martinez et al, 2018; Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2020). The findings of this study can bring important insights for future research on the strategies used by the profitable organizations to build their reputation and self-representation on social media through discursive legitimation practices.

**Keywords:** *organizational legitimacy, corporate reputation, sociopolitical approach, legitimacy theory, mixed methods, qualitative methods.*

## **Introduction**

In the last decades, many papers have analyzed the importance of reputation for different types of organizations and in different economic environments (Rao, 1994; Deephouse et al., 2005; Walker, 2010; Lammers et al., 2013). Literature reviews (Walker, 2010; Veh et al., 2019) on reputation scrutinized the different theoretical grounds of reputation: *institutional theory* (Rao, 1994; Deephouse et al., 2005; Davies et al., 2010; Connelly et al., 2011), *the resource-based view (RBV) theory* (Carter et al., 1999; Deephouse, 2000; Roberts & Dowling, 2002; Rindova et al., 2007), or *the signaling theory* (Basdeo et. al, 2006; Walker, 2010; Carreras et al., 2013; Yüncü & Koparal, 2017; Veh et al., 2019).

The institutional theory offers a fresh approach to building a company's reputation through social interaction, consisting of three key elements: legitimacy, isomorphism, and adaptation (Lammers & Guth, 2013). Reputation refers to the social recognition and acknowledgment of a company's accomplishments, according to Rindova et al. (2005, p. 1034). To gain legitimacy, organizations must adhere to social and legal obligations during their interactions with others, as noted by Arslan and Saylı (2006, cited in Yüncü & Koparal, 2017).

Numerous studies investigated the correlation between corporate reputation and organizational legitimacy. Researchers focusing on the legitimacy concept have done several studies (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Tost, 2011; Bitektine, 2011; Bitektine & Haack, 2015). On the other hand, a different set of studies have emphasized the differences and similarities between the two concepts (Cornelissen, 2004; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; King & Whetten, 2008; Bitektine, 2011; Bartlett et al., 2013).

A bibliometric literature review by Du, Feng, and Lv (2022) has shown the relationship between the two concepts. Their main finding is that the cluster of studies on legitimacy - reputation (#3) emerged after 2008 and reached its peak in 2011-2012 (Deephouse & Suchman,

2008; Bitektine, 2011; Thornton et al., 2012; Tost, 2011 apud Du, Fend & Lv, 2022). Their research, a bibliometric analysis based on the data from 1995 to 2020 from the Web of Science (WoS), was used as a reference for this paper.

This study analyzes the literature regarding the relationship between the two concepts. Firstly, it aims to provide an updated view of the theoretical evolutions in social judgments on legitimacy and reputation from a theoretical and methodological perspective. Secondly, it seeks to identify the bridging themes and concepts from a conceptual standpoint, which can serve as the basis for future extended research.

## **1. Legitimacy and reputation, two concepts emerging from the social judgment**

Legitimacy has been a topic of interest in organizational sociology and economics since the 1970s, but it was only in the 1990s that extensive literature reviews and studies began to appear. Several notable scholars, such as Ashforth & Gibbs (1990), Suchman (1995), Deephouse & Carter (2005), Deephouse & Suchman (2008), Bitektine (2011), Tost (2011), and Thornton et al. (2012), have contributed to this growing body of research.

Over the last 40 years, legitimacy and reputation have become closely related concepts. Scholars such as Rao (1994), Suchman (1995), Lahdesmaki & Siltaoja (2010), Carreras, Alloza & Carreras (2013), and Yüncü & Koparal (2017) have explored their connection, sometimes seeing them as complementary, while other times as different forms of organizational identity. Fombrun & Shanley (1990), Scott (2001), Whetten & Mackey (2002), Barnett (2006), and Bitektine (2011) have all contributed to this discussion.

King & Whetten (2008) emphasized that all organizations must have legitimacy, while reputation is a desirable but not necessary attribute. In their bibliometric study, Du et al. (2022) identified 12 clusters including both concepts: "signaling theory", "business ethics", "CSR communication", "reputation", "environmental disclosure", "organizational identity", "leadership", "strategic alliance", "institutional entrepreneur", "network legitimacy", "intangible assets", "legitimacy theory", and "activist."

### **1.1. Definitions of Legitimacy and Reputation**

Legitimacy appeared as a cornerstone concept for neo-institutionalism (Greenwood et al., 2008; Bartlett et al., 2013), although the research on legitimation acquiring in organizations dates back to the '70s. One of the turning points in the evolution of the studies on legitimacy (property) and legitimation (process) was marked by Suchman's article, where legitimacy is presented as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable,

proper or appropriate within socially constructed systems of norms, values, beliefs, definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). He identified three types of legitimation - *pragmatic* (calculated) legitimacy, *moral* legitimacy, and *cognitive* legitimacy. Later, Suchman reviewed his taxonomy of the legitimacy concept and expanded the categories to *pragmatic* legitimacy (*egocentric/ethnocentric*), *moral* legitimacy (*consequential, procedural, structural, and personal* legitimacy), and *cognitive* legitimacy (*comprehensive or natural*).

Other researchers developed new categories focusing on the organizational context - Deephouse (1996) differentiated *media legitimacy* (understood as legitimacy with the general public) and *regulatory legitimacy* (legitimacy with government regulators) or the approach (micro vs. macro or sociopolitical vs. psychological). Scott (1995) and Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) proposed another taxonomy: regulatory sociopolitical legitimacy (based on existing norms and laws), normative sociopolitical legitimacy (based on existing rules and laws), and cognitive legitimacy (based on taken-for-grantedness).

