

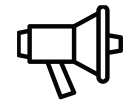
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IMPROVING THE METHODOLOGY OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IN ENHANCING THE COUNTRY'S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE: IN THE EXAMPLE OF SOUTH KOREA

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Abstract: Although research on strategic management linked with national branding is growing, few studies have focused on the improvement of strategic management methodology through the experience of South Korea. The present study opens broad opportunities for the application of strategic management in international image studies, including the role of policy coordination and institutional communication and their impact on national reputation in responding to global competition. The purpose of this study is to examine the role of strategic management and international communication in achieving national image enhancement in responding to the challenges of global perception. Collected survey data were subjected to a detailed PLS-SEM analysis to estimate the conditional probability that a strategic factor has a significant effect, given the presence of one or more of its related policy variables. In order to analyze strategic governance and international perception while also including image-related factors, certain strategic indicators and perception variables were combined with the measurement set defined by prior literature, which resulted in the structural equation model. The results show that stakeholders' favorable evaluation of the effectiveness of their strategic management practices shows national branding positively influences the formation of their international country image through the mediating effect of public perception toward cultural diplomacy, economic achievements, and policy credibility. The results also show the positive impact of strategic governance and international communication on national image during the global evaluation process. Moreover, understanding the influence of strategic management for national image building in relation to the structural model of international perception is a contribution to policy research that may help future governments achieve faster reputation development. This research can also benefit policymakers as it provides practical implications such as strategic coordination mechanisms to strengthen the use of the national image model and it contributes to the existing literature in the area of strategic management and country branding in general.

Key words: Strategic Governance, National Branding, International Country Image, Strategic Image Governance, International Communication, PLS-SEM Modeling, Public Perception and Reputation Management.

INTRODUCTION

Some scholars have based their research into strategic intentions on Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior model, which explains the individual's attempt to start a new strategic initiative with three key determinants: the attitude of its stakeholders, the intention to act, and the perception of control.

According to Ismailova and Chun [2], high levels of strategic governance commitment and international communication capability are both significant factors for enhancing national reputation when responding to global perception challenges.

In a seminal work on the concept of a strategic management framework, Murcia et al. [7] suggest that a strategic management system should generate value in terms of (1) organizational competitiveness, (2) institutional credibility and (3) availability of access to a wide variety of strategic resources.

Malancea [1] offers a broad overview of the strategic management literature on image building by comparing it with other related concepts, such as reputation management and corporate image.

Major problems occur when policy strategies are put together, ignoring the interaction of governance and communication, for example, by a lack of coordination with cultural diplomacy, economic policy and, international media communication (Mamuladze and Mamuladze [11]). Although strategic management practices and

international communication policies are accepted as contributing to shaping a national image strategy, there is limited empirical evidence of the interaction between these practices and policy-driven perception factors, especially during global challenges such as COVID-19.

These approaches are difficult and complex to apply in practice, and have been shown to be incapable of directly operationalizing the concept of strategic image management for governments in practice [1, 7, 10]. According to some researchers the reasons for the government's lack of having a coordinated strategic plan are: either the founder being too engaged with operational governance to think about long-term planning, or sometimes the founder believing there is plenty of time to develop a succession plan before their retirement.

Many researchers have found evidence of the influence of cultural diplomacy, economic performance, and the governance structure on national reputation [3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14]. Strategic communication, the source of coordination and governance processes, 'is a complex and dynamic mechanism,' write Ismailova and Chun [2], and continue to note that 'institutional coordination and policy communication can play important roles in members' perception formation' [2], as communication helps facilitate understanding and credibility.

Many scholars appear to have developed their own strategic management frameworks; for example, Foris et al. [10] identified and analyzed strategic components of destination governance focusing on the reputation of a national brand. A review of the literature reveals that great efforts are being made to understand country-branding and the influence of the strategic governance process on national reputation from different perspectives.

This approach demands extensive qualitative evaluation and complex modeling methods, and for these reasons, is not considered to be a practical solution for the improvement of a national image strategy [1]. The studies typically included cross-sectional observations with a time frame of only several years, with only a few of them having longitudinal observations in periods of more than ten years.

