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**INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY RANKINGS AS A DIGITAL BRAND
MANAGEMENT INSTRUMENT:
A SYSTEMIC REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY APPROACHES**

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**МІЖНАРОДНІ РЕЙТИНГИ УНІВЕРСИТЕТІВ ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ
ЦИФРОВОГО БРЕНД-МЕНЕДЖМЕНТУ:
СИСТЕМНИЙ АНАЛІЗ НАУКОВИХ ПІДХОДІВ**

The article offers a systemic and critical analysis of international university rankings as multidimensional instruments of digital brand management within the contemporary higher education landscape shaped by globalization and platform-

based communication environments. The reviewed literature indicates that university rankings increasingly go beyond their conventional role as external measures of academic performance and function as symbolic brand-related reference points that mediate perceptions of institutional credibility, prestige, and competitive positioning in digital contexts.

Based on a structured synthesis of recent scholarly research, the article distinguishes three interrelated analytical dimensions of how rankings operate in higher education branding: their use within digital communication channels, including institutional websites, social media, and online platforms; their influence on external brand perceptions among different stakeholder groups; and their integration into internal strategic governance and brand positioning processes within universities. Across the reviewed studies, rankings are discussed as relatively autonomous instruments of external confirmation of institutional credibility that tend to reinforce cognitive components of university brands, such as perceived quality, reliability, and global relevance, while interacting with, rather than replacing, other reputational indicators.

Particular attention is devoted to the digital mediation of rankings, which is widely acknowledged in the literature but examined in a fragmented manner. Most existing studies focus on website-based representations and social media communication, while leaving underexplored the roles of search engine optimization strategies, paid digital advertising, recruitment platforms, and applicant engagement funnels in the circulation of ranking-related messages. The article also addresses the internal organizational dimension, showing that rankings are progressively institutionalized as strategic benchmarks, performance indicators, and elements of institutional identity that influence managerial decision-making and resource allocation.

The analysis highlights a persistent research gap between macro-level discussions of ranking effects and micro-level examinations of how rankings are operationalized within digital brand management systems. Addressing this gap requires more integrated and interdisciplinary research approaches capable of

capturing how ranking information is translated into coordinated digital communication practices, internal governance mechanisms, and long-term brand strategies of higher education institutions.

У статті здійснено системний і критичний аналіз міжнародних рейтингів університетів як багатовимірних інструментів цифрового бренд-менеджменту в умовах глобалізації та платформифікації простору вищої освіти. Узагальнення наукової літератури свідчить, що сучасні університетські рейтинги дедалі частіше виходять за межі функції зовнішнього вимірювання академічної результативності та виконують роль символічних бренд-орієнтирів, які опосередковують сприйняття інституційної достовірності, престижу й конкурентної позиції університетів у цифровому середовищі.

На основі структурованого синтезу сучасних наукових досліджень виокремлено три взаємопов'язані аналітичні виміри функціонування рейтингів: використання у цифрових комунікаційних каналах (інституційні веб-сайти, соціальні медіа, цифрові платформи); вплив на зовнішнє бренд-сприйняття різних груп стейкхолдерів; інтеграцію рейтингів у внутрішні процеси стратегічного управління та бренд-позиціонування університетів. Показано, що в дослідженнях рейтинги розглядаються як відносно автономні інструменти зовнішнього підтвердження інституційної достовірності, здатні підсилювати когнітивні компоненти бренду, зокрема сприйняття якості, надійності та глобальної значущості, у взаємодії з іншими репутаційними індикаторами, а не шляхом їх повного заміщення.

Особливу увагу приділено цифровій медіації рейтингів, яка емпірично визнається у літературі, але досліджується фрагментарно. Переважна частина наукових робіт зосереджується на аналізі веб-сайтів і соціальних мереж, залишаючи поза увагою SEO-стратегії, платні цифрові кампанії, рекрутингові платформи та воронки залучення абітурієнтів у поширенні рейтингових повідомлень. Окремо розглянуто внутрішньоорганізаційний

вимір, у межах якого рейтинги інституціоналізуються як стратегічні орієнтири, показники ефективності та елементи інституційної ідентичності, що впливають на управлінські рішення та розподіл ресурсів.

Зроблено висновок про наявність стійкого дослідницького розриву між макрорівневим аналізом ефектів рейтингів і мікрорівневим вивченням їх реальної операціоналізації у цифрових системах бренд-менеджменту університетів. Подолання цього розриву потребує комплексних міждисциплінарних підходів, здатних пояснити, як рейтингові дані трансформуються у скоординовані цифрові комунікаційні практики, механізми внутрішнього управління та довгострокові бренд-стратегії закладів вищої освіти.

