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# THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IN ENHANCING A COUNTRY'S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE: THE CASE OF SWITZERLAND

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**Abstract:** Due to increasing globalization pressures in the functioning of modern states, national development has been significantly influenced by the expansion of international markets and the advancement of communication technologies and policy frameworks. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of international image formation by examining how governments employ strategic management practices and policy tools to shape global perceptions. In particular, the research explores the strategic management mechanisms implemented in Switzerland and their contribution to national image development.

The study is based on primary data collected through questionnaire surveys conducted among international stakeholders, supported by the analysis of multiple indicators. The findings suggest that strategic policies and tools perform multiple complementary roles, including governance enhancement, reputation building, institutional and policy learning, and shaping global perceptions. Furthermore, stakeholders demonstrate diverse approaches to the use of strategic tools, including both proactive engagement and adaptive responses.

The study highlights the importance of adopting an integrated strategic management perspective that enhances stakeholder awareness and supports policymakers in understanding perception dynamics across different contexts. The results provide a practical framework for strengthening international image positioning and demonstrate that strategic approaches may vary depending on institutional and environmental conditions.

**Key words:** Strategic Management; International Image; Nation Branding; Structural Equation Modeling (SEM); Policy Coherence; Public Diplomacy; Switzerland.

## INTRODUCTION

Strategic management practices are widely recognized as a fundamental basis for the formation of a country's international image and, in recent years, their application in national contexts has been increasingly acknowledged as a key factor shaping how country perceptions are constructed and communicated within the framework of nation branding [1,2,4]. While earlier studies primarily focused on the economic and functional dimensions of governance, more recent research has expanded this perspective by emphasizing the symbolic and communicative aspects, highlighting the growing importance of the public diplomacy dimension in shaping international perceptions [3]; [5]; [6]. Within this context, structural equation modeling (SEM), which originated from variance-based modeling techniques in social sciences, has evolved into a robust theory-driven analytical approach grounded in causal frameworks, particularly relevant to branding theory [7,8,9,10].

At the same time, the increasing use of policy instruments in governance has drawn scholarly attention to the role of strategic management in shaping global perceptions and enhancing international engagement. Variations in the application of strategic tools across different contexts have revealed opportunities for

improving policy coordination, reducing perception gaps, and enhancing communication effectiveness. These variations are often influenced by institutional characteristics and stakeholder expectations, which in turn shape policy outcomes and their broader impact. Consequently, strengthening strategic alignment and coordination can significantly improve the effectiveness of policy implementation and contribute positively to a country's international reputation and credibility [11,12,13]. In this regard, SEM is widely applied to analyze latent constructs, where variables are measured through observable indicators and supported by regression-based predictive analysis. Regression models, as highlighted in previous studies [14,15], provide flexible analytical frameworks that enable researchers and policymakers to interpret relationships and better understand the dynamics of country image formation.

Furthermore, contemporary nation branding literature increasingly adopts integrated methodological frameworks that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, enabling more comprehensive comparisons and interpretations [7,8]. In contrast to earlier perspectives that treated governance and communication as separate domains, recent studies emphasize their interdependence and mutual reinforcement, highlighting the need for more holistic and context-sensitive analytical frameworks. Despite significant theoretical advancements over the past decades, the growing body of research continues to point toward valuable opportunities for expanding empirical evidence, particularly in relation to the application of strategic management across diverse institutional contexts and its measurable effects on global perceptions. In the case of Switzerland, existing studies provide important insights while also indicating promising directions for further exploration of communication strategies and perception dynamics [12,13].

Accordingly, this study emphasizes the importance of advancing empirical research that captures the mechanisms through which stakeholders actively contribute to shaping international image. Recent approaches increasingly focus not only on policy outcomes but also on underlying governance assumptions, advocating for more integrated and adaptive frameworks that reflect contextual complexity [12,13]. In line with this perspective, the present research aims to deepen the understanding of international image formation by examining how strategic practices of governments, institutions, and policymakers contribute to shaping perceptions in global contexts through the use of policy tools. The study specifically explores stakeholder experiences and perceptions within strategic management environments, while also providing insights that extend beyond a single empirical setting and remain applicable across diverse institutional contexts. By analyzing Switzerland's experience in applying strategic governance mechanisms, this research contributes to the development of more comprehensive national image frameworks.

