

A Review of Research on National Image

Yi Wang*

School of Foreign Languages, Anhui Science and Technology University, Fengyang 233100, China

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: National image has developed into a prominent interdisciplinary research field that examines how nations are perceived, evaluated, and represented in international contexts. Since its emergence in the mid-twentieth century, the concept has expanded from a cognitive variable in international relations to a complex construct shaped by media discourse, market mechanisms, cultural narratives, and translation practices. Drawing on representative scholarship from international relations, communication studies, marketing, imagology, and translation studies, this paper offers a comprehensive review of research on national image. It traces the conceptual origins and theoretical evolution of the field, examines its major research domains and methodological approaches, and identifies key characteristics and trends. The review argues that national image should be understood as a dynamic, multidimensional, and discursively constructed phenomenon resulting from the interaction between self-representation and external perception. By synthesizing existing research, this paper clarifies the intellectual landscape of national image studies and highlights directions for future inquiry, particularly with regard to language, media, and translation.

Keywords: National image; Country image; International communication; Discourse; Translation

Online publication: January 30, 2026

1. Introduction

In the context of intensified globalization and increasingly frequent international communication, national image has attracted sustained scholarly attention. A nation's image affects not only diplomatic relations and foreign policy decisions, but also economic cooperation, cultural exchange, tourism, and international public opinion. As international interactions are increasingly mediated through news reporting, digital platforms, and translated texts, national image has become deeply embedded in communicative and discursive processes.

Early studies in international relations demonstrated that states often act not on objective reality itself, but on their subjective perceptions of other nations, which are shaped by belief systems and symbolic representations^[1]. These perceptions influence how international events are interpreted and how strategic decisions are made. With the expansion of mass media, national image gradually became linked to public opinion and media representation, as audiences came to rely heavily on mediated information to form impressions of foreign countries^[2].

Over time, research on national image has developed into a multidisciplinary and increasingly interdisciplinary field, drawing on international relations, communication studies, marketing, psychology, cultural studies, and translation studies. Scholars have approached the concept from different perspectives, emphasizing cognition, evaluation, discourse, branding, or cultural mediation. While this diversity has enriched the field, it has also resulted in conceptual ambiguity and methodological fragmentation. A systematic review is therefore necessary to clarify the conceptual foundations, theoretical evolution, and research orientations of national image studies.

This paper aims to provide such a review by synthesizing representative scholarship and tracing the development of national image research from its origins to contemporary interdisciplinary approaches. Rather than offering a simple chronological listing of studies, the paper focuses on the underlying theoretical logics, research domains, and methodological trends that have shaped the field.

2. Conceptual foundations of national image

2.1. National image as a cognitive construct

The concept of national image originated in the field of international relations and political psychology in the post-World War II period, when scholars began to question the assumption that states act solely on the basis of objective material conditions. One of the earliest and most influential formulations conceptualized national image as the images that nations hold of themselves and of other actors within the international system. In this sense, national image functions as a cognitive filter through which international reality is perceived, interpreted, and evaluated.

Building on this cognitive orientation, Holsti (1962) argued that national images are embedded in belief systems composed of perceived “facts” and value judgments^[3]. These belief systems shape how policymakers define situations, identify threats, and formulate responses. Importantly, Holsti emphasized that such belief systems are not neutral representations of reality, but selective and interpretive constructs influenced by prior experience, ideology, and institutional context. Wright (1957) similarly highlighted that conflicts in international relations often arise not between states themselves, but between distorted images of states, underscoring the explanatory power of national image in understanding international misunderstanding and conflict escalation^[4].

From this early perspective, national image was primarily associated with elite cognition and foreign policy decision-making. The analytical focus rested on how decision-makers perceive other nations’ intentions, capabilities, and reliability, and how these perceptions influence strategic behavior. Although this approach tended to privilege political elites and state actors, it established two enduring insights: first, that national image is inherently subjective and prone to bias; and second, that perception can exert causal influence independent of objective reality. These insights provided the intellectual foundation for later research that extended the concept beyond elite cognition to broader social and communicative contexts.

The theoretical significance of this cognitive approach lies in its challenge to purely materialist explanations of international behavior. By foregrounding perception and belief, early national image research introduced psychological mediation into the analysis of international relations. This perspective implies that even accurate or improved information may fail to alter state behavior if it contradicts deeply entrenched images and belief systems. National image thus operates as a form of cognitive shortcut that reduces complexity for decision-makers, while simultaneously increasing the risk of systematic misperception. These insights would later be extended beyond elite cognition to explain broader patterns of public perception and media representation.

2.2. Expansion and differentiation of the concept

As national image research expanded beyond international relations, the concept underwent significant elaboration and differentiation. Scholars in communication studies, marketing, and social psychology shifted the analytical focus from elite perception to public evaluation, defining national image as the aggregate of beliefs, impressions, and evaluative judgments associated with a particular country (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). This broader definition emphasized that national image is not confined to policymakers, but is socially shared among diverse audiences.