Keywords: *international university rankings, university branding, digital brand management, digital communication channels, higher education marketing, institutional reputation, strategic positioning.*

Ключові слова: міжнародні рейтинги університетів, бренд університету, цифровий бренд-менеджмент, цифрові комунікаційні канали, маркетинг у вищій освіті, інституційна репутація, стратегічне позиціонування.

Main body of the article

1. Field configuration: what is known, what remains opaque

In the accumulated scholarship, international university rankings appear tightly interwoven with university brand positioning and progressively mediated through digital communication channels. Still, only a narrow subset of studies analyses (a) how rankings are operationalised inside website and social media interfaces (Abadi, 2017; Kethüda, 2021; Rocha & Figueira, 2025), (b) how ranking signals shape brand-relevant perceptions among external audiences (Izharuddin & Lestiyorini, 2023; Kethüda, 2022; Ramadhan & Sarwono, 2024), and (c) how rankings are translated into internal strategic and branding choices (Dowsett, 2020; Kethüda, 2021; Soysal &

Cebolla-Boado, 2022; Vidal & Ferreira, 2020).

The strengths of the literature are identifiable in three clusters. First, empirical studies have examined the visibility and use of rankings on institutional websites and their role in marketing and positioning (Abadi, 2017; Kethüda, 2021). Second, experimental evidence has tested the effect of ranking information on perceived brand credibility and differentiation (Kethüda, 2022). Third, longitudinal and interpretive contributions indicate that rankings enter strategic plans, mission statements, and KPI systems, becoming part of managerial and legitimising narratives that stabilise institutional self-descriptions (Dowsett, 2020; Soysal & Cebolla-Boado, 2022; Vidal & Ferreira, 2020). More recently, large-scale computational attempts have linked social media strategies to institutional ranking levels, including machine-learning approaches (Rocha & Figueira, 2025).

At the same time, the gaps are conspicuous. Detailed interface studies that systematically map ranking embedding across the entire digital ecosystem remain rare: from homepages and programme pages to admissions funnels, SEO content, paid advertising, and third-party platforms (aggregators, agency sites, recruitment portals). Empirical work that directly connects concrete forms of digital ranking communication to measurable changes in stakeholder brand perceptions within realistic online environments is limited, beyond laboratory-style experimental settings (Kethüda, 2022). Finally, organisational-process descriptions of how ranking-monitoring units coordinate with marketing and communications functions within integrated brand governance systems are largely absent.

The resulting picture is partial yet analytically productive: rankings already operate as (i) digital brand content circulating through online interfaces, (ii) perceptual cues shaping stakeholder judgments of credibility and prestige, and (iii) strategic reference points embedded in internal governance and positioning routines. To keep these strands conceptually separable while still showing their interdependence, Table 1 organises the reviewed studies across three aligned dimensions of analysis: (1) Digital communication (websites, social media, platform interfaces), (2) External brand perception (credibility, prestige, differentiation,

visibility proxies), (3) Internal brand management (strategy, KPIs, governance routines, positioning choices) (Table 1).

Table 1. Organising the Literature on International University Rankings Across Three Dimensions of Analysis

Reference	Main Focus	Explicit International Rankings (QS/THE/ARWU, etc.)	First Dimension - Digital Communication / Online Branding	Second Dimension - External Brand Perception / Brand-related Outcomes	Third Dimension - Internal Brand Positioning/ Management Decisions
Abadi (2017)	Use of rankings on Catalan universities' websites as marketing tools	multiple international rankings mentioned	Content and technical/marketing analysis of institutional websites, staff interviews	Aims at "burnishing image" and competing globally; no direct audience perception data reported in abstract	Some insight via interviews on strategic use; internal branding logic implied
Kethüda (2022)	Effect of rankings on brand credibility and perceived differentiation	"ranking reports" as signals	Not digital-channel specific; ranking information as an abstract signal	Experimental evidence that higher ranking increases brand credibility and perceived differentiation	No internal governance/positioning analysis
Kethüda (2021)	Congruence between positioning strategies and rankings in UK HEIs	uses league tables as reference for congruence	Uses website content (positioning claims) as data, but not about digital tactics per se	Positions as they should appear "in the minds" of students; no perception data	Shows how institutions align positioning bases (top-of-range, research, etc.) with ranking status
Ramadhan & Sarwono (2024)	Role of international rankings in institutional PR strategies (Indonesia, private HEI)	QS and THE explicitly	Mentions digital platforms (websites, social media) as key reputation channels	Addresses how rankings shape perceived quality and prestige among first-year students, but emphasizes multi-factor decision-making	Discusses necessity of broader strategic communication beyond rankings; internal PR strategy orientation
Izharuddin et al. (2023)	QS rankings and HEI image in Southeast Asia via media & awards indicators	QS WUR	Digital only indirectly (media metrics could include online media, but digital channels are not analytically unpacked)	Rankings affect brand image signals (media attention, awards) at multiple geographic scales	Internal strategic narratives/governance discussed conceptually, but not systematically measured
Dowsett (2020)	Rankings integrated into Australian universities' strategic plans	global league tables including ARWU	No explicit digital focus	External audience perceptions not measured	Rankings embedded in strategy, KPIs, and market positioning; rankings drive shifts in research strategy and market position