While new concepts appeared in the literature on legitimacy and reputation, the attention of the researchers moved to the explanation of the relationship between the two notions (King & Whetten, 2008; Du et al., 2022) to the organizational rhetorical mechanisms that contribute to the building of the legitimacy and reputation through discursive activities (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Vaara et al., 2006; Golant & Sillince, 2007; Du et al., 2022).

Reputation was, for the last four decades, a trans-disciplinary concept, analyzed and investigated by academics in economics, business strategy and ethics, corporate finance, organizational studies and sociology of organizations, marketing, public relations and communication sciences, linguistics, and discourse. The fundamental works of Fombrun and Shanley (1990), Fombrun and van Riel (1997) steered a plethora of studies (Gotsi et al., 2001; Balmer et al., 2002; Bromley, 2002; Davies et al., 2003; Barnett et al., 2006; Lange et al., 2011; Carreras et al., 2013; Motion et al., 2013; van Riel, 2013; Boistel, 2014; Boivie et al., 2016; Dowling, 2016; Von Berlepsch et al., 2022).

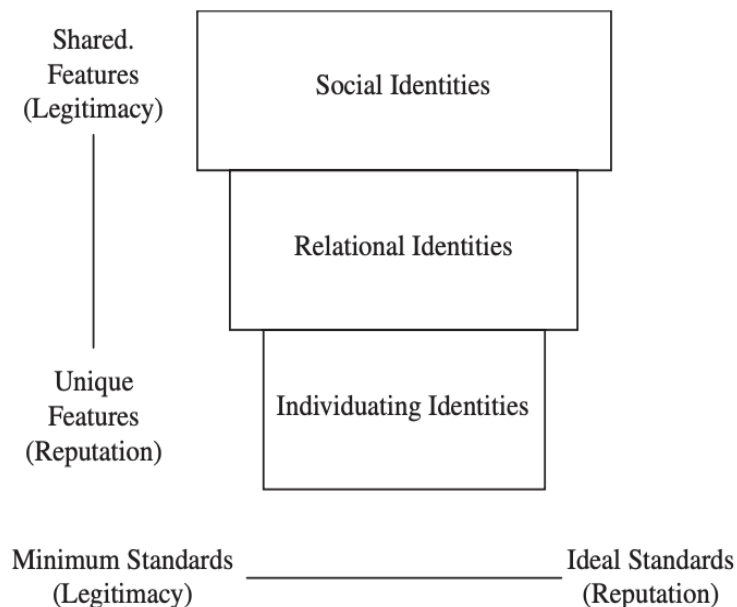
Ravasi et al. (2018) conducted a study to review the evolution of the research on the formation of organizational reputation and synthesized six perspectives: a theoretic, a strategic, a macro-cognitive, a micro-cognitive, a cultural-sociological, and a communicative one (p. 47). According to their empirical findings, from a cultural-sociological perspective, reputation is “the general evaluation of organizations and their actions against moral, technical or artistic criteria” (p. 47). Reputation was defined as “a set of attributes” associated with a company, based on its previous activity (Weigelt & Camerer, 1988, p. 443), “a corporate intangible thought to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, employee attraction and retention, firm

equity, and investor awareness” (Fombrun, 1996; Roberts & Dowling, 2002 apud Highhouse et al., 2009), ”a global, temporarily stable, shared evaluative judgment about a firm” (Highhouse et al., 2009, p. 1487).

## 1.2. Similarities and differences between the two concepts

Previous research has explored the concepts of legitimacy and reputation from different perspectives. Legitimacy is more socially oriented, while reputation is associated with economic logic (King & Whetten, 2008). Legitimacy is about shared features adopted by social identities and minimum standards at an individual level, whereas reputation is built on ideal standards, shaping unique individual features (see Figure 1).

From a socio-psychological perspective, the terms were used interchangeably (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Staw & Epstein, 2000) or regarded as ”different forms of judgment that one can render for an organization” (Bitektine, 2011, p. 173). Finally, the rhetorical angle, also embraced by Lahdemaski and Siltaoja (2010), compared the reputational discourse and the legitimacy in four ways: in terms of economic resource, as social recognition, as a moral control mechanism or for prevention of risk in case of social exclusion (p. 97).



*Fig. 1. Hierarchically ordered identity referents and corresponding relationship to legitimacy and reputation King & Whetten, 2008, p. 198 – adapted*

Rao (1994) emphasized that organizations adeptly used the interdependent relationship of reputation and legitimacy when enhancing the legitimacy of a new category, such as the

automotive industry. Following Suchman's and Scott's approach, Suddaby, Bitektine, and Haack categorized legitimacy into cognitive, regulative, and normative. While cognitive legitimacy aligns closely with the use of the word "taken for granted" by Aldrich and Fiol (1994, p. 648), regulative legitimacy "refers to the degree to which an organization complies with explicit regulative processes - rule setting, monitoring, and sanctioning activities" (Scott, 1995, p. 42 apud Yüncü, V. 2020).

Bitektine (2011, p. 173) focused on the importance of the evaluator's perspective and the type of judgment assessing the organization. In his perspective, *cognitive legitimacy*, *socio-political legitimacy*, *reputation*, and *status* can be regarded as different forms of judgment that one can render concerning an organization. Each form of judgment seeks to answer a different question that concerns the evaluator: *Does the organization belong to any familiar class or category?* (cognitive legitimacy judgment). *Does the organization have the right to exist, and Is the organization beneficial or hazardous to me, my social group, or the society I live in?* (socio-political legitimacy judgment). *How will the organization perform/ behave relative to other organizations in the set?* (reputation judgment); and *Where does the organization fit in the ranked order of similar organizations?* (status judgment) (Bitektine, 2011, p. 162).

