

The image of the state in the media as a theoretical problem

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Research Relevance

National image is an important strategic resource. A positive national image directly and powerfully influences a country's political, diplomatic, and commercial activities; national image and reputation have long been considered strategic resources for a nation. The media is one of the important means of constructing a national image,

In the era of global digital communication, a country's soft power increasingly depends on how its national image is constructed, circulated and perceived abroad. Western-dominated media narratives often diverge from China's self-presentation, producing persistent stereotypical or even hostile images that affect investment, tourism, diplomatic alliances and cultural exchange. Investigating the mechanisms of this symbolic struggle is therefore essential for both China's international communication strategy and the broader theory of nation branding.

Research Aim

This research aims to analyze the role and mechanisms of contemporary media, with a focus on visual and social media, in the construction and perception of China's national image, and to explore strategies for effectively managing this image in a fragmented global information landscape.

Research Tasks

To achieve this objective, the study undertakes the following tasks:

To define the complex, interdisciplinary concept of "national image" and establish its theoretical framework, distinguishing between entity image, media image, and cognitive image.

To map the current state of China's national image globally, identifying key perceptual divergences between developed and developing countries.

To examine the transformative role of media (from traditional to "new new media"/social media) as the primary channel for image construction.

To analyze the growing significance of visual communication in shaping national perceptions.

Object and Subject

Object: the process of national-image formation in international media.

Subject: China's media image as projected and perceived in developed and developing countries in the digital age.

Methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, primarily utilizing:

Theoretical Analysis & Synthesis: Reviewing and integrating literature from international relations, communication studies, and cultural studies.

Case Study Analysis: Examining specific instances of media portrayal and public perception shifts.

Comparative Analysis: Contrasting China's image in different geopolitical contexts (e.g., developed vs. developing nations) as revealed by survey data.

Scientific Novelty

The research provides an integrated analysis that connects classic theories of national image (e.g., Boulding, Jervis) with the realities of the contemporary digital media landscape,

emphasizing the dual, interactive challenges of visual narrative strategies and social media dynamics in shaping China's global perception.

Theoretical Basis

The research is grounded in several key theoretical pillars:

Foundational theories of national image and soft power (Kenneth Boulding, Robert Jervis, Joseph Nye).

Media theory, including Marshall McLuhan's concepts of media as extension and environment.

Theories of mediatization and the social construction of reality.

Jan Assmann's "cultural memory" theory regarding symbol-based collective image construction.

Data and frameworks from authoritative international surveys (Pew Research Center, Gallup).

Theoretical Significance

The work contributes to the interdisciplinary field of national image studies by:

Offering a structured framework for analyzing the tripartite relationship (entity-media-cognitive image) in the digital age.

Elaborating on the concept of "mediatized construction" as a key process influenced by technological change.

Highlighting the "visual turn" and the disruptive role of social media as critical, under-explored dimensions in theoretical models of national image formation.

Practical Significance

The findings offer actionable insights for practitioners and policymakers involved in China's public diplomacy and international communication, suggesting:

The need for differentiated communication strategies tailored to the distinct media ecosystems and preconceptions of developed versus developing regions.

The critical importance of investing in compelling visual narrative production that can transcend linguistic and cultural barriers.

The necessity of engaging proactively and authentically within global social media platforms to participate in and guide discourse, moving beyond one-way broadcasting to foster interactive understanding.

General Conclusion

This study has systematically examined the complex dynamics underlying the construction and perception of China's national image in the contemporary global landscape. By integrating theoretical frameworks from international relations, media studies, and cultural analysis with empirical data on international attitudes, several key conclusions emerge.

First, the research confirms that national image is a fundamentally tripartite and mediated construct, consisting of the entity image (objective reality), the media image (curated representation), and the cognitive image (public perception). For the vast majority of the global public, the media image serves as the indispensable and often definitive proxy for understanding a distant nation. This underscores that in the digital age, a country's image is not merely a reflection of its tangible achievements but is profoundly shaped by the architectures and logics of global media ecosystems.

Second, the analysis of China's current international image reveals a stark and consequential divergence. A significant gap exists between the predominantly negative perceptions held in major developed Western nations—closely tied to geopolitical tensions and ideological framing by influential media—and the largely positive perceptions prevalent across many developing regions, particularly in Africa, where narratives of partnership and mutual economic benefit dominate. This dichotomy illustrates that national image is not monolithic but is inherently relational, contextual, and interest-laden.

Third, the evolving nature of media itself has become a central variable in this process. The shift from traditional broadcast media to the interactive, user-driven realm of social media (Web

2.0) represents more than a change of channel; it constitutes a change in the very environment of perception. Furthermore, the "visual turn" in global communication elevates the strategic importance of symbols, narratives, and aesthetic representations in crafting memorable and emotionally resonant impressions.

Therefore, the mediatized construction of national image today is a dual challenge: it is a technical challenge of mastering new platforms and visual languages, and a political-cultural challenge of navigating entrenched stereotypes and competing geopolitical narratives. For China, this means that enhancing its global image requires a parallel, two-track strategy: the continued and transparent strengthening of its entity image through sustainable development and global cooperation, coupled with a sophisticated, audience-aware cultivation of its media image.

Theoretical contributions of this work lie in its synthesis of classical national image theory with contemporary media and visual culture studies, providing an updated framework for analysis. Practically, it argues for differentiated communication strategies: actively engaging with the skeptical publics and complex media landscapes of the developed world to reduce deficit and build bridges of understanding, while simultaneously consolidating the positive partnership narrative in the Global South. Crucially, it advocates for a move beyond one-way messaging toward fostering genuine discursive engagement on global digital platforms and investing in high-impact visual storytelling that can convey complexity and shared human values.

In conclusion, managing a national image in the 21st century is an ongoing, dynamic process of negotiation between a nation's reality, its mediated representations, and the diverse interpretive communities abroad. Success depends on recognizing this complexity and strategically aligning substantive action with empathetic and agile communication across all forms of media.

Источники и литература

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