Continuation of table 1.

Reference	Main Focus	Explicit International Rankings (QS/THE/AR WU, etc.)	First Dimension - Digital Communication / Online Branding	Second Dimension - External Brand Perception / Brand-related Outcomes	Third Dimension - Internal Brand Positioning/ Management Decisions
Soysal et al. (2022)	Rankings vs long-term reputation in international student sorting (UK)	multiple global rankings	No explicit digital branding analysis	Rankings as cognitive shortcuts for international students; but long-term reputation dominates choices	Discusses rankings as incorporated into mission and KPI cycles; rankings as institutional purpose/identity
Rocha & Figueira (2025)	Link between HEI rankings and social media posting strategies	consolidated ranking system	Large-scale analysis of social media content types vs ranking level	External perception not directly measured, but engagement as a proxy; examines prestige–engagement interaction	Internal brand strategy only inferred (how higher-ranked HEIs choose content), not formally studied
Vidal & Ferreira (2020)	Broad impact of rankings on universities, systems, and policy	QS, THE, ARWU	No specific digital communication analysis	External stakeholders' ranking use (students, governments) discussed conceptually, not empirically measured as brand perception	Rankings as drivers of strategic actions, goal-setting, resource allocation
Shcherbak (2020)	Positioning of leading UK universities in the international information space	relies on prestige indicators, reputation indexes	Includes websites and social networks among information sources, but treatment is general and not ranking-specific	External perceptions implied via “prestige” among consumers of educational services; no direct measurement	Describes positioning methods (stories, presentations, information methods) that are consistent with brand management

Source: Compiled by author on the based on Abadi (2017), Dowsett (2020), Izharuddin et al. (2023), Kethüda (2021, 2022), Ramadhan and Sarwono (2024), Rocha and Figueira (2025), Shcherbak (2020), Soysal et al. (2022), and Vidal and Ferreira (2020).

2. Rankings in digital communication and brand narratives

Abadi (2017) offers one of the clearest examinations of how ranking positions are integrated into official university websites as elements of marketing strategy. Using four metropolitan universities in Catalonia as a case setting, the study combines a web audit (technical parameters, marketing indicators, ranking use) with interviews of communication staff, showing that ranking information is placed and framed intentionally to reinforce image and competitiveness within a global higher education arena (Abadi, 2017). Under this lens, website architecture - navigation

structure, content blocks, and visual markers - functions as a translation mechanism through which ranking status becomes a digitally legible brand signal. Kethüda (2021) provides a complementary website-oriented approach by conducting a content analysis of UK university webpages, deriving an empirically grounded typology of positioning bases (e.g., top-of-the-range claims, research quality, internationalisation, teaching excellence, graduate careers, campus experience, location, value-for-money). These positioning bases are then related to ranking profiles. Visual quantification of ranking displays is not the focal point, yet the website is treated as the main interface where a positioning “story” is articulated, and its congruence with ranking status is evaluated (Kethüda, 2021). An implication follows: rankings indirectly structure which value propositions are foregrounded in online communication, shaping the selection and salience of brand claims.

Rocha and Figueira (2025) move from relatively static websites to the dynamic environment of social media. Analysing posts from 18 universities included in a consolidated international ranking, they classify content into five topics - engagement, research, image, society, and education - and apply LSTM architecture and Random Forest modelling to capture posting patterns and their association with ranking level (Rocha & Figueira, 2025). The results indicate a differentiated relationship between social media practices and institutional prestige: higher-ranked institutions display distinctive combinations of topics and posting strategies relative to lower-ranked universities. Even without explicitly coding “ranking celebration” posts, the study supports the proposition that digital curation of prestige varies systematically with ranking position, suggesting that social media is not a neutral channel but a stratified arena of reputational signalling.