## **2. Research questions. Research strategy and methodological design. Corpus**

### **2.1. Research questions**

This study builds upon previous research on the connection between reputation and legitimacy, using the literature review principles, and seeks to answer specific questions: Q1. *What are the bridging themes and concepts between legitimacy and reputation?* Q2. *What are the theories and methods used by previous research to investigate the relationship between legitimacy and reputation?*

The methodological design followed three steps (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 212):

#### **2.1.1. Literature refining**

In this stage, bibliometric filters helped to narrow the list of articles from a broader literature identified on the Web of Science and SCOPUS scientific databases. This process was transposed into a PRISMA diagram to obtain a more granulated corpus for the literature review. From this, a final selection of 57 articles was made, including both concepts of legitimacy and reputation.

### **2.1.2. Conceptual universe delimitation**

A qualitative analysis of the 57 abstracts from stage 1 was conducted using two qualitative analysis software, Leximancer and Atlas.ti. The aim was to capture the theoretical approaches and methodological evolutions linking the two key concepts, legitimacy and reputation. Initially, the keywords associated with the two concepts were identified with the bibliometric software Leximancer, resulting in a list of 56 codes (concepts).

### **2.1.3. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of the conceptual universe**

Initially, the list of 56 concepts was refined and condensed by eliminating terms with similar meanings or interpretations, with the findings of Du, Feng, and Lv (2022) serving as the starting point. The refined list was then categorized into four groups, including themes, concepts, methods, and theories, with 17 themes, 14 concepts, 10 theories, and three methods. The conclusions were then distilled through a qualitative discourse analysis using Atlas.ti software.

## **2.2. Research Strategy**

The methodological design followed three steps: literature refining, literature review corpus selection, and conceptual universe delimitation.

**2.2.1. Literature refining.** Selection from a broader literature identified on Web of Science and SCOPUS scientific databases. Bibliometric filters were used to narrow down the list of articles. This process was transposed into a PRISMA diagram to obtain a more granulated corpus for the literature review. From this, a final selection of 57 articles was made, including both concepts of legitimacy and reputation.

The research strategy had as a starting point the findings of the latest literature review proposed by Du et al. (2022). The authors conceived and published a literature review for the legitimacy research and concluded by recommending continuing the study of the relationship between legitimacy and reputation and extending the inquiries to other scientific databases alongside the Web of Science.

The methodology used was mixed (quantitative and qualitative), integrating statistical data and codes (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In the first stage, using bibliometric methods and models (Donthu et al., 2022, p. 287), the corpus of the systematic literature review has been identified and selected. Bibliometrics is a quantitative method to identify streams and trends in a thematic field, especially the ones disputed by several research domains. "Bibliometrics indicates the

collection, the handling and the analysis of quantitative bibliographic data, derived from scientific publications” (Verbeek, 2003, p. 181).

### **2.2.2. Literature review corpus selection**

*Step 1.* The initial extended corpus was obtained by investigating the scientific databases Web of Science and Scopus. At the same time, the searching filters (step 1) were the themes of *corporate reputation* AND *legit* (*legitimation/ legitimacy*). The two databases resulted in 4,220 articles containing one of the words/ syntagm or both (3,727 on WoS and 423 on Scopus). The next step was to refine the bibliographic material even more, and a second filter was applied to the corpus (step 2) - *article type* (article published, review article, book, book chapter). The corpus decreased to 3,798 articles (3,590 on WoS and 388 on Scopus).

*Step 2.* A new filter was used for *research areas* (business economics, communication, social sciences), and the remaining articles decreased to 2,077 (1,704 on WoS and 373 on Scopus).

*Step 3.* Another filter was considered relevant - the *Language (EN)* (total of 1,691 articles, 1,348 on WoS, and 343 Scopus).

*Step 4.* Another filter - *Open access* - was used, resulting in 566 total articles, of which 437 were WoS and 129 Scopus.

*Step 5.* The last step of the filtering process was to remove the duplicates between the two databases, resulting in a final corpus of 556 articles, with 427 on WoS and 129 on Scopus. This flow can be visualized in Fig. 1.

*Step 6.* New refining was conducted, and the articles were classified into three categories, using two criteria: the existence of one of the key concepts (both *reputation* and *legitimacy* - marked 1, *reputation* - marked 2, *legitimacy* - marked 3) among the keywords of the articles or in abstracts.

Of the total number of articles, 128 included keywords, of which 41 contained keywords listing concepts, *reputation*, and *legitimacy*. Another 426 articles had only abstracts without keywords. The two categories were separated in an Excel spreadsheet—the list of articles with abstracts identified 30 articles containing both key concepts. The two lists of selected articles were mixed in a separate Excel spreadsheet.

The selection was made in an Excel file resulting from the mix mentioned in step 5. The breakdown by category was: 71 ( $n_1$ ) articles had both concepts among the keywords or in abstracts, 54 articles ( $n_2$ ) - only reputation, 283 only legitimacy ( $n_3$ ).