As a result, despite these efforts, currently, there exists a clear gap in the literature as to how the concept of the strategic national image might be operationalized and evaluated in practice. This study seeks to fill the existing gap about strategic management in international image formation, their policy or governance implementation, as well as empirical methods for a more effective introduction of strategic governance and international communication. Based on experiences of several governments, this study aims to further clarify how strategic management affects the functioning of national branding systems and, in particular, international reputation formation. The aim of this study is to present the conceptual model which is suitable for empirical applications such as strategic governance and international communication comparative policy analyses.

We aim to add to the theoretical and empirical knowledge in this field by taking an integrated approach to the analysis of this topic. This research also aims to evaluate the influence of these factors on national image formation in addressing the challenges of global competition. In the methodology section, we discuss this study's design, its variables, and analytical method. Section three describes the procedure used in this study while focusing on the three-stage model for structural analysis by Hair et al. [7].

Following the numerous studies that have used the PLS-SEM approach to analyze strategic constructs, this study suggests a set of hypotheses to confirm the reliability of the conceptual model in the context of this research. Section four briefly outlines different hypotheses, which are then analyzed by the adapted structural equation model in the results section, which will also support the discussion.

METHODS

Data were collected via a survey questionnaire consisting of measurement items listed in prior literature and national branding indicators which together cover strategic governance variables in South Korea. South Korea became one of the first countries in the world to ease its restrictions against the COVID-19 outbreak [1]. The sample population consists of graduate students, all pursuing degrees in international relations and public policy. All had prior professional experience, including being involved and participating in one or more of the national branding projects that provided the empirical basis for this study and are discussed above.

Overall, 268 responses were received, and after screening and elimination for incomplete and inconsistent responses ([1], [2], [3], & [4], [5]), 241 valid responses were obtained, with an effective response rate of 89.9%. Furthermore, to generate a sufficient statistical power level for various analyses to be carried out later, the minimum sample size required for a model of this complexity was determined to be 200 observations.

This sample of 241 students includes 124 women and 117 men; they are studying at the master's and doctoral levels; and they come from various academic backgrounds across the country.

The main limitation of this sample is that the surveys were only conducted with students, although on a positive note, the participants were at least knowledgeable of strategic governance. To ensure consistency and to avoid bias in the data, a purposive sampling method was used in this study. The cases discussed in this analysis are based on the evaluation and perception of respondents, such as policy experts and graduate

students on strategic governance of the country or institutions. The data for this study was collected by survey questionnaire, as such a quantitative approach can provide reliability and comparability ([1] et al., [2]).

Despite these limitations, the authors of this research study decided to use these three strategic variables as a basis for their analysis because it directly focuses on governance mechanisms in international perception. Ajzen and Fishbein ([1]) developed a theory of planned behavior ([2]) to differentiate behavioral intention from other types of social behavior. The indicators employed to measure the constructs in the structural model are adapted from prior literature ([1]).

The data collection instruments for the current study included structured questionnaires derived from the literature; students evaluated themselves using perception measures based on Likert scales. Despite these limitations, the authors of this research study decided to use these three strategic variables as a basis for their analysis because it directly focuses on governance mechanisms in international perception.

In the current study, PLS-SEM was used in two steps: first, the fit of the measurement model was evaluated ([1] [2]), then the parameters of the structural equation model were estimated ([3]; [4]; [5] et al., [6]). Following this approach, several researchers ([1], [2]) developed this methodology further by introducing additional evaluation procedures, which subsequently resulted in guidelines and recommendations for structural modeling. The issue with the goodness-of-fit index has been discussed, as the values are approaching the threshold.

Though these procedures were originally applied to marketing studies, the model used in the present research was modified in order to analyze strategic governance as well. The standardized factor loading for all the constructs and their items were significant ([1] of standardized factor loading > [2]; [3] & [4], [5]). [1] et al. ([2]) argue that a composite reliability must be considerably higher than a Cronbach's alpha. Therefore, values for reliability and validity for all the constructs were within the acceptable thresholds, thereby showing that the items have satisfactory measurement properties.

The responses were limited on point, per statement up to 10 words in length, and provided the information to address the research objectives. National image ([1]) is the dependent variable for this study. National image creation was measured using the four dimensions of the strategic governance model: policy coordination, institutional communication, cultural diplomacy, and economic credibility ([1]). The measurement used to evaluate national image was adopted from earlier studies ([1] & [2], [3]; [4] et al., [5]), and the national image construct consisted of six items measured on a five-point Likert scale.