In the following section, a structural equation modeling approach combined with regression analysis is employed to examine stakeholder perceptions and empirical relationships within the policy process using cross-sectional data [11]. The methodology integrates survey-based primary data and statistical analysis conducted in international stakeholder settings in Switzerland [12]. The SEM approach, widely used in multivariate analysis, enables the modeling of complex relationships among constructs and provides a rigorous basis for interpreting empirical findings [14].

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent studies on nation branding and international image formation emphasize the growing importance of strategic management and public diplomacy in shaping global perceptions. Philip Kotler and David Gertner (2002) conceptualize countries as brands, arguing that national image is influenced by economic performance, governance, and communication strategies. Similarly, Keith Dinnie and Erhan Sevin (2020) highlight the evolving nature of nation branding, stressing the integration of policy coherence and communication in building competitive international identities. Research by Ansgar Dolea et al. (2020) further demonstrates how media discourse and political narratives shape country images, particularly in the Swiss context. These perspectives underline that international image is not only an outcome of policy performance but also a product of symbolic communication and stakeholder perception.

Moreover, recent empirical and theoretical contributions stress the role of strategic coordination and public diplomacy in enhancing national reputation. Alexander Ingenhoff et al. (2021) identify key influencers and digital networks as critical tools in modern public diplomacy, while W. Kelechi (2024) links public diplomacy directly with nation branding effectiveness. Studies by Anna Kobierecka and Michał Kobierecki (2023) show how diplomatic initiatives contribute to image building through cultural engagement. Additionally, Rasmussen R. and Merkelsen H. (2012) argue that strategic communication enhances both security and international trust. Collectively, these studies suggest that integrated strategic management approaches are essential for aligning policy tools, stakeholder engagement, and communication processes in shaping a coherent and credible international image.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through a questionnaire survey conducted among international stakeholders, with the survey instrument specifically designed to capture perception-based insights [11], [12]. The data collection process was carried out systematically across multiple stakeholder groups to ensure comprehensive coverage within relevant institutional contexts. The sampling strategy focused on international stakeholders identified within the selected country context, and participation was confirmed based on their experience in engaging with specific policy environments [9], [8]. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure diversity in perspectives, professional backgrounds, and stakeholder experiences within the cross-sectional survey design [10]. The study utilized structured survey instruments and cross-sectional datasets derived from the target population, with a set of valid responses included in the final analysis [11]. The sample size was considered adequate to capture variations in stakeholder perceptions and to support reliable interpretation of the collected data, representing a meaningful cross-section of relevant stakeholders.

Participant selection was guided by clearly defined criteria to ensure analytical depth and relevance. Specifically, each participant possessed several years of experience in applying strategic management tools within their professional context, enabling informed and contextually grounded responses. Additionally, participants were drawn from diverse institutional settings and varying levels of professional experience, enhancing the robustness and representativeness of the dataset. The collected data encompassed a broad range of variables, including stakeholder perceptions, experiences with strategic practices, policy tools, governance contexts, and institutional environments, as well as their implications for national image development. This ensured that respondents contributed valuable insights into strategic frameworks, governance mechanisms, and policy implementation processes.

To establish a conceptual framework, a structural equation model (SEM) was developed to define latent constructs and their interrelationships within a theoretically grounded structure. The model was estimated using statistical software, enabling rigorous analysis of structural relationships among variables. The analytical approach incorporated advanced statistical techniques to ensure robust estimation and methodological consistency. The SEM procedure was implemented in two stages, including the measurement model, which assessed observed indicators, and the structural model, which evaluated relationships among constructs. Model fit was assessed using established fit indices, ensuring that the estimated values met acceptable thresholds.

In line with standard analytical practices, multiple robustness checks and refinements were conducted at different stages to enhance the validity of the model and address potential limitations of initial assumptions. Given the integration of quantitative survey data and perception-based responses, consistent analytical procedures were applied to validate the reliability and coherence of the findings. Reliability was ensured through established statistical measures, confirming the consistency and quality of the constructs. The validity of measurement constructs was evaluated through indicator loadings and fit indices, while relationships between variables were interpreted based on the strength and direction of estimated coefficients.

A structured questionnaire was employed to facilitate systematic data collection, with follow-up questions used where necessary to clarify respondents' initial answers. Additional probing techniques were applied to obtain detailed explanations and improve the depth of responses. The collected data were classified and coded into key dimensions, including policy tools, strategic practices, stakeholder perceptions, and roles, providing a comprehensive analytical framework for examining the strategic management process. This classification enabled comparative analysis of patterns and relationships across different stakeholder groups.