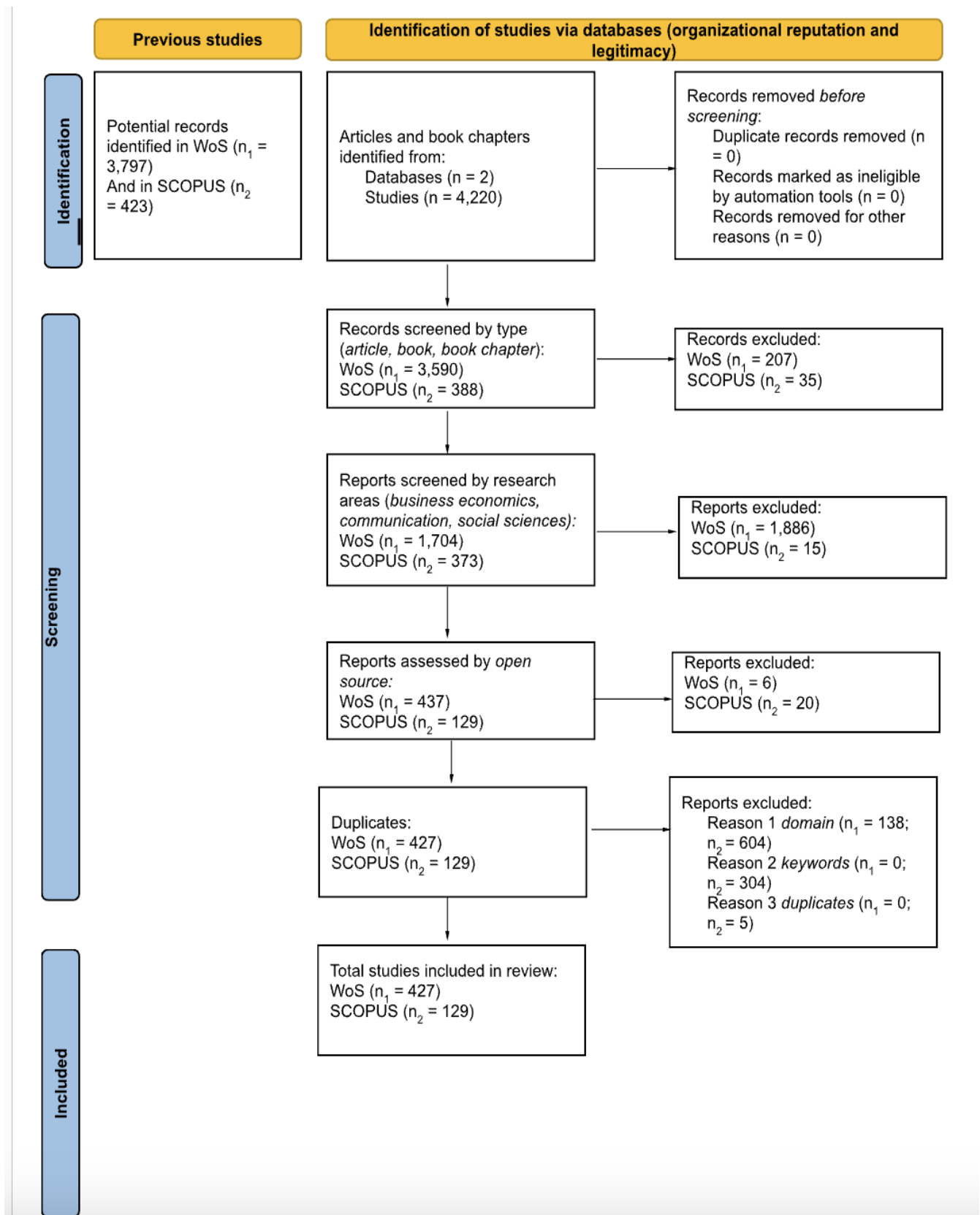
*Step 7.* The final corpus of the study resulted from introducing a new impact filter on the dedicated literature based on the number of quotations. Of the total number of articles focusing on the abstracts or keywords on both concepts (n=71), only 57 have been cited at least once. The next step was to transpose the abstracts of the 57 articles into a text (Word) document, including the titles, authors, and keywords, to enable the coding with the Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS).

### **2.2.3. Conceptual universe delimitation**

A qualitative analysis of the 57 abstracts from stage 1 was conducted using two qualitative analysis software, Leximancer and Atlas.ti. The aim was to capture the theoretical approaches and methodological evolutions linking the two key concepts, legitimacy and reputation. Initially, the keywords associated with the two concepts were identified with the bibliometric software Leximancer, resulting in a list of 56 codes (concepts).

The next step was a directed content analysis (Zang & Wildemuth, 2005) based on inductive reasoning to validate and broaden the conceptual framework proposed by Du, Feng, and Lv (2022). In this second stage of the research, the corpus resulting from the first stage, formed of 57 articles, was analyzed with the corpus for the last research stage - mixed qualitative and quantitative - consisting of a content analysis conducted through Leximancer and Atlas.ti. Leximancer, as a software used for its systematic quantitative literature review (SQLR) functionalities, can provide a factual and reproducible approach to identifying, selecting, and evaluating the body of literature rigorously and transparently (Biroscak et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2022).

Leximancer allowed the identification of the words with the highest relevance according to frequency and relevance. Through empirical correlation, these words were split into four categories ("themes", "concepts", "methods", and "theories"), which became the categories and codes grid used in the coding phase in Atlas.ti. Taking into account the theories and concepts that were also used in the literature on organizational reputation (Barnett et al., 2006; Lange et al., 2011; Carreras et al., 2013; Dowling 2016), 6 of the categories proposed by Du et al. (2022) have been of interest for this paper - "signaling theory", "CSR communication", "reputation", "organizational identity", "intangible assets" and "legitimacy theory". These categories were used as codes in the coding model applied to the corpus of abstracts in this study.