Strategic management focuses on what elements must be included in an organization in order to fulfil the expectations placed on the institution ([1], p. 3). The constructs of the model (i.e., strategic governance, international communication, and national branding) were all measured on five-point Likert scales ranging from strongly disagree ([1]) to strongly agree ([2]).

This was an analytical framework, where the constructs were formed by the conceptual model and the items addressed the dimensions of governance as explained in prior studies. The analysis focused on identifying those patterns that occurred more often in the responses, marking statements that clearly illustrated what the perception of respondents meant in the context of strategic governance.

Data screening and reliability was analyzed using the statistical software SmartPLS; the model then was measured using a PLS-SEM approach to structural equation modeling ([1]) in SmartPLS, which is an alternative to covariance-based SEM.

The idea of bootstrapping is based on the statistical approach by Efron ([1]) as presented in sampling theory and several applications of these procedures ([2]). The analysis focused on identifying those relationships that occurred more often in the model, marking paths that clearly illustrated what the influence of variables meant in the context of international image formation.

By using the three strategic constructs as a starting point and extending the framework, this research will contribute to the development of a broader analytical model. In the case of PLS-SEM, all other indicators supported the reliability of the constructs ([1] and [2] standardized factor loadings; [3] greater than [4]).

Additionally, the Fornell-Larcker criterion by [1] was divided into convergent and discriminant validity and then complemented with additional tests used in SEM: [2] and [3]. It is argued that Cronbach's alpha is often too conservative, and that composite reliability alone can determine the consistency of a construct ([1] & [2], [3]). However, SmartPLS as an analytical tool has also its limitations such as the strong dependence on sample size.

RESULTS

These findings appear to support the validity of the suggested conceptual framework, and thus providing an analytical method, based on the integration of a strategic governance model, for evaluation and development of national image strategies in practice. The results show that strategic governance mechanisms are often able to conduct well in the global reputation evaluation process, and by doing so also bring positive branding – and sometimes strong reputational – results.

Table 1. Summary statistics

Name	No.	Type	Missings	Mean	Median	Scale min	Scale max	Observed min	Observed max	Standard deviation	Excess kurtosis	Skewness	Cramer-von Mises p value
SM1_StrategicPolicyAlignment	1	MET	0	4.163	4.155	1.000	7.000	1.000	7.000	1.048	0.164	-0.076	0.484
SM2_StrategicPlanningQuality	2	MET	0	4.255	4.333	1.000	7.000	1.000	7.000	1.087	0.364	-0.148	0.711
PC1_InterAgencyCoordination	3	MET	0	3.550	3.675	1.000	7.000	1.000	7.000	1.153	-0.059	0.104	0.818
PC2_PolicyConsistency	4	MET	0	3.565	3.712	1.000	7.000	1.000	7.000	1.086	0.243	0.096	0.388
IC1_GlobalMediaEngagement	5	MET	0	3.908	3.887	1.000	7.000	1.000	7.000	1.185	-0.401	-0.060	0.379
IC2_DigitalDiplomacyIntensity	6	MET	0	4.165	4.165	1.000	7.000	1.000	7.000	1.238	0.094	-0.368	0.081
NB1_CountryBrandAttractiveness	7	MET	0	4.025	4.001	1.000	7.000	1.000	7.000	1.107	0.029	-0.072	0.271
NB2_InternationalBrandRecognition	8	MET	0	3.991	4.051	1.000	7.000	1.000	7.000	1.022	0.089	-0.101	0.497
GR1_ForeignPublicTrust	9	MET	0	4.451	4.429	1.000	7.000	1.000	7.000	1.059	0.548	-0.232	0.349
GR2_GlobalReputationScore	10	MET	0	4.069	4.047	1.000	7.000	1.000	7.000	1.128	0.057	-0.039	0.871