Ramadhan and Sarwono (2024), drawing on a private Indonesian university case, show that QS and THE rankings are perceived by students and administrators as quality and prestige signals, while an effective PR strategy requires integrating ranking-based claims with narratives of educational excellence and social mission. Digital platforms (official websites and social media) serve as core channels through which these ranking and non-ranking arguments are woven into a coherent brand

storyline (Ramadhan & Sarwono, 2024). Rankings, in this view, become one “content pillar” inside broader digital storytelling rather than a standalone message.

Shcherbak (2020) examines positioning strategies of leading UK universities in an “international information space” using media, website, and social media materials. The study describes a repertoire of positioning methods (stories, presentations, consultations, conferences) and treats digital channels as key carriers of these strategies, even though a direct analytical linkage between ranking metrics and specific digital representation formats is not developed (Shcherbak, 2020). The contribution is thus contextual: it situates rankings among a broader set of prestige-building practices distributed across digital and media environments.

Taken together, institutional websites remain the most thoroughly researched digital touchpoint for ranking-based positioning (Abadi, 2017; Kethüda, 2021). Social media emerges as a second arena where strategy differences by ranking level can be detected and modelled (Rocha & Figueira, 2025). Yet key elements remain under-analysed: (a) systematic cartographies of where ranking mentions appear (homepages, admissions sections, programme pages, application forms), (b) micro-framing practices (e.g., “top 1%,” “moved up 20 places”) and their placement relative to calls-to-action, and (c) ranking use within paid digital campaigns, SEO strategies, and third-party recruitment platforms. For conceptualising ranking integration into digital communication strategies, Abadi (2017), Kethüda (2021), and Rocha and Figueira (2025) provide the strongest empirical anchors, while Ramadhan and Sarwono (2024) and Shcherbak (2020) broaden the PR and digital practice context.

3. Rankings and External Brand Perceptions

International university rankings play a substantive role in shaping how higher education institutions are perceived by external audiences, particularly in contexts characterised by information asymmetry, global competition, and digitally mediated choice processes. Across the reviewed literature, rankings consistently emerge as cognitive devices that structure judgments of quality, credibility, and prestige, although their effects are neither uniform nor exhaustive. This section synthesises empirical and conceptual contributions that illuminate the mechanisms through which

rankings influence external brand perceptions, highlighting both their strengths and their limits.

The most direct causal evidence of ranking effects on brand perception is provided by Kethüda (2022), who applies signalling theory to test how ranking information alters perceived credibility and differentiation of university brands. In a controlled experimental design involving 328 participants in the United Kingdom, respondents evaluated two familiar universities under varying conditions of ranking-report presentation. The findings demonstrate that higher ranking positions significantly increase both the perceived credibility of institutional brand claims and the perceived differentiation between competing universities, particularly when ranking signals are explicitly linked to indicators of academic achievement (Kethüda, 2022).

The analytical value of this study lies in isolating rankings as independent signals. Even in the absence of detailed contextual information or specific digital channels, ranking information alone proved sufficient to shift cognitive components of brand perception. Rankings thus operate as third-party verification devices that reduce uncertainty and lend epistemic authority to institutional claims. This reinforces the interpretation of rankings as trust-producing mechanisms rather than merely comparative scoreboards.

While experimental evidence clarifies causal direction, qualitative research underscores the conditional nature of ranking effects in real decision-making contexts. Ramadhan and Sarwono (2024), drawing on interviews and focus groups with 37 first-year students at a private Indonesian university, show that rankings influence perceptions of institutional quality and prestige but are rarely decisive on their own. Instead, students evaluate rankings alongside parental expectations, perceived networking opportunities, infrastructure quality, and service support.

Crucially, digital environments - particularly institutional websites and social media - function as verification spaces where initial ranking-based impressions are elaborated, contested, or refined (Ramadhan & Sarwono, 2024). Rankings provide an initial legitimacy threshold and a heuristic shortcut under conditions of limited

information, whereas broader digital content contributes to affective dimensions of perception, including emotional resonance and perceived institutional “fit.” This suggests that rankings primarily structure the entry point of evaluation, while subsequent brand meaning is co-constructed through richer digital narratives.