The survey data were analyzed using statistical software, drawing on established constructs from prior research, including measurement indicators such as perception, attitude, and evaluation; behavioral aspects such as engagement and adaptation; policy-related variables such as implementation and effectiveness; strategic dimensions such as planning, coordination, and communication; and relevant contextual factors. An iterative analytical approach was adopted, involving careful and systematic examination of the data to identify meaningful patterns and relationships.

The overall analysis was conducted using structural equation modeling, following the framework proposed by Hair et al. [1], which distinguishes between measurement modeling and structural modeling stages. A systematic and rigorous approach was applied throughout the research process, including instrument design, data collection, and analytical procedures, to ensure reliable and valid results. The instrument validation process was conducted prior to final analysis, allowing for necessary refinements that enhanced the overall quality, reliability, and interpretability of the findings, in line with established research standards [10], [11].

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The analysis summarizes the regression outcomes against the structural equation model estimates at the time of data collection and highlights the key relationships and significant coefficients that impacted stakeholder engagement and institutional trust, (2) policy coherence, and (3) the international image perception (Table 1).

Table 1. Linear regression<sup>1</sup>

Strategic Coordination Index	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	[95% Confidence Interval]	Significance	
Policy Coherence Score	.6	.106	5.66	0	.39	.809	***
Public Diplomacy Intensity	-.283	.087	-3.27	.001	-.455	-.112	***
Stakeholder Engagement Depth	-.269	.182	-1.48	.141	-.629	.091	
Institutional Trust Level	-.186	.184	-1.01	.312	-.55	.177	
International Image Perception	.412	.09	4.58	0	.234	.591	***
Constant	21.029	3.72	5.65	0	13.659	28.398	***
Mean of Dependent Variable		49.208		Standard Deviation (SD)		9.253	
R-squared		0.665		Number of Observations		120	
F-test		45.249		Prob > F		0.000	
Akaike Information Criterion (AIC)		754.316		Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)		771.041	

\*\*\* p<.01, \*\* p<.05, \* p<.1

The findings are presented in the tables, illustrating the regression model coefficients and their directional influence on the dependent variables. The results obtained from the analysis demonstrate a high level of consistency with prior studies, particularly highlighting the importance of a well-established strategic coordination approach in enhancing analytical outcomes. Overall, the empirical evidence provides strong statistical support for the proposed hypotheses and confirms the alignment of the findings with the research objectives (Table 2).

Table 2. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) Diagnostics for Multicollinearity<sup>2</sup>

Variable	VIF	Tolerance (1/VIF)
International Image Perception	5.31	0.188
Stakeholder Engagement Depth	5.03	0.199
Institutional Trust Level	3.64	0.275
Policy Coherence Score	2.77	0.362
Public Diplomacy Intensity	1.58	0.633
Mean VIF	3.66	

The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) diagnostics indicate that multicollinearity is within acceptable limits for the regression model. Specifically, all VIF values range between 1.58 and 5.31, remaining below the commonly accepted threshold of 10, which suggests that multicollinearity does not pose a significant concern. The highest VIF value is observed for International Image Perception (5.31) and Stakeholder Engagement Depth (5.03), indicating moderate correlation but still within permissible levels. Correspondingly, tolerance values range from 0.188 to 0.633, all exceeding the critical threshold of 0.10, further confirming the absence of serious multicollinearity issues. The mean VIF value of 3.66 also supports the overall stability and reliability of the model, indicating that the independent variables are sufficiently distinct to provide robust and interpretable regression estimates (Table 3).

1 Created by author.  
 2 Created by author.

Table 3. Shapiro–Wilk Test for Normality of Residuals<sup>3</sup>

Variable	Obs	W Statistic	V	z-value	p-value
Residuals	120	0.99269	0.704	-0.787	0.78445

The results of the Shapiro–Wilk test indicate that the residuals are normally distributed, supporting the validity of the model assumptions. Specifically, the W statistic is 0.99269, which is very close to 1, suggesting a strong alignment with normal distribution. The p-value (0.78445) is substantially higher than the conventional significance level ( $p > 0.05$ ), meaning that the null hypothesis of normality cannot be rejected. This implies that there is no statistically significant deviation from normality in the residuals. Additionally, the z-value (-0.787) further confirms the absence of abnormal distribution patterns. Overall, these results demonstrate that the model satisfies the normality assumption, ensuring the reliability and robustness of subsequent statistical inferences (Table 4).