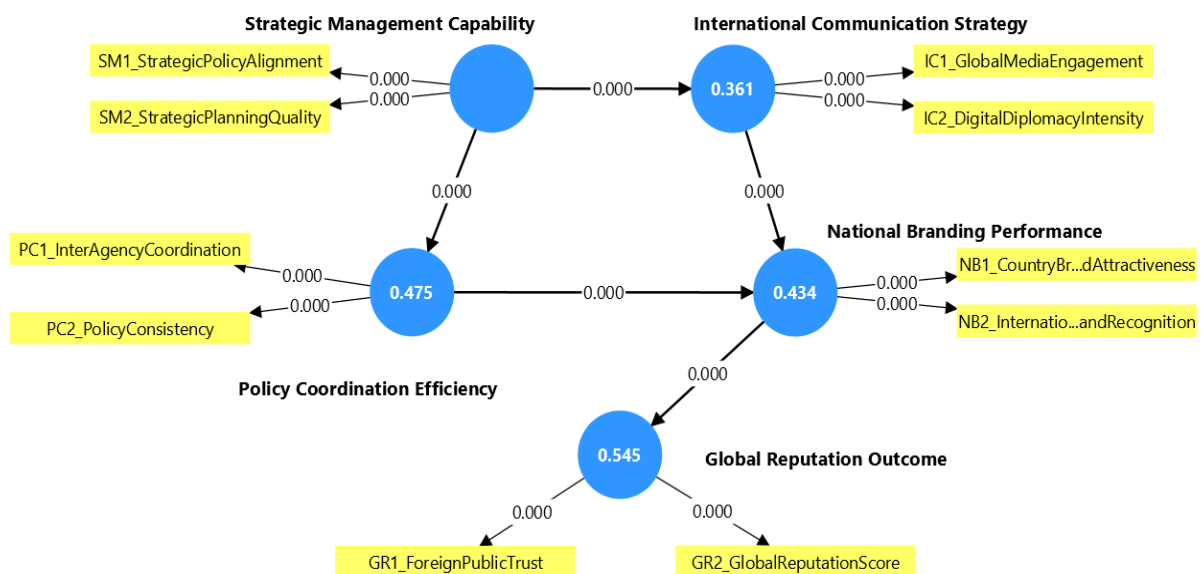


Figure 1. PLS-SEM Model 1

Among the three strategic constructs, the effect of national branding performance appears to be the most significant factor contributing to the conditional probability of global reputation improvement. Of the respondents reported having positive perceptions of strategic governance, all fall into the high probability group of this strategic governance framework, which further points to a clear relationship between policy coordination and international reputation formation.

Path coefficients histogram: International Communication Strategy -> National Branding ...