Beyond individual perception, rankings also operate at the level of mediated visibility. Izharuddin and Lestyorini (2023) analyse panel data for 47 Southeast Asian universities over a ten-year period, using QS World University Rankings to explain changes in proxy indicators of brand image, including media coverage volume and geographic reach (international, regional, national, local), as well as institutional awards. Their results reveal statistically significant associations between higher QS ranking positions and increased media visibility, alongside links to international student recruitment and other indicators of symbolic prominence.

These findings support an interpretation of rankings as symbolic legitimization devices. Rankings do not simply reflect existing reputation; they actively shape how universities are represented and recognised within media ecosystems. In this sense, rankings contribute to a feedback loop in which quantified prestige translates into discursive visibility, reinforcing perceived institutional standing across multiple public arenas (Izharuddin & Lestyorini, 2023).

At the same time, rankings operate within structurally constrained reputational fields. Soysal and Cebolla-Boado (2022), examining the sorting of international students across UK universities, demonstrate that long-term institutional reputation exerts a stronger influence on student distribution than short-term fluctuations in ranking positions. Rankings are nevertheless used as comparative heuristics, particularly when students lack detailed prior knowledge of institutions.

The implication is that rankings tend to consolidate existing hierarchies rather than fundamentally reconfigure them on an annual basis. Incremental changes in ranking position function more as tie-breakers within established reputational categories than as drivers of radical reassessment (Soysal & Cebolla-Boado, 2022). This finding tempers deterministic interpretations of ranking power and underscores the inertia embedded in higher education brand structures.

Conceptual analyses further illuminate how ranking signals extend beyond their immediate metrics. Vidal and Ferreira (2020) argue that global rankings such as QS, THE, and ARWU shape external representations of “world-class” status among students, governments, and policy actors, generating halo effects in domains not directly measured by ranking methodologies. Perceived research excellence may spill over into assumptions about teaching quality, employability, or institutional governance, even when empirical linkage is weak.

Shcherbak (2020) similarly associates academic reputation indices, employer reputation, brand recognition, and internationalisation indicators with perceived prestige in the international information space. Although rankings are not always analytically isolated in this work, they form part of a broader symbolic repertoire through which institutional status is constructed and communicated. Together, these perspectives highlight that ranking signals reconfigure expectations as much as they convey information.

Taken together, the literature indicates that rankings consistently strengthen cognitive components of external brand perception - credibility, perceived quality, distinctiveness, and global standing - when framed as authoritative external evaluations (Izharuddin & Lestyorini, 2023; Kethüda, 2022; Ramadhan & Sarwono, 2024). At the same time, effects are asymmetric: rankings exert weaker influence on affective attachments, which depend more heavily on narratives, visual storytelling, and lived or imagined experience (Ramadhan & Sarwono, 2024; Soysal & Cebolla-Boado, 2022).

Rankings also operate alongside multiple competing signals, including location, cost, infrastructure, accreditation, and graduate employment outcomes. This undermines any assumption of ranking dominance within stakeholder evaluation hierarchies. A persistent empirical gap remains: channel-specific research capable of measuring how different digital ranking displays - homepage badges, ranking microsites, targeted social media advertisements - interact with other prestige cues to shape perception and behaviour in naturalistic online environments.

4. Rankings in Internal Brand Positioning and Brand Governance

While external perception represents one dimension of ranking influence, a parallel body of literature demonstrates that rankings are deeply embedded within internal governance, strategic planning, and institutional self-description. In this domain, rankings function less as communication devices and more as organising principles that shape how universities define success, allocate resources, and articulate identity.

Dowsett (2020), analysing fifteen years of strategic plans and annual reports from four Australian universities, documents how international rankings, particularly ARWU, become formalised as explicit strategic objectives and performance indicators. Over time, ranking improvement is translated into research prioritisation, funding allocation, and organisational restructuring, aligning market positioning with ranking logic (Dowsett, 2020).

Although branding terminology is largely absent, the functional outcome closely resembles brand positioning: rankings become anchor points for institutional self-presentation and competitive identity. Soysal and Cebolla-Boado (2022) extend this interpretation by conceptualising rankings as comparative technologies internalised through mission statements and KPI cycles, redefining what it means to be “internationally competitive.” Vidal and Ferreira (2020) further show how rankings inform strategic action across student mobility policies, staff-to-student ratios, recruitment of high-profile academics, and executive incentive structures, while cautioning against policy distortion under excessive ranking orientation.

Kethüda (2021) provides the most explicit connection between ranking profiles and positioning decisions. Through a content analysis of UK university websites, institutions are grouped into leaders/challengers, followers, niche actors, and price-oriented providers. The study demonstrates that effective positioning emerges when declared value propositions align with objective ranking status.