*Fig. 2. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for updated systematic reviews which included searches of WoS and SCOPUS only*

#### **2.2.4. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of the conceptual universe.**

Initially, the list of 56 concepts was refined and condensed by eliminating terms with similar meanings or interpretations, with the findings serving as the starting point. The refined list was then categorized into four groups, including themes, concepts, methods, and theories, with 17 themes, 14 concepts, 10 theories, and three methods. The conclusions were then distilled through a qualitative discourse analysis using Atlas.ti software.

During the generation of a cloud for the two fundamental notions of "reputation" and "legitimacy", Leximancer conducted an automated qualitative analysis that proposed a list of 27 "concepts." To isolate these concepts, Leximancer used two criteria - "count" (frequency) and "relevance" (proximity). The research author manually added 29 "concepts" by employing keywords suggested by the authors of the articles included in the corpus.

The list counted 56 keywords (see *Table 1*): *legitimacy, reputation, social, corporate, financial, literature, firms, stakeholders, theory, companies, CSR, business, performance, relationship, value, process, public, status, accreditation, certification, reports, communication, management, assets, contests, sustainability, market, perspective, risk, engagement, financial and performance, theory and legitimacy, information, approach, political, organization, media, perception, web, theory and reputation, image, identity, signaling, legitimization, brand, conformity, journalists, ranking, communication, and corporate, regulatory, representations, cognitive, future, institution, leader, resource*).

**Table 1. List of keywords (resulted through Leximancer content analysis method)**

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Relevance (100%)</b>		<b>Concept</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Relevance (100%)</b>
legitimacy	62	100		risk	7	11
reputation	55	89		approach	6	10
social	23	37		assets	6	10
theory	20	32		engagement	6	10
corporate	19	31		perception	6	10
companies	16	26		sustainability	6	10
firms	14	23		web	6	10
literature	14	23		conformity	5	8
management	14	23		identity	5	8
csr	12	19		political	5	8

process	12	19		legitimacy theory	5	8
public	12	19		financial and performance	4	6
financial	11	18		image	4	6
relationship	11	18		media	4	6
stakeholders	11	18		regulatory	4	6
business	10	16		future	3	5
certification	10	16		leader	3	5
communication	10	16		legitimization	3	5
reports	10	16		ranking	3	5
value	10	16		representations	3	5
accreditation	9	15		resource	3	5
contests	9	15		signaling	3	5
information	9	15		reputation theory	3	5
market	9	15		brand	2	3
performance	9	15		cognitive	2	3
status	9	15		communication and corporate	2	3
organization	8	13		institution	2	3
perspective	7	11		journalists	2	3

## Coding

After conducting the critical discourse analysis using Leximancer, the keywords were categorized into four groups: *concepts*, *themes*, *methods*, and *theories* and the list was contracted by two criteria: (i) keywords having the same understanding or being redundant (i.e. "journalist" - "evaluators", "reports" - "rhetorical strategies", "public" - "stakeholders", "financial performance" - "reputation", "institution" - "organization") have been eliminated; (ii) the keywords having fell under the same code were integrated in one of the four categories. The list of keywords resulting from Leximancer was transformed into a codes registry with 44 entries, split in four categories.

The abstracts of the 57 selected articles, including the titles and the authors, were imported into Atlas.ti (the website version of the platform). The corpus has been analyzed through open coding, applying 44 codes organized in 4 categories (*concepts, themes, methods, and theories*), as mentioned above (see the complete list in *Table 2*).

To avoid redundancies, each abstract was used for one code only (see the complete list in *Table 3*). During the labeling process, 425 text units (words, phrases, or sentences) have been marked as containing one of the 44 codes. Open coding consists of "operations by which data are broken down, conceptualized, and put back together in new ways. It is the central process by which theories are built from data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, apud Smit, 2002, p. 69).

**Table 2. Codes organized by themes, concepts, theories, methods (selection used in Atlas.ti)**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Concepts</b>	<b>Theories</b>	<b>Methods</b>
Leadership	Organizational identity	Signalling theory	Quantitative methods
CSR Communication	Intangible assets	Legitimacy theory	Qualitative methods
Cognitive approach	Rhetorical strategies	Stakeholders theory	Mixed methods
Socio-political approach	Institutional strengthening	Consumer inference theory	
Process	Organizational legitimacy	Institutional theory	
Result	Self-legitimization	Resource based theory (RBV)	
Evaluators	Reputation	Power theory	
Crisis communication	Dialogic communication	Reputation theory	
Public institutions	Third-party legitimation	Contingency theory	
Charities	Interpretivism	Social representations theory	
Private companies	Organizational learning		
Social enterprises	Organizational stigma		
Entrepreneurs	Personal branding		
Social media	Delegitimation		
Gender diversity			
Marketing communications			
Corporate Social Irresponsibility			