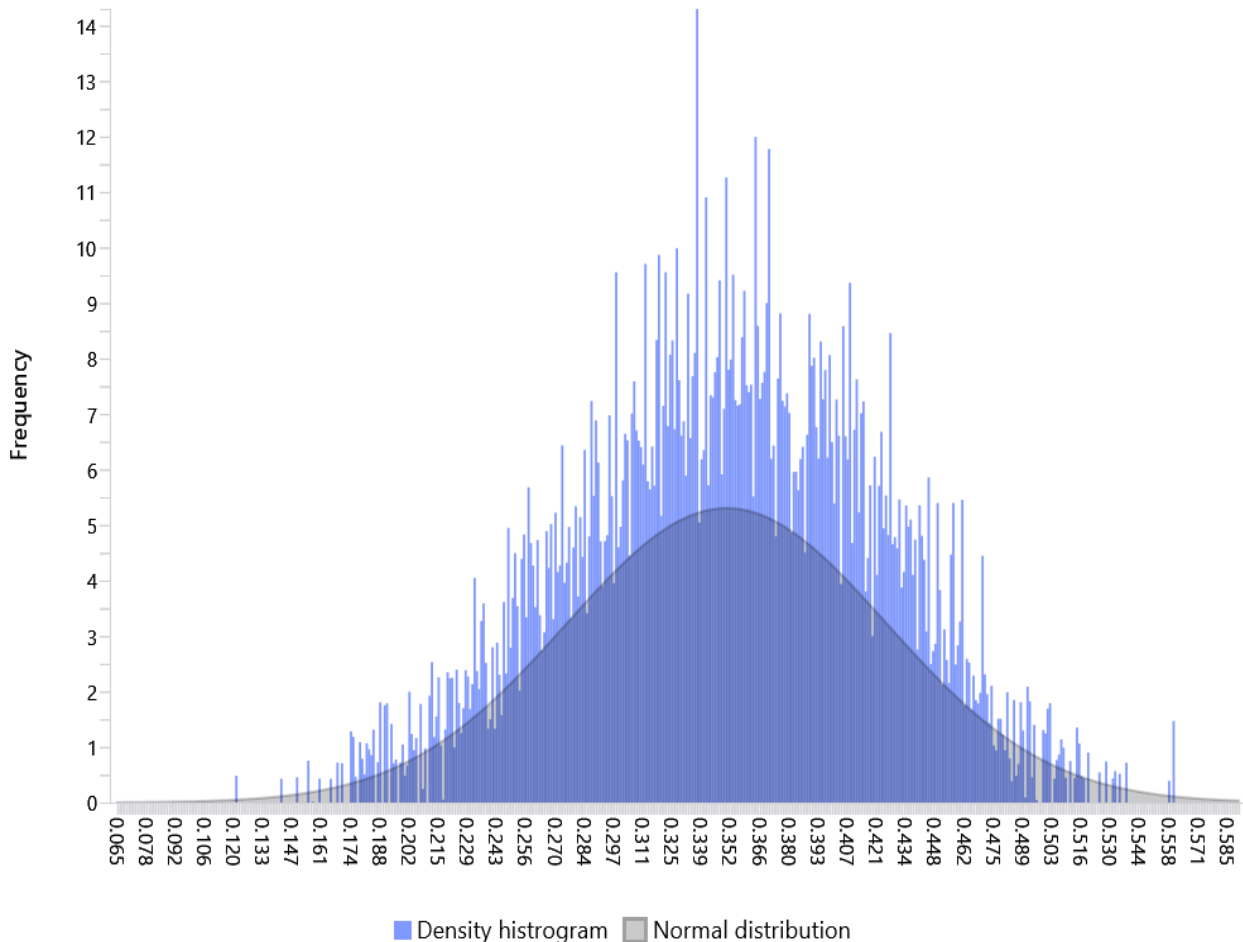


Figure 2. Normal distribution of path coefficient values over International community strategy to national branding

Looking at this data, several observations of the policy coordination indicators and international communication variables of national branding performance fall into this category (although, many of them have reported positive policy impacts during the evaluation of a country reputation model).

Nearly half of both policy coordination indicators (PC1 and PC2) and international communication indicators (IC1 and IC2) fall into a moderate probability group which appears to have a low probability of developing global reputation growth and hence low chance of strong international perception within this analytical framework.

In the case of this analytical model, once again, construct measurability was an important consideration, and therefore an indicator number was assigned to more effectively describe each latent construct. Furthermore, the PLS-SEM results indicate that policy coordination efficiency and strategic management knowledge creation have a significant positive influence on national branding performance in responding to the global perception crisis. The constructs in the structural equation model can be applied for the analysis of the strategic governance dimensions separately and also in combination. This line of thought results in an easier identification of the strategic governance mechanism from other types of institutional practices. To probe the mediating effect from strategic management capability to global reputation outcome through the national branding performance, the analysis analyzed the indirect effects and the possibility of mediation. However, there are some combinations of strategic variables the estimation of which is not possible.

