

UDC 658.8

DOI 10.30546/JIECM.2026.01.334

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF CORPORATE AND PRODUCT BRANDS: AN INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR ARCHITECTURE, ALIGNMENT AND PORTFOLIO VALUE CREATION

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Summary. *In contemporary market conditions, brands function not only as identifiers of products but also as strategic assets shaping organizational identity, stakeholder trust, and long-term competitiveness. This conceptual article develops an integrative framework for the joint strategic management of corporate and product brands. Although prior scholarship has produced important insights into customer-based brand equity, corporate branding, internal branding, and portfolio design, these streams have often remained analytically fragmented. In practice, however, firms increasingly create value through the interaction of corporate and product brands within complex architectures and portfolios. Drawing on key theoretical contributions, the article identifies six interrelated dimensions of joint brand management: brand architecture, positioning, innovation and extension, internal alignment, stakeholder co-creation, and reputation governance. The analysis demonstrates that value creation depends on the degree of alignment between the corporate brand platform and product-level execution. When this alignment is strong, firms can generate credibility transfer, stronger legitimacy, and portfolio resilience. When alignment is weak, dilution, inconsistency, and reputational spillovers become more likely. The article contributes by integrating customer-based and stakeholder-oriented branding perspectives into a single conceptual framework and by translating that framework into a governance agenda for managers responsible for multi-brand growth, innovation, and long-term brand legitimacy.*

Keywords: *corporate branding, product branding, brand architecture, internal branding, brand portfolio*

1. Introduction. In modern economic conditions, brands are no longer managed solely as product-level signs used to differentiate offers in competitive markets. They increasingly function as strategic assets that structure meaning across portfolios, stakeholder relations, innovation processes, and reputational systems [1; 2]. Product brands continue to shape customer choice, but corporate brands now carry broader strategic responsibilities related to organizational identity, legitimacy, trustworthiness, and long-term purpose [3, p. 1048; 4, pp. 1331-1334].

This transformation has made the relationship between corporate and product brands more significant than ever. In practice, firms often compete simultaneously through a corporate promise and a set of product-specific promises. Corporate associations affect how products are perceived, while repeated product experiences gradually influence corporate reputation [5]. Yet much of the literature still treats these two levels separately. Product branding has traditionally emphasized awareness, positioning, and customer response, whereas corporate branding has focused on identity, culture, and stakeholder management [2; 3; 4].

The growing need for integration can be explained by several developments. First, hybrid brand architectures and multi-brand portfolios make it increasingly difficult to determine when the corporate brand should dominate, endorse, or remain in the background. Second, digital communication platforms increase both the scale and speed of brand expression, thereby creating new governance challenges. Third, greater scrutiny regarding sustainability, ethics, and authenticity means that product-level actions can strengthen or undermine corporate claims much more rapidly than before [6, pp. 117-121; 7, pp. 19-22].

Against this background, the present article addresses the following research question: which strategic dimensions structure the joint management of corporate and product brands, and under what conditions does their integration create value rather than confusion, dilution, or reputational risk? The purpose of the article is to develop a compact conceptual framework that explains how firms can align corporate and product brands within a unified strategic system.

2. Literature review. 2.1. Brand equity and the foundations of product-brand management. The roots of this topic lie in brand equity research. Aaker conceptualized brands as assets creating value through awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty [1]. Keller further developed this perspective by showing that customer-based brand equity depends on how brand knowledge shapes consumer response to marketing activities [2, pp. 2-4]. These classical contributions established the foundation for product-brand management, particularly in relation to positioning, differentiation, and customer choice.

However, while these frameworks remain essential, they are less explicit in explaining how organizational-level meanings and stakeholder perceptions interact with product-brand performance. As firms increasingly operate through brand portfolios rather than isolated offers, customer-based brand equity alone is not sufficient to explain how value is created across different brand levels.

2.2. Corporate branding, identity, and reputation. Corporate branding scholarship broadens this perspective by emphasizing identity, culture, and reputation. Hatch and Schultz argued that corporate branding must be understood through the interaction among organizational identity, internal culture, and external image [8, pp. 1042-1046]. Balmer similarly highlighted the rise of a corporate marketing logic in which the corporation itself becomes a central object of branding [4, pp. 1335-1338]. Abratt and Kleyn later clarified that corporate identity, corporate branding, and corporate reputation are closely related but analytically distinct constructs [3, pp. 1050-1055].