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 General**

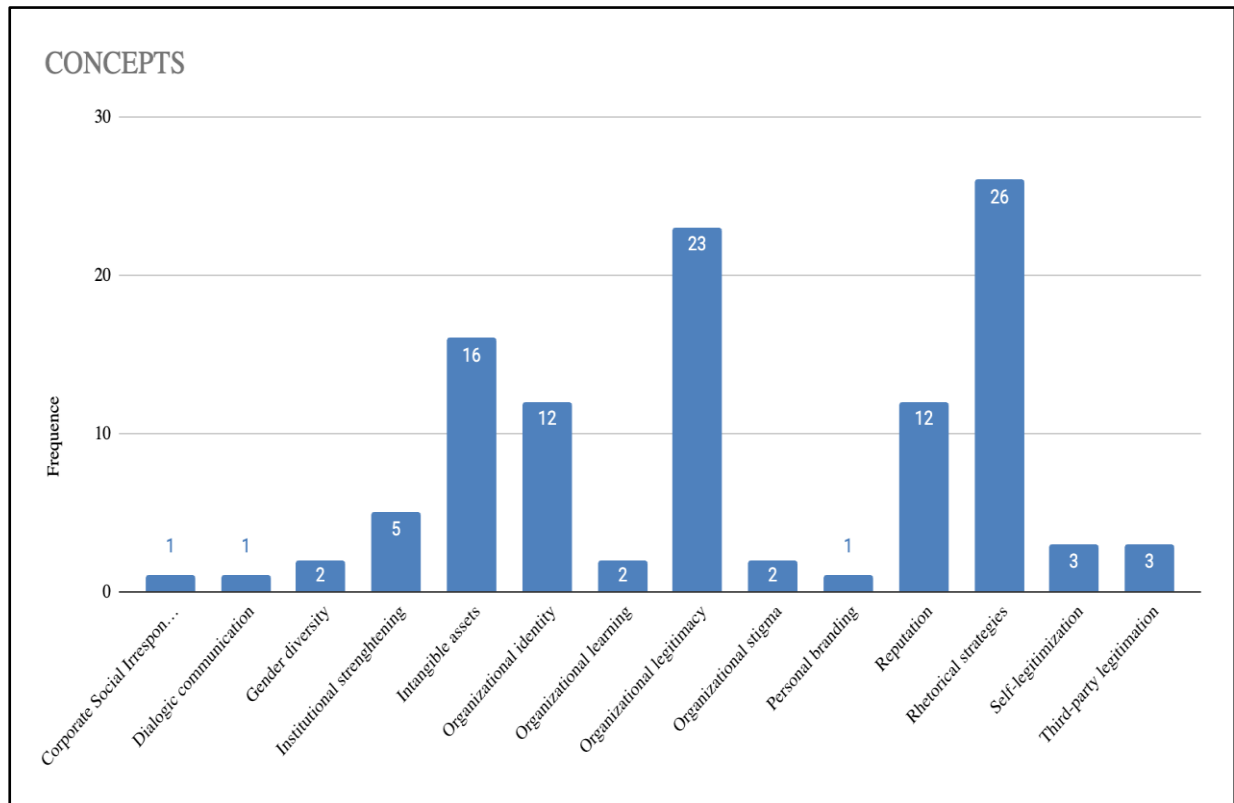
The coding process showed that 109 sequences (quotes) contained *concepts*, 50 were references for research *methods*, 180 were for *themes*, and 86 were for *theories*. Several conclusions were drawn based on the results obtained from the discourse analysis in Atlas.ti. "Qualitative research" (method) was the preferred method among the researchers, and "rhetorical strategies" grabbed more attention than other ways of obtaining legitimacy and reputation. The "sociopolitical approach" (theme) was prevalent in the analyzed corpus, and "private companies" (theme) were more often the object of research than "public institutions" (theme) or "charities" (theme).

#### **3.2. Concepts**

Rhetorical strategies" (26 mentions) and "organizational legitimacy" (23 mentions) emerged from the literature review as a cornerstone in this stream of research, and more precisely, the legitimization processes through which organizations build or protect their reputation.

This finding is supported by the number of abstracts mentioning "rhetorical strategies" as the fourth most used code among 44 codes. Discourse analysis, content analysis, or multimodal analysis (words and images) appeared in 26 contexts in the analyzed corpus (Wæraas & Sataøen, 2014; Snihur, 2016; Lefsrud et al., 2020). Rhetorical strategies were explored on social media (Twitter and Instagram) from a dialogic communication perspective (Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017; Prabowo & Rusfian, 2019) through sustainability, annual reports or triple bottom line (TBL) reporting or voluntary risk reporting (Oliveira et al., 2011; Sridhar, 2012; Rudkin & al., 2019; Busuioc & Rimkutè, 2020; Pasko & al., 2021) or storytelling (Schadenberg & Folmer, 2022).