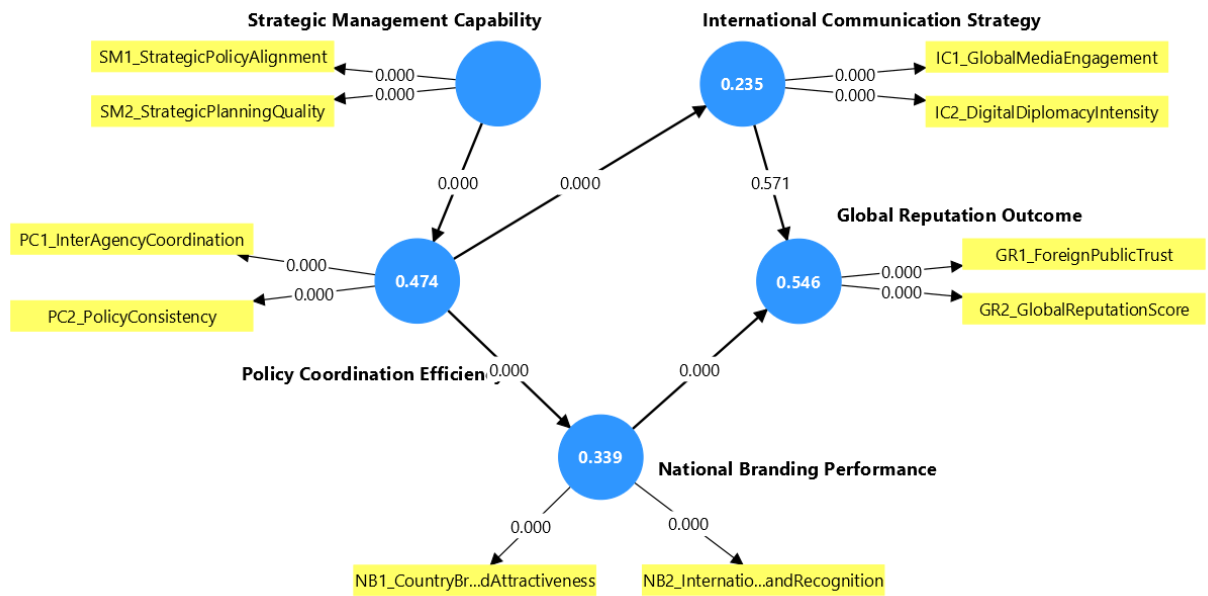


Figure 3. PLS SEM Model 2

Regarding Model 2, which concerns the direct relationship between international communication strategy and global reputation outcome’s performance, international communication strategy had no significant impact on global reputation outcome’s formation. For example, on the basis of the definitions as described, a strategic communication generation policy initiative cannot be considered a direct driver or reputation determinant, and in this situation the evaluation of public life perception will be indirect.

Table 2. Path coefficients

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
International Communication Strategy -> Global Reputation Outcome	0.040	0.040	0.070	0.567	0.571
National Branding Performance -> Global Reputation Outcome	0.716	0.713	0.055	12.989	0.000
Policy Coordination Efficiency -> International Communication Strategy	0.485	0.485	0.062	7.764	0.000
Policy Coordination Efficiency -> National Branding Performance	0.582	0.583	0.054	10.804	0.000
Strategic Management Capability -> Policy Coordination Efficiency	0.689	0.691	0.044	15.649	0.000

In our analysis, no direct effect was found from international communication strategy to global reputation outcome, but we found a significant indirect effect from international communication strategy to global reputation outcome’s formation through the national branding performance, indicating that this is a case of partial mediation. Specifically, one observation was excluded from the policy coordination efficiency construct (PC1), one from the international communication construct (IC1), and one from the national branding performance construct (NB1).

DISCUSSION

This paper proposes the term strategic image governance, which defines the coordinated management of national reputation drivers in the context of strategic management and country branding. This study analyzes different dimensions of strategic governance and international communication, which are classified as core

strategic constructs even though some policy objectives are either not quite fulfilled or over-fulfilled. This analytical framework described above is an integrated strategic management approach.

The analytical model as conducted and presented in this study is a mere conceptual evaluation framework and depends on the strategic governance, international communication and national branding performance. The results show that stakeholders' favorable evaluation of their strategic management practices has a significant and positive effect on their international country image, the national branding performance and their global reputation perception. The empirical findings show that strategic governance efficiency has a significant role in achieving national reputation enhancement in responding to the global perception crisis.

It also demonstrates that strategic governance mechanisms increase national branding performance because they provide institutional stakeholders with a coordinated framework that allows policy alignment and reputation formation (international perception) through policy coordination mechanisms (strategic governance structures).

The PLS-SEM results reveal that policy coordination efficiency has a direct positive influence on national branding performance in responding to the global perception crisis. Therefore, this paper introduces the concept of strategic image governance (representing strategic coordination or policy alignment) as an analytical framework for the evaluation or development of a national image strategy, particularly in international reputation management. This example demonstrates that the success of national branding performance is not only connected to a strong governance framework and a reduction in policy fragmentation. Furthermore, they appear to face institutional coordination barriers and policy communication challenges preventing them from achieving this strategic alignment via a coherent governance framework.

However, strategic governance can also be seen as a policy coordination mechanism, when considering the interaction of institutional communication systems, as national branding performance can be strengthened if strategic initiatives that aim at solving reputation management problems rely on coordinated governance structures that provide different types of policy instruments.