One important line of conceptual differentiation concerns the source of national image. Researchers have distinguished between internal images held by a nation's own citizens and external images held by foreign publics ^[5]. These two dimensions often diverge, reflecting differences in lived experience, media exposure, and ideological positioning. Such divergence highlights the potential tension between a nation's self-perception and how it is perceived internationally, a tension that has become increasingly salient in the context of global communication.

Another significant distinction is temporal, recognizing that national image is not static but evolves over time. Scholars have identified historical images rooted in collective memory, current images shaped by contemporary events and media discourse, and future-oriented images associated with expectations and projections ^[6]. This temporal layering suggests that national image is accumulative and path-dependent, shaped by both continuity and change.

Furthermore, national image has been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing political, economic, cultural, social, military, and diplomatic aspects. These dimensions interact dynamically rather than existing in isolation. For example, economic success may reinforce perceptions of political competence, while cultural narratives may soften perceptions of geopolitical rivalry. Recognizing this multidimensionality has significantly complicated the task of measurement, but it has also enhanced the explanatory power of national image research.

These conceptual refinements significantly expanded the analytical scope of national image research. By distinguishing between internal and external, past and future, and multiple substantive dimensions, scholars moved away from treating national image as a monolithic perception. Instead, national image came to be understood as a layered and relational construct, varying across audiences, historical moments, and communicative contexts. While this expansion enhanced explanatory power, it also introduced methodological challenges, particularly with regard to operationalization and comparison across studies.

2.3. National image as a dynamic and constructed phenomenon

A major theoretical shift in national image research has been the move from viewing image as a relatively stable cognitive representation to understanding it as a dynamic and socially constructed phenomenon. From this perspective, national image is not simply discovered or perceived, but actively produced, circulated, and contested through communication.

Media discourse plays a particularly central role in this process. Through patterns of selection, framing, and repetition, media narratives foreground certain aspects of national reality while marginalizing others ^[7]. These discursive practices contribute to the stabilization of particular national images over time, even when they diverge from lived experience or empirical complexity. National image thus becomes embedded in recurring narratives and symbolic repertoires.

In addition to media discourse, political rhetoric, cultural production, and translation practices are key mechanisms of image construction. Translation, in particular, mediates national image across linguistic and cultural

boundaries, reshaping meaning in accordance with target audiences' expectations and interpretive frameworks^[8-9]. From a constructionist perspective, national image is therefore best understood as an ongoing process of meaning-making rather than a fixed attribute of the nation itself.

From a constructionist perspective, national image should therefore be understood as an ongoing process of meaning-making rather than a fixed attribute of the nation itself. Images are continuously negotiated through discourse, shaped by power relations, institutional agendas, and cultural assumptions. This approach shifts analytical attention from the question of whether an image is "accurate" to how and why certain representations gain dominance, persistence, or legitimacy in specific communicative environments.

3. Development of national image research

3.1. International relations and strategic perception

In its initial stage, national image research was closely linked to the study of international conflict and cooperation. Early scholars argued that perceptions of other nations, rather than objective conditions alone, often determine state behavior. Boulding (1959) identified images of hostility or friendliness, strength or weakness, and stability or insecurity as core variables shaping expectations and strategic interaction within the international system.

Holsti (1962) further demonstrated that these images are shaped by selective perception and cognitive bias, making them prone to distortion. Decision-makers tend to interpret new information in ways that confirm pre-existing beliefs, thereby reinforcing entrenched national images. Wright (1957) similarly emphasized that international conflicts frequently arise not between states themselves, but between distorted images of states. From this perspective, national image functions as an intervening variable between material conditions and political action.

An important contribution of this early research lies in its challenge to rationalist models of international relations that prioritize material power and objective interests. By foregrounding perception, belief, and misperception, national image research introduced a psychological dimension into the analysis of international politics. This perspective suggests that even accurate information may fail to correct distorted national images if it contradicts entrenched belief systems. As a result, national image can exert causal influence independent of material capabilities, shaping threat perception, alliance formation, and conflict escalation.

However, early international relations research on national image was largely elite-centered and state-focused. The analytical emphasis rested on policymakers and strategic decision-makers, while broader social actors and communicative processes received limited attention. The national image was treated primarily as a mental construct rather than a socially circulated discourse. This limitation would later prompt scholars to shift their attention from elite cognition to public opinion, media representation, and communicative practices.

3.2. Media, communication, and public opinion

With the expansion of mass media and the globalization of information flows, scholars increasingly turned their attention to the role of communication in shaping national image. Media organizations were identified as primary image-formers, particularly for audiences lacking direct contact with foreign societies.