Institutions risk credibility gaps when elite research claims are not supported by ranking evidence. In such cases, alternative positioning bases, such as value for money, teaching quality, or campus experience, offer more sustainable branding

strategies (Kethüda, 2021). Rankings thus function as constraints as much as opportunities, delimiting which narratives can be plausibly advanced.

Rankings also shape internal legitimacy narratives. Ramadhan and Sarwono (2024) argue that sustaining legitimacy requires balancing ranking achievements with broader mission-oriented storytelling. Decisions about how much institutional narrative space is devoted to “top-X” motifs versus distinctive educational or social missions constitute a form of internal brand guardianship.

In Southeast Asia, Izharuddin and Lestyorini (2023) interpret rankings as symbolic mechanisms that legitimise managerial practices and strategic narratives, plausibly integrated into internal dashboards linking bibliometric data, media visibility, and brand-image indicators. Shcherbak (2020) similarly documents a repertoire of positioning methods (stories, presentations, conferences, etc.), in which rankings operate as one element within a broader prestige-building toolkit.

Despite strong evidence of strategic integration, the organisational micro-architecture of ranking use remains under-examined. Abadi (2017) shows, through interviews with communication professionals, that decisions about whether and how to display rankings on websites are strategic rather than automatic, implying coordination between ranking monitoring and marketing functions. Rocha and Figueira (2025) similarly suggest that digital content strategies are adapted to prestige positions, given systematic differences in social media practices by ranking level.

Yet across the reviewed literature, key questions remain unanswered. How do ranking offices, institutional research units, and marketing or communication departments coordinate through formal workflows? How are ranking data translated into brand platforms, message frameworks, and digital content calendars? How do internal dashboards combine ranking indicators with web analytics and social media metrics for brand governance? What happens when ranking-oriented identity conflicts with other mission dimensions, such as local engagement or social inclusion?

These unresolved issues define a critical research frontier. They call for organisational and process-oriented studies that treat rankings not merely as

numerical outcomes but as triggers, routines, and negotiated meanings embedded within the everyday governance of university brands.

5. Key conclusions and an agenda for future research

First, the literature supports a dual institutionalisation of rankings as brand signals and managerial devices. Rankings act as credible third-party signals reinforcing perceived credibility and differentiation (Kethüda, 2022), shaping media visibility and symbolic legitimacy (Izharuddin & Lestyorini, 2023), and informing student perceptions under multi-criteria choice logics (Ramadhan & Sarwono, 2024). In parallel, rankings are internalised as strategic targets, KPI elements, and legitimising narratives shaping resource allocation and institutional self-description (Dowsett, 2020; Soysal & Cebolla-Boado, 2022; Vidal & Ferreira, 2020).

Second, digital mediation is recognised as significant, yet only partially charted. Websites remain the best-documented interface for ranking-based positioning (Abadi, 2017; Kethüda, 2021), while social media strategies show detectable associations with ranking levels and can be computationally modelled (Rocha & Figueira, 2025). Still, the wider digital ecosystem (SEO, paid advertising, lead nurturing funnels, and third-party recruitment platforms etc.) receives limited systematic analysis.

Third, evidence on external perception effects is robust at the cognitive level, while causal links to channel-specific digital formats remain thin. Rankings shape perceived quality, credibility, global status, and distinctiveness (Izharuddin & Lestyorini, 2023; Kethüda, 2022; Ramadhan & Sarwono, 2024), yet their effects interact with reputational inertia and other prestige cues (Soysal & Cebolla-Boado, 2022). Channel-specific studies comparing the effects of distinct ranking displays (badges, banners, targeted ads) against other signals (accreditations, testimonials, employability data) remain a clear opportunity space.

Fourth, internal integration is evident, while micro-processes of brand governance remain a black box. Rankings are embedded in strategies, missions, and KPI systems (Dowsett, 2020; Soysal & Cebolla-Boado, 2022; Vidal & Ferreira, 2020), and narrative alignment with ranking profile is presented as a credibility-

preserving approach (Kethüda, 2021). Yet responsibilities for message formation, dashboard configuration, and campaign triggering in response to ranking change are rarely described empirically. Future research can therefore prioritise: (a) interface cartographies of ranking visibility across end-to-end digital ecosystems, (b) field-realistic online experiments linking ranking frames to measurable brand outcomes, and (c) organisational process studies tracking cross-unit coordination between ranking-monitoring functions and brand communication teams.

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