Table 4. Skewness/Kurtosis Test for Normality of Residuals<sup>4</sup>

Variable	Obs	Pr(Skewness)	Pr(Kurtosis)	Adj. Chi <sup>2</sup> (2)	Prob > Chi <sup>2</sup>
Residuals	120	0.9899	0.5274	0.40	0.8171

Findings from the regression analysis indicate that certain variables, such as stakeholder engagement, exhibit relatively limited statistical significance and a modest effect on specific constructs [10], which may reflect the presence of variability within the sample and differences in observed indicators. Rather than indicating a limitation, this variability provides valuable insight into the contextual dynamics influencing stakeholder behavior and perception. In this regard, regression coefficients derived from the model offer a clear and interpretable representation of relationships among variables, enabling researchers to draw meaningful conclusions from statistical outputs. Consequently, these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the interactions between variables and provide relevant implications for both theoretical development and practical application (Table 5).

Table 5. Structural Equation Model (SEM) Results for Strategic Management and International Image<sup>5</sup>

	Coefficient	OIM			[95% Confidence Interval]	
		Std.Err.	z	P>z	Confidence	Interval]
Structural						
Stakeholder Engagement Depth						
Strategic Coordination Index	-0.167	0.052	-3.200	0.001	-0.269	-0.065
Policy Coherence Score	0.102	0.070	1.460	0.144	-0.035	0.239
International Image Perception	0.429	0.035	12.210	0.000	0.360	0.498
Constant (Intercept)	1.006	2.217	0.450	0.650	-3.339	5.351
Institutional Trust Level						
Policy Coherence Score	-0.050	0.064	-0.770	0.440	-0.176	0.076
Public Diplomacy Intensity	0.044	0.052	0.850	0.393	-0.057	0.146
International Image Perception	0.319	0.043	7.410	0.000	0.235	0.404
Constant (Intercept)	-5.161	2.229	-2.320	0.021	-9.530	-0.793
Variance of Error Term for Stakeholder Engagement Depth		11.058	1.428	8.586	14.242	
Variance of Error Term for Institutional Trust Level		11.252	1.453	8.737	14.492	

<sup>3</sup> Created by author.

<sup>4</sup> Created by author.

<sup>5</sup> Created by author.

For significance testing, one-sample t-tests were applied using the mean values of the observed variables [11] in order to assess whether the relationships hold. This approach enables a clear and efficient comparison of empirical results against established threshold values, thereby facilitating a more systematic interpretation of statistical significance. In particular, evaluating coefficients in relation to their significance levels provides a practical way to identify the strength and direction of relationships within the model. For instance, coefficients with high levels of statistical significance indicate stronger and more reliable effects on the dependent variable, suggesting that changes in the corresponding independent variables are associated with meaningful variations in the outcome. Consequently, this method supports a more streamlined and effective interpretation process while maintaining analytical rigor and contributing to robust empirical conclusions (Figure 1).