2.3. Brand orientation, portfolio logic, and integration. Another important line of research concerns brand orientation and portfolio governance. Urde described brand orientation as a strategic mindset through which brands are treated as long-term organizational resources rather than short-term communication tools [6, pp. 117-119]. In portfolio settings, this implies that value is generated not only within individual brands but also through the relationships among them.

Brexendorf and Keller demonstrated that corporate brands can transfer innovativeness and credibility to product brands, but only when brand architecture and perceived fit support such transfer [5]. Sevel, Abratt, and Kleyn similarly showed that organizations operating with both corporate and product brands require deliberate portfolio-level coordination rather than isolated brand decisions [7, pp. 22-24]. The central issue is therefore not whether the corporate brand or the product brand should dominate in the abstract, but how their interaction should be orchestrated under specific strategic conditions.

2.4. Internal branding, stakeholder co-creation, and contemporary pressures. Internal branding research demonstrates that employees are essential to brand enactment. In B2B and service contexts especially, employee behavior is inseparable from the delivery of the brand promise [9, pp. 1251-1254]. Liu, Ko, and Chapleo showed that internal branding affects how employees interpret and perform brand-building roles in daily practice [10, pp. 2-6]. This suggests that alignment between corporate and product brands depends not only on communication but also on organizational behavior.

Recent scholarship also highlights the role of stakeholder co-creation, authenticity, and sustainability. Iglesias et al. argued that corporate brand identity increasingly emerges through interactions with stakeholders rather than through unilateral managerial control [11, pp. 34-39]. Related work on conscientious corporate brands indicates that purpose, authenticity, organizational culture, and social responsibility have become central to how brands are judged [12, pp. 418-424]. These developments suggest that modern brand strategy must be understood as a multi-level system connecting symbolic meaning, organizational conduct, and stakeholder interpretation.

3. Methodological Approach. This study adopts a conceptual and integrative review approach. It does not present new empirical data and does not claim the exhaustiveness of a formal systematic

review. Instead, it selectively synthesizes influential and recent peer-reviewed studies from several related fields: customer-based brand equity, corporate branding, internal branding, brand architecture and portfolio management, and sustainability-oriented brand governance.

This approach is appropriate because the strategic management of corporate and product brands is a multi-level problem. It cannot be adequately explained through one single theory, one unit of analysis, or one performance metric. The aim of the article is therefore to integrate these research streams into a coherent analytical framework that explains how corporate brand platforms, governance systems, and product-brand actions interact to shape portfolio outcomes.

4. Conceptual Framework and Discussion. 4.1. Corporate and product brands as interdependent strategic assets. Corporate and product brands should be understood as distinct but interdependent strategic assets. The corporate brand operates at the level of the organization and communicates who the firm is, what it stands for, and why it deserves trust from multiple stakeholders [8, pp. 1046-1048; 3, p. 1052]. By contrast, the product brand operates at the level of the market offer and is more directly tied to category benefits, target segments, and usage situations [1; 2].

The distinction is important, but so is the relationship between the two. Firms frequently rely on the corporate brand to confer legitimacy, reassurance, and innovativeness to product brands, particularly in contexts characterized by uncertainty or complexity [5, p. 1537]. At the same time, product brands generate the concrete experiences through which broader corporate promises become credible. This reciprocal relationship means that brand management should be approached as a coordinated system rather than as two independent tasks.

Table 1. Strategic distinctions between corporate and product brands

Dimension	Corporate brand	Product brand	Strategic opportunity	Main risk
Strategic scope	Organization-wide meaning system	Offer- and category-specific meaning system	Multi-level coherence across the portfolio	Symbolic overreach or fragmentation
Primary stakeholders	Customers, employees, investors, partners, regulators	Customers, channel partners, category influencers	Legitimacy combined with market conversion	Misaligned stakeholder priorities
Time horizon	Long-term identity and reputation	Medium-term positioning and market response	Stability with adaptability	Rigidity or short-termism
Dominant equity source	Trust, legitimacy, culture, corporate associations	Awareness, relevance, differentiation, experience	Cross-brand transfer of credibility	Dilution from weak fit
Governance locus	Top management, strategy, corporate communications	Marketing teams, category managers, sales	Clear decision rights	Internal conflict and slow execution
Failure transmission	Portfolio-wide spillover more likely	More localized but may accumulate upward	Faster learning and recovery	Contagion across brands

Source: Compiled by the author based on [1], [3], [4], [5], [7], [8].