Research in communication studies demonstrated that foreign news is structured by news values and framing conventions rather than by objective representativeness. Agenda-setting theory explained how media influence what audiences think about, while framing theory illuminated how media discourse shapes how events and actors

are interpreted [10]. These theoretical advances shifted national image research toward the analysis of mediated representation and public perception.

From a communication perspective, national image is produced through repeated patterns of representation that become normalized over time. Media narratives tend to privilege certain themes, actors, and evaluative frames, thereby stabilizing particular images of foreign countries in public consciousness. Once established, these images may persist even when contradicted by new events, due to the cumulative and repetitive nature of media exposure.

This communicative turn marked a decisive expansion of national image research from elite perception to mass audiences. National image was no longer conceptualized solely as a strategic variable in foreign policy, but as a discursive outcome shaped by journalistic routines, institutional ideologies, and audience interpretation. This shift laid the groundwork for later studies that integrate media analysis, discourse studies, and public opinion research into the study of national image.

3.3 Market-oriented and branding perspectives From the late twentieth century onward, economic globalization prompted growing interest in the market implications of national image. Research in marketing demonstrated that perceptions of a country influence consumer evaluations of product quality, perceived risk, and purchasing decisions [11–12]. National image thus came to be viewed as an economic asset with tangible consequences.

These insights contributed to the emergence of nation branding studies, which conceptualize countries as symbolic entities competing for reputation in global markets [13–14]. Within this framework, national image is strategically managed through coordinated communication, branding initiatives, and international events.

Compared with earlier political and communicative approaches, market-oriented perspectives emphasize the instrumental and managerial dimensions of national image. National image is treated as a resource that can be shaped, leveraged, and evaluated in terms of economic outcomes. This approach has broadened the scope of national image research by linking perception to consumption, investment, and competitiveness.

At the same time, critics have noted that nation branding approaches risk oversimplifying complex national realities by reducing them to marketable symbols or slogans. By prioritizing strategic image management, such approaches may underplay structural inequalities, historical power relations, and ideological contestation [15]. These critiques have motivated scholars to reintroduce historical, cultural, and discursive perspectives into the analysis of national image.

4. Major research domains

4.1. Models and functions of national image

A central research domain concerns the development of conceptual models explaining how the national image operates. Early models focused primarily on cognitive beliefs and stereotypes, while later frameworks incorporated affective responses and behavioral intentions.

From an imagological perspective, Chew (2006) emphasized the historical and relational nature of national images, situating them within long-term power structures such as “center-periphery” and “strong-weak” relations. This approach highlights that national images are not merely individual perceptions, but culturally and historically sedimented representations shaped by asymmetric global relations.

More recent models conceptualize national image as a multi-layered construct involving cognition, emotion,

and action. These models suggest that beliefs about a country shape emotional responses, which in turn influence behavioral intentions such as purchasing, traveling, or supporting foreign policies^[16]. Such integrative frameworks provide a more comprehensive explanation of how national image translates into social and political outcomes.

4.2. Agents and pathways of image construction

Research has increasingly focused on the agents and pathways involved in national image construction. Governments, media organizations, cultural institutions, corporations, and individual actors all participate in shaping national images through various communicative practices^[17].

Rather than being produced by a single actor, a national image emerges from the interaction of multiple agents operating across different levels. Government-led public diplomacy initiatives may coexist with commercially driven branding campaigns and media-generated narratives, producing overlapping or even contradictory images of the same nation.

Recent studies indicate that digital platforms and social media have significantly transformed image construction processes by enabling decentralized and participatory communication^[18-19]. These developments challenge traditional top-down models of national image management and call for more nuanced analyses of networked communication environments.

4.3. Measurement and evaluation

The measurement of national image has long posed methodological challenges due to its abstract and multidimensional nature. Early studies relied on survey-based scales to capture cognitive evaluations of countries^[20].

Subsequent research has incorporated affective and behavioral dimensions into measurement models, offering more comprehensive frameworks for empirical analysis^[21]. These models allow researchers to examine how different dimensions of national image interact and influence stakeholder behavior.

The adoption of big data and event-based datasets has further expanded methodological possibilities^[22]. While these approaches enhance scale and comparability, they also raise questions regarding interpretation, context sensitivity, and the relationship between media visibility and public perception.

4.4. Language, culture, and translation

An increasingly influential strand of research foregrounds language, culture, and translation as central mechanisms of national image construction. Studies in imagology and translation demonstrate that translation reshapes national images by recontextualizing discourse across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Translation is not a neutral transfer of information, but an interpretive act involving selection, framing, and adaptation. Through lexical choices, narrative restructuring, and evaluative positioning, translation actively reconstructs national images for target audiences.