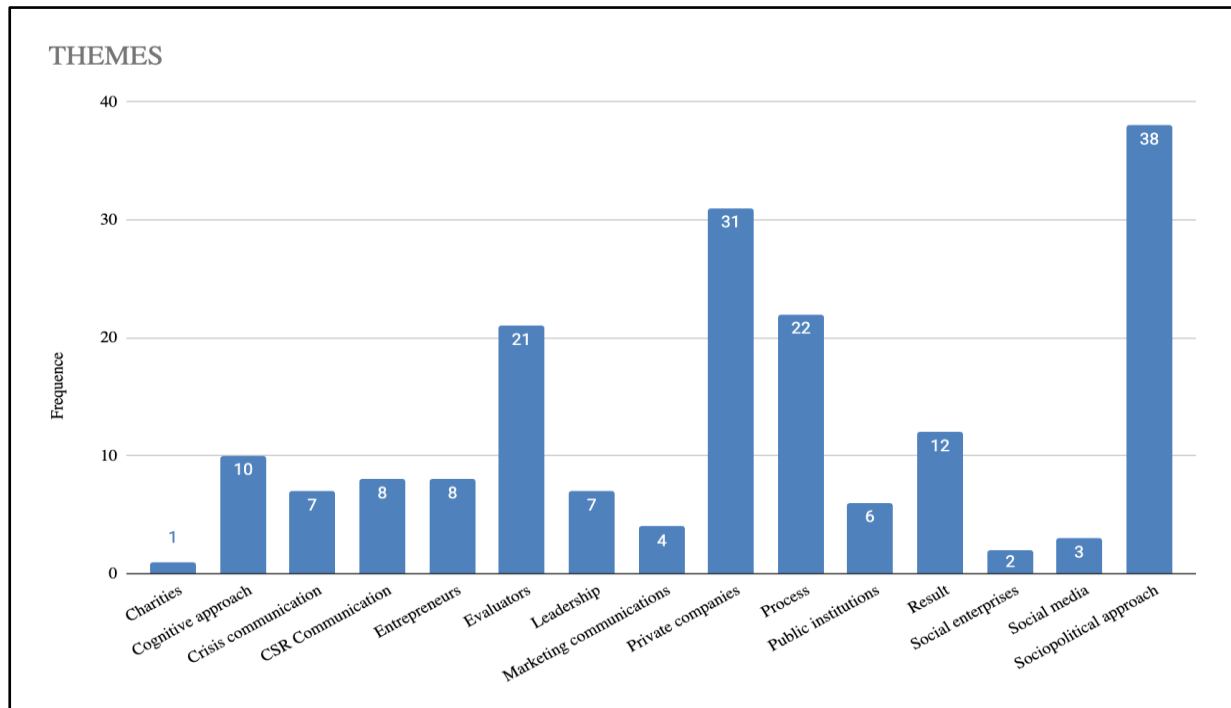
"Personal branding" (Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017), "dialogic communication" (Prabowo & Rusfian, 2019) and "corporate social irresponsibility" (Khan & Kamal, 2021) marked the lowest number of mentions, only one per each code. Future research regarding the mechanisms connecting the organizational legitimacy and corporate reputation within these three areas can be conducted.



*Fig. 3. Concepts repartition - using Atlas.ti coding platform*

### **3.3. Themes**

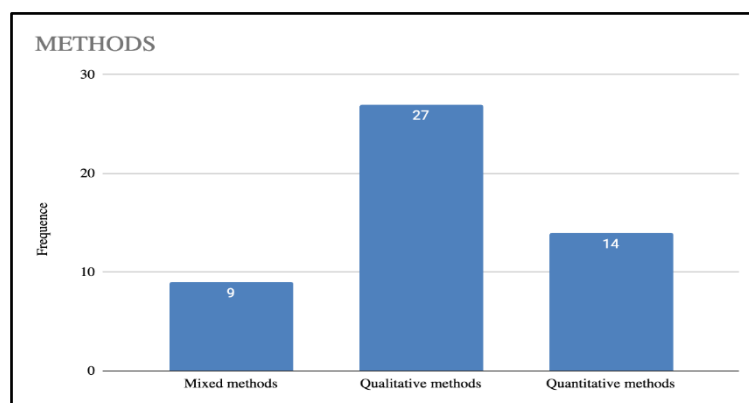
The "sociopolitical approach" (38) was the code with the highest number of entries among the themes as well as among the total list of codes. This finding underlines that researchers were more interested. Also, previous literature insisted on understanding how private companies approach legitimacy and reputation and the relationship between the two concepts, while other types of organizations (governmental, nonprofit organizations, charities or social enterprises) were less interesting from this perspective. Studies have been conducted in multinational companies, listed companies, banks, corporations, and firms (de Anca & Gabaldon, 2014; Zorn et al., 2014; Pollach, 2015). The evaluation process of legitimacy and reputation were the lens through which researchers aimed to explain the interplay between the two concepts. By contrast, the low number of studies applied to social media (3) validates the limited interest towards the concept of "dialogic communication" concept.



*Fig. 4. Themes repartition - using Atlas.ti coding platform*

### **3.4. Methods**

It was found that the second most commonly used research method was "qualitative methods" (27 mentions). Qualitative research techniques like interviews (Darraz & Bernasconi, 2014; Zorn et al., 2014; Paget et al., 2016; Schadenberg & Folmer, 2022), case studies (Busuioc & Rimkutė, 2020), literature reviews, and meta-reviews are essential for studying concepts like legitimacy and reputation. Other methods included document analysis, discourse analysis, and content analysis of sustainability reports and multimodal messages (Sridhar, 2012; Sorenson, 2014; Lefsrud et al., 2020; Malay & Fairholm, 2020; Pasko & al., 2021; Schadenberg & Fomer, 2022; Turner, 2022).