4.2. Brand architecture and portfolio governance. Brand architecture is the formal structure through which a firm organizes visibility, endorsement, and hierarchy among brands. Whether the company adopts a branded house, a house of brands, endorsed branding, or a hybrid model, the architecture determines how strongly corporate meaning is transferred to product brands [5, pp. 1535-1541]. For this reason, architecture should be treated as a strategic governance issue rather than as a purely symbolic naming decision.

A clear architecture can reduce customer uncertainty, support communication efficiency, and guide resource allocation across the portfolio. However, architecture is also the main channel through which risk travels. If the corporate brand is highly salient, product-level problems may contaminate the entire portfolio. If product brands are kept too distant, firms may lose the beneficial spillovers of trust and innovativeness that the corporate brand could otherwise provide [7, pp. 22-24]. The key strategic question is therefore what must remain shared across the portfolio and what may remain flexible at the product level.

4.3. Positioning, extension, and innovation. The division of labor between corporate and product brands becomes especially visible in positioning and extension strategy. In many cases, the corporate brand is better suited to communicate enduring values, competence, and long-term direction, whereas product brands are more effective in communicating category-specific benefits and points of differentiation [2; 5]. Strong brand systems preserve this distinction while maintaining conceptual coherence.

This issue becomes particularly important when firms pursue category extensions or rebranding. Extending a corporate brand into a new market may reduce perceived risk and accelerate recognition, but it may also overstretch brand associations if fit is weak [13, pp. 147-151]. Rebranding, similarly, may support strategic renewal, yet it can also disrupt the continuity on which product-level equity depends [14, pp. 537-541]. The managerial challenge is therefore to balance change and continuity in ways that preserve both flexibility and credibility.

4.4. Internal branding and employee alignment. The relationship between corporate and product brands is ultimately enacted through employees. This is especially true in service, B2B, and omnichannel settings where the brand is experienced through human interaction rather than only through formal communication [9, p. 1253]. Internal branding is therefore not a secondary communication function, but a core strategic process. Research indicates that employee understanding, attention, and role clarity strongly influence whether brand strategy is translated into coherent practice [10, pp. 4-7]. If employees are uncertain about how the corporate platform relates to product-level expectations, inconsistency appears across the portfolio. Internal branding should thus be treated as a central mechanism linking corporate identity and market execution.

Table 2. Integrative framework for joint management of corporate and product brands

Layer	Core elements	Strategic function	Key governance question
Corporate brand platform	Purpose, identity, values, reputation cues	Defines the strategic core	What must remain constant across the portfolio?
Governance mechanisms	Architecture rules, endorsement logic, internal branding, coordination routines	Translates strategy into decisions	Who can adapt what, when, and on what basis?
Product brand actions	Positioning, extension, communication, customer experience	Adapts the core to category realities	How should the promise be expressed in this market and offer?
Portfolio outcomes	Product equity, trust, legitimacy, resilience	Captures direct and spillover value	Which effects remain local and which travel across brands?
Feedback and recalibration	Market reactions, stakeholder responses, employee insights	Updates both brand levels	How should learning reshape the system?

Source: Compiled by the author based on [5], [7], [10], [11], [12], [13].

The framework suggests several core propositions. First, clearly governed brand architecture increases positive transfer of trust and innovativeness while reducing dilution risks [5, pp. 1538-1540]. Second, corporate endorsement is most effective when product-level uncertainty is high and perceived fit is strong [5; 15]. Third, internal branding mediates the relationship between corporate brand orientation and product-level consistency [9; 10]. Fourth, authenticity and sustainability claims strengthen the portfolio only when product-level practices provide credible support [12].

5. Conclusion. Corporate and product brands should not be managed as isolated symbolic assets. They form an interdependent strategic system in which corporate identity, product experiences, employee behavior, and stakeholder interpretation continuously influence one another. Firms create stronger and more resilient brand value when they align a coherent corporate platform with disciplined product-level execution, supported by clear architecture, internal alignment, and credible governance mechanisms.

The article has shown that the strategic management of corporate and product brands depends on the interaction of multiple dimensions rather than on isolated branding actions. Architecture determines how value and risk move across the portfolio; positioning and extension shape the allocation of meaning; internal branding connects strategy to practice; and authenticity determines

whether corporate narratives are believed. For this reason, successful brand management requires coordination, consistency, and evidence-based alignment across all levels of the brand system.

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Received : 20.02.2026

Accepted for publication: 15.04.2026