Empirical research on translated news discourse illustrates how translation mediates national image in concrete contexts. Valdeón (2016) showed how translated news contributed to constructing a new image of Spain, while Fois (2022) demonstrated how pandemic-related news translation shaped Italy's international image^[23-24]. These studies highlight translation as a strategic site of image negotiation.

5. Characteristics and trends of national image research

National image research exhibits several salient characteristics. It has evolved from single-discipline inquiry

to multidisciplinary expansion and interdisciplinary integration. Methodological approaches have diversified, incorporating surveys, discourse analysis, big data analytics, and experimental methods.

A notable trend is the increasing focus on the interaction between external perception and internal self-representation. Rather than treating these dimensions separately, recent research conceptualizes national image as the outcome of dynamic negotiation between hetero-construction and auto-construction.

6. Conclusion and future directions

This review has traced the evolution of national image research from its cognitive origins in international relations to its contemporary interdisciplinary configurations. National image emerges as a dynamic, multidimensional, and discursively constructed phenomenon shaped by communication, culture, and power relations.

Future research may benefit from greater attention to language and translation as core mechanisms of national image construction, particularly in the context of global media and digital communication. Diachronic, comparative, and corpus-based approaches can further illuminate how national images evolve across time and contexts, thereby enhancing both theoretical depth and practical relevance.

Funding

This article was sponsored by the grant of Anhui Province Philosophy and Social Science Planning Project: A Corpus-based Multi-dimensional Interpretation and Discursive Construction of Contemporary China's National Image in the English Translation of Public Diplomatic Texts (AHSKQ2021D181).

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Reference

- [1] Boulding KE, 1959, National Images and International Systems. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 3(2): 120–131.
- [2] Galtung J, Ruge MH, 1965, The Structure of Foreign News. *Journal of Peace Research*, 2(1): 64–91.
- [3] Holsti OR, 1962, The Belief System and National Images: A Case Study. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 6(3): 244–252.
- [4] Wright Q, 1957, International Conflict and the Belief Systems of Decision-makers. *World Politics*, 9(2): 255–271.
- [5] Jenes B, 2007, Reputation Building in International Relations. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest.
- [6] Chen X, 2010, The Evolution of National Image and its Implications for International Communication. *Journal of International Communication*, 16(2): 45–60.
- [7] Gitlin T, 1980, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. University of California Press, California.
- [8] Soenen J, 1995, Imagology and Translation. *Meta*, 40(1): 102–110.
- [9] Flynn P, Leerssen J, van Doorslaer L, 2015, Interconnecting Translation Studies and Imagology. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- [10] McCombs ME, Shaw DL, 1972, The Agenda-setting Function of Mass Media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2): 176–

[11] Liefeld JP, 1993, Experiments on Country-of-origin Effects: Review and Meta-analysis of Effect Size, in Product-country Images: Impact and Role in International Marketing. International Business Press, London, 117–156.

[12] Martin IM, Eroglu S, 1993, Measuring a Multi-dimensional Construct: Country Image. *Journal of Business Research*, 28(3): 191–210.

[13] Kotler P, 1997, Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning, Implementation, and Control (9th ed.). Prentice Hall, New Jersey.

[14] Dinnie K, 2022, Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice (2nd ed.). Routledge, London.

[15] Chew M, 2006, The Imagery of Foreign Policy: Constructing National Images. World Scientific, Singapore.

[16] Castano E, Bonacossa A, Gries P, 2016, National Images as Integrated Schemas: Subliminal Priming Effects on Foreign Policy Preferences. *Political Psychology*, 37(3): 321–336.

[17] Roth KP, Diamantopoulos A, 2009, Advancing the Country Image Construct. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(7): 726–740.

[18] Wu Y, Thelwall M, Kousha K, 2016, National Image on Twitter: A Comparative Study of Country Mentions. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 67(11): 2583–2597.

[19] Hu Y, Li DQ, Zhang X, 2024, Multimodal Construction Of National Image on Short-Video Platforms: A Case Study of TikTok. *Discourse & Communication*, 18(2): 233–252.

[20] Parameswaran R, Pisharodi RM, 1994, Facets of Country-of-origin Image: An Empirical Assessment. *Journal of Advertising*, 23(1): 43–56.

[21] Buhmann A, Ingenhoff D, 2015, The 4D Model of the Country Image: An Integrative Approach from the Perspective of Communication Management. *International Communication Gazette*, 77(1): 102–124.

[22] Szalai M, Garai N, 2023, Status-seeking with a Negative Image: The Changing Position of Visegrád Countries in the International Community between 2004 and 2020. *New Perspectives*, 32(1): 30–51.

[23] Valdeón RA, 2016, Constructing a New Image for Spain: The Role of Translation in *El País* English Edition. *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice*, 24(2): 242–257.

[24] Fois E, 2022, Translating Crisis: News Translation and the Construction of Italy's National Image during COVID-19. *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice*, 30(4): 585–600.

Publisher's note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.