*Fig. 5. Methods repartition - using Atlas.ti coding platform*



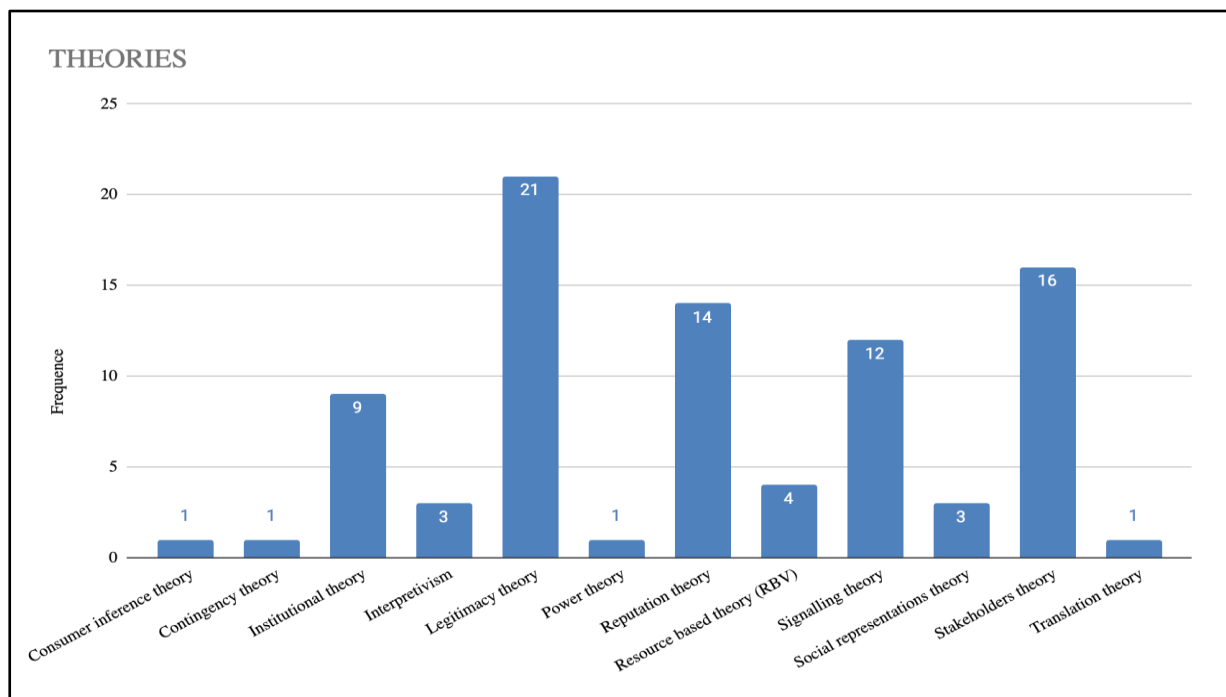
On the other hand, the quantitative methods applied by the researchers to the selected corpus included the use of statistical software such as PLS through SmartPLS (Khan & Kamal, 2021), factorial analysis using AMOS statistical software (Silva et al., 2022).

Mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) were employed in the studies regarding the organizational legitimacy and crisis communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020), the theory of the organizational stigma (Devers et al., 2009), the relationship between different intangible assets - reputation, legitimacy and image (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2020).

### **3.5. Theories**

Among the 11 theories mapped, the "legitimacy theory" appeared as the most prominent, followed by the "stakeholders theory" and "reputation theory." It was noted that theories like "contingency theory", "power theory", "translation theory", or "consumer inference theory" were also identified, although to a lower extent than the previous ones.

Another finding of the study is that, across the literature review, the legitimacy theory appears more often (21 codes) than the reputation theory (14 codes).



*Fig. 6. Theories repartition - using Atlas.ti coding platform*

From a theoretical perspective, previous research showed that legitimacy theory was the first to be mentioned or referred to (Oliveira et al., 2011; Woods, 2016; Desai, 2018;

Goldfarb et al., 2018; Rudkin et al., 2019; Panibratov, 2020), followed by stakeholders theory (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2020; Lefsrud et al., 2020; Pasko et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2022) and reputation theory (Bartlett et al., 2013). Consumer inference theory (Maier et al., 2021), power theory (Malay & Fairholm, 2020), contingency theory (Wang, 2010) or the translation theory (Wæraas & Sataøen, 2014) complete the theoretical landscape.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Although new directions of studying the relationship between organizational reputation and legitimacy surged - new theoretical endeavors for more robust integration of the two concepts, legitimacy and reputation, for instance, or new communication platforms and channels scrutinized, such as LinkedIn, a professional social media -, this research has its limits.

One limitation of our methodology is that we used a combination of manual and automated processes to select, refine, and analyze our corpus from a content perspective. While the filters in both Web of Science and SCOPUS databases allowed us to choose studies that included both corporate reputation and organizational legitimacy, we still needed to manually highlight the relationship or proximity between the two concepts. This means that our final corpus selection may have been influenced by human error or that the researcher may have missed some relevant sources.

Also, from a methodological perspective, the study differs from the most recent literature reviews in the domain as it employs two Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), Leximancer and Atlas.ti, focusing on content analysis. Previous studies (Veh et al., 2019; Leila et al., 2020; Du et al., 2022; Mohd Sofian et al., 2023) showed a preference for VOS Viewer. The main criteria did not consider chronological variables such as the year of publication or streams of knowledge like authors or scientific publications covering the theme. This approach sets this study apart from its reference, making it more relevant from a conceptual evolution perspective rather than a scientific stream development perspective.

A second discussion comes from the limited previous literature review research diving into the same theme, which guided me to the only reference that might be considered relevant, the bibliometric study conducted by Du et al. (2022). Recently, other studies dedicated to literature reviewing focused either on the legitimacy alone - measurement challenges (Díez-Martín, F. et al., 2021) or on corporate reputation - concept assessment (Veh et al., 2019), interplays between corporate reputation and media (Leila et al., 2020), corporate reputation conceptual evolution in the last five decades (Mohd Sofian et al., 2023), CSR communication and corporate

reputation (Usman, 2020). This study showcases the increasing interest of researchers in the organizational legitimacy and corporate reputation constituted through communication and underlines the contribution of the rhetorical strategies to explaining the interplays between the two concepts.

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