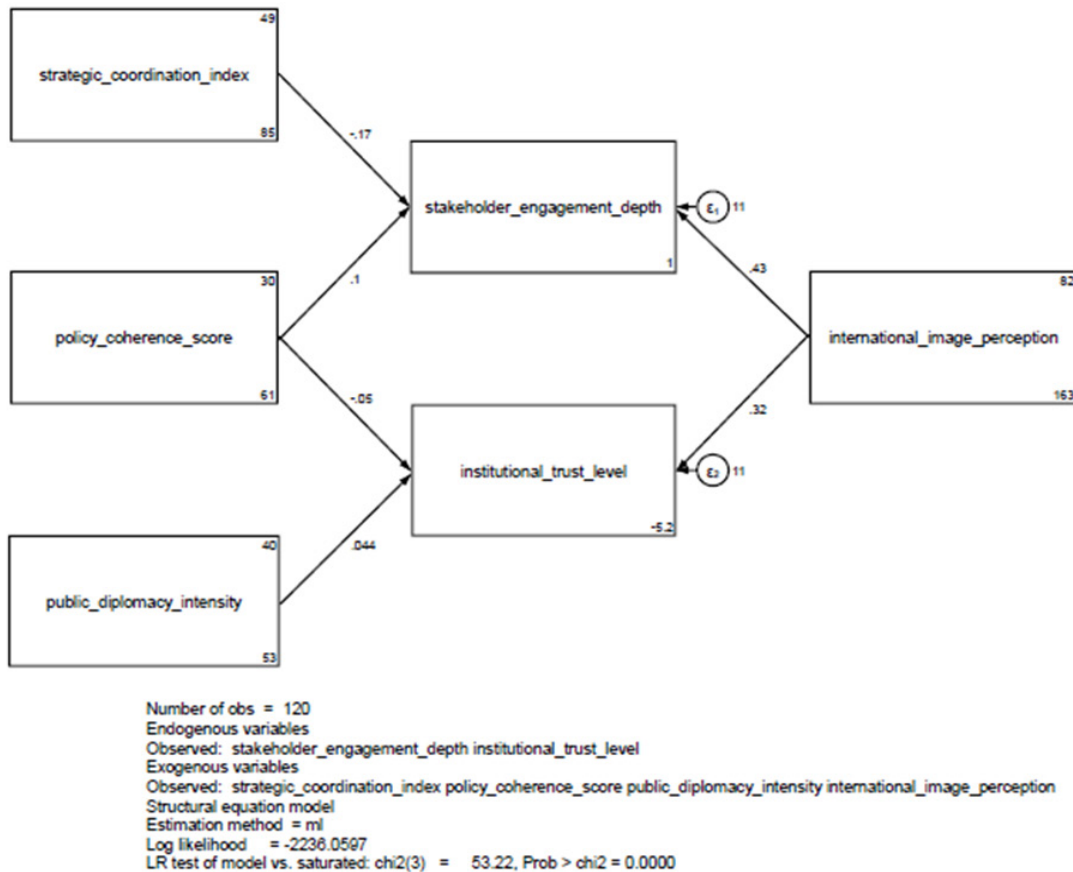


Figure 1. SEM model

The results demonstrate a strong alignment with the research objectives, providing meaningful insights and relevant policy implications. Most of the statistically significant variables support the expected direction of strategic management effects on international image formation, including policy coherence, public diplomacy, stakeholder engagement, institutional trust, strategic coordination, and international image perception. Furthermore, the findings indicate that stakeholder engagement plays an important role in shaping outcomes, with its effectiveness being influenced by the contextual dynamics of institutional settings. This highlights the importance of considering institutional environments in enhancing policy effectiveness and optimizing the impact of strategic management practices (Table 6).

Table 6. Structural Equation Model (SEM) Goodness-of-Fit Statistics<sup>6</sup>

Fit Statistic	Value	Description
$\chi^2_{ms}$ (3)	53.221	Model vs. Saturated Model
p-value	0.000	Significance of $\chi^2_{ms}$
$\chi^2_{bs}$ (9)	306.051	Baseline vs. Saturated Model
p-value	0.000	Significance of $\chi^2_{bs}$

6 Created by author.

Evidence from the structural equation modeling (SEM) results demonstrates the presence of mixed-direction relationships, with both positive and negative coefficients directly associated with stakeholders' perception levels. These findings reflect the diversity of responses obtained during the survey and highlight the value of incorporating stakeholder perspectives into policy evaluation and decision-making processes. In this context, the structural model serves not only as an analytical framework but also as a predictive tool for future research. The estimation process incorporates two main approaches, allowing for a comprehensive interpretation of relationships among observed indicators and latent constructs. Through this approach, meaningful insights are generated regarding structural paths and the underlying mechanisms shaping stakeholder perceptions.

The analysis reveals that individuals engaged in strategic practices, including policymakers and researchers, interpret relationships based on their perception levels and professional experiences. Furthermore, certain variables demonstrate variation in both magnitude and direction of influence, reflecting the complexity of interactions within the model. Key findings from the analysis were grouped into two broad thematic categories based on their empirical relevance, enabling a clearer understanding of the results. Overall, the analytical framework proves effective in demonstrating that strategic coordination positively influences stakeholder engagement, while international image perception contributes to strengthening institutional trust, as supported by the results presented in Tables 1 and 5. While earlier assumptions suggested that strategic tools would produce uniform effects, the findings highlight the importance of context-specific application and adaptive implementation within policy and governance environments [1,2,3].