This empirical evidence confirms the relevance of the strategic governance model in its analytical application, thus aligning it with the theoretical propositions of prior research studies [1]. This analysis showed that the integration of strategic constructs by policy frameworks can be used to gain understanding of reputation formation and policy effectiveness in national branding systems, and that some dimensions of strategic governance may be more influential than others.

According to the general definition of strategic governance, an institutional initiative can only be considered as such if it brings about an observable policy outcome and is consequently a determinant factor on the national image formation process. If strategic coordination mechanisms are not fulfilled, the governance framework is most likely to be a constraint factor on the specific national reputation outcome. Consistent with prior studies [1], this research found a significant relationship and positive association between public perception toward national branding performance and international reputation formation.

These findings are in agreement with prior research, confirming that strategic governance coordination is pivotal for countries to develop strong international reputations. Understanding the influence of strategic management practices for national image building and the evaluation framework by this analytical model can help future governments to coordinate policy strategies and gain added institutional credibility to face the global perception challenges.

Knowing the current strategic governance structure, is likely beneficial for the effective development and implementation of the national image strategy of governments and institutions.

Nevertheless, even recognized strategic governance frameworks do not fully meet these three criteria when applied concerning their institutional coordination mechanisms, which is mainly important in international reputation management. Due to several methodological, institutional and data availability issues, empirical results in strategic governance research differ significantly from such results in corporate reputation studies.

As there is yet little empirical evidence on strategic governance mechanisms in the literature on national branding, this study contributes some analytical insights on strategic governance interactions to the literature on country branding.

These results are in agreement with those of prior studies that depicts strategic governance as the ability to manage and apply institutional resources, empowering a government to develop an effective national brand and capacity to coordinate policy actions and strengthen international reputation. This could be explained by the fact that the government's strategic coordination adds to the national reputation formation by aligning the policy communication mechanisms and the credibility of the governance framework.

These findings are consistent with a previous study [1], who investigated the strategic communication role of institutional coordination in generating national reputation outcomes by strengthening policy credibility through coordinated governance mechanisms. The analyses of the strategic governance constructs are only partially based on perception measures, such as the indicators for policy coordination and international communication

in the evaluation of national branding, while other parts are based on secondary indicators (e.g. economic credibility indicators for national reputation performance).

The evaluation model can only be applied when analyzing already existing policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms as inputs to national image products. Furthermore, they appear to face data availability limitations and methodological constraints preventing them from generalizing this analytical model via a broader empirical dataset. Further research needs to be conducted to test the applicability of the strategic governance framework in different national contexts.

Before applying the strategic governance framework of the conceptual model, it is necessary to collect data in different countries and policy environments, to prepare comparative datasets and analytical indicators, as well as to obtain empirical evidence in connection with the policy variables, which will allow the evaluation of the analytical framework, and a more comprehensive and more robust interpretation of the factors determining the national reputation outcome. Furthermore, these limitations are consistent with the observations of previous research on national branding frameworks.

CONCLUSION

This analytical framework can form a conceptual basis for further empirical studies to clarify the interaction between strategic governance and international communication, and as such, is the main methodological contribution of this research. This will help to broaden the theoretical discussion in the area of strategic governance research and national branding in general. Furthermore, comparative analysis with similar governance models in other countries and policy environments can help validate the framework in the literature. This approach can also provide a sort of analytical classification of strategic governance mechanisms for policy evaluation and, thus, serve as a conceptual reference point for future researchers to focus on during the different stages of the strategic management process, helping future governments achieve stronger reputation development. Finally, like all other works that deal with national branding systems, the limitation remains that little is known about whether or not the proposed framework will actually begin the transformation of governance practice in the future. Further empirical research needs to be conducted to test the applicability of the strategic governance framework in different national contexts. Before applying the strategic governance framework of the conceptual model, it is necessary to collect data in different countries and policy environments, to prepare comparative datasets and analytical indicators, as well as to obtain empirical evidence in connection with the policy variables, which will allow the evaluation of the analytical framework, and a more comprehensive and more robust interpretation of the factors determining the national reputation outcome. During this process, it will be possible to collect more empirical observations and, if necessary, refine the analytical model once again.

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