Empirical results further indicate that different dimensions of strategic practices exert varying influences on stakeholder perceptions across institutional settings [4,5]. In particular, policy coherence, public diplomacy intensity, stakeholder engagement, and institutional trust emerge as key factors shaping the model outcomes. Respondents' evaluations of policy tools and their practical experiences suggest that the effectiveness of strategic approaches increases as coordination improves, leading to higher perception scores ( $p < 0.01$ ). This improvement is associated with enhanced policy alignment and greater capacity for informed decision-making within institutional networks [6,7,8]. These findings provide a valuable reference point for interpreting relationships within the model and suggest that stronger strategic coordination contributes to reducing perception gaps, offering new empirical insights within a structured SEM framework [9].

From a theoretical perspective, the results confirm the relationship between strategic management practices and international image formation, supported by statistically significant outcomes and model validation indicators ( $\chi^2_{ms} > \chi^2_{bs}$ ) [13,14]. The increased explanatory power of the model reinforces the assumption that strategic coordination positively contributes to policy implementation processes. Additionally, the results demonstrate that policy coherence plays a crucial role in reducing inconsistencies in perception and supports the continued integration of strategic management approaches within international and institutional contexts [15,16]. The analysis carries important implications for policy design, governance, and decision-making in cross-national institutional environments, with strong statistical significance levels ( $p < 0.01$ ) indicating that stakeholders are increasingly capable of applying strategic tools effectively [17].

The findings also suggest that strategic alignment provides a useful framework for informing policymakers and enhancing policy implementation outcomes. While earlier perspectives often emphasized context-specific applications, the current study highlights broader applicability across different institutional settings. Consistent with previous literature, strategic management approaches in nation branding have shown variability across contexts, while public diplomacy strategies have been widely recognized but remain open to further integration within comprehensive policy frameworks [18]. Although existing literature highlights a wide range of strategic tools, the present findings indicate that stakeholders demonstrate varying levels of understanding in applying these mechanisms within complex environments, suggesting opportunities for further development and capacity building [19].

At the same time, the study identifies areas for further refinement, particularly in strengthening coordination mechanisms to enhance implementation effectiveness [20]. While the findings align with prior research, they also emphasize the importance of expanding empirical analysis across diverse contexts. The sample used in this study provides valuable insights within a specific setting, and future research may build on these results by incorporating comparative and longitudinal approaches to further enhance generalizability. Overall, respondents demonstrated a clear and consistent understanding of strategic practices, particularly in relation to coordination, communication, engagement, trust, and policy effectiveness. Although certain variables and contextual factors may benefit from deeper exploration, the findings underscore the importance of considering diverse stakeholder experiences within broader institutional frameworks. This perspective supports a more comprehensive understanding of strategic management and its role in shaping international image formation across different policy environments.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We conclude that relying solely on the direct and isolated application of strategic tools—such as design, communication, and coordination mechanisms—is insufficient to establish a comprehensive and effective framework for all stakeholders. Instead, an integrated approach to strategic management is essential to ensure that policy processes generate meaningful insights and sustainable outcomes. The findings highlight the importance of adopting a holistic perspective when implementing complex policy processes, where coordination, communication, and alignment are treated as interconnected components rather than separate elements.

Furthermore, this study emphasizes that strategic management practices operate differently across institutional contexts, suggesting the need for adaptable and context-sensitive frameworks. A strategic integration approach can enhance stakeholders' awareness of how policy instruments and strategic tools influence outcomes, thereby supporting more informed decision-making among policymakers and practitioners. In this regard, future research should adopt broader comparative perspectives to examine the application of strategic mechanisms across diverse institutional environments, enabling both theoretical validation and clearer practical implications.

The results also indicate that variations in strategic practices and institutional settings play a significant role in shaping policy outcomes and international image formation. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to explore these relationships through longitudinal and comparative approaches, extending the analysis to different country contexts and regional settings. Such efforts would provide deeper insights into how strategic coordination, communication processes, and policy alignment mechanisms evolve over time and across governance systems. Additionally, further research should place greater emphasis on the role of governance structures and policy implementation methods in determining how strategic dimensions—particularly coordination—affect different aspects of perception, including international image formation. Overall, advancing research in this direction will contribute to the development of more robust, flexible, and contextually relevant strategic management frameworks.

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