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The Role of Digitalisation in Shaping Country Image: Towards a Conceptual Framework

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Abstract: The objective of this study is to examine the complex role played by digital technologies in shaping a country's image on the global stage. In recent times, with the rapid evolution of digital communication platforms, developing nations have increasingly turned to digital technologies to project their cultural, economic, and political narratives to an international audience. This paper examines the relevant literature relating to how digital technologies contribute to the creation and dissemination of a country's image, impacting the opinions and views of global stakeholders. It so doing, the paper reviews the challenges and opportunities arising from the integration of digital tools in country branding efforts, including misinformation concerns, digital diplomacy, cybersecurity, and the democratization of narrative-building. The paper then puts forward a provisional conceptual framework for primary research in Nigeria that will examine the interplay of digitalisation and country image. The paper concludes that digitalisation has a significant influence on a country's image, affecting perceptions of technological advancement, economic development, access to information, social transformation, and global competitiveness, and suggests that the framework put forward here may act as a model for cross-country comparisons in subsequent studies.

Keywords: Digitalisation, Country Image, Provisional Conceptual Framework, Digital Transformation.

1. Introduction

Digitalisation can significantly impact a country's image, transforming the perception of its economic competitiveness and cultural identity. Digital technologies can help countries to showcase their unique attributes and achievements through websites, social media platforms, and digital marketing campaigns. This digital storytelling allows countries to influence perceptions among key stakeholders, including tourists, investors, policymakers, and the global community. Digitalisation has democratised access to information, empowering individuals and communities to participate in shaping their country's image, but has also brought new risks as regards misinformation, cyber-attacks, and online reputation management. Despite these challenges, the extant literature emphasises the importance of authenticity, storytelling, and digital diplomacy in shaping global perceptions. Understanding how countries use digital tools to shape their image is crucial for policymakers, marketers, and scholars. This paper thus explores this research area, reviewing relevant literature and putting forward a framework that encapsulates the key concepts.



Figure 1: Digital Technologies 2024

The two concepts that are central to this research are digitalisation and country image. “Digitalisation” implies the use of modern electronic devices, tools, equipment, and resources to generate, store, process, or present information in numerical form. However, it also refers to the process change brought about by the introduction of digital technologies (Riedl et al., 2017). These digital tools are often categorized under acronyms like SMAC (social media, mobile, analytics/big data, and Cloud) and BRAID (blockchain, robotics, automation of knowledge work/artificial intelligence, internet of things, and digital fabrication), and these nine technologies have recently evolved to support a wider conceptual categorisation (Figure 1). According to Frenzel et al. (2021), digitalisation means converting analog information into digital format, but also entails the streamlining of processes and activities, reducing costs and enhancing efficiency for businesses. The strategic integration of digital technologies can bring about substantial changes to an organization's culture, operations, and value proposition. When this change also involves the development of new products or services, then "digital transformation" occurs (Wynn & Felser, 2023).

“Country image” refers to a nation's global perception and reputation, influenced by its digital presence, policies, and technological advancements (Revilla-Camacho et al., 2022). As the world becomes more interconnected and interdependent, the study of country image has gained prominence in academic and practical spheres. The paradigm shift demands understanding and managing the complexities of a country's image crucial for various stakeholders, including governments, businesses, and individuals as its impact on international relations, trade, and tourism. In today's world, a country's digital presence, policies, and technological advancements are crucial in shaping its international reputation (Ahmed et al., 2021). This rapid evolution of technology has completely revolutionized the way we communicate and access information within a country (Vahdat, 2022). Anholt (2021) emphasizes the need for countries to actively manage their image, recognizing its far-reaching implications on various aspects of global interactions and introduces the concept of a "good country". It explores strategies for fostering positive international perceptions, emphasizing collaboration and contribution to global well-being. How other countries view a nation can impact its ability to attract investments, foster diplomatic relations, and encourage citizen engagement (Abdulquadri et al., 2021). While some experts in developed nations may argue that we have moved beyond the digital revolution and entered a post-digital era, digitalisation remains critical for developing countries (Yina, 2020). The image is an important aspect when describing a country (Anyanka, 2018). It determines how citizens of a country are being viewed and treated based on their opinion about that country, which could either be positive or negative. The government should work with all sectors to ensure that digital tools are used in a way that can enhance the country's image.

Integrating digital technologies across various sectors plays a critical role in shaping a country's socio-economic landscape and global standing (Udegbumam et al., 2023). Digitalization has the potential to enhance government efficiency, transparency, and citizen participation while also generating employment prospects, but it remains a major challenge in most developing countries. Cybersecurity, infrastructure gaps, and lack of digital literacy are major hurdles that impede sustainable development in most African nations. The current study aims to understand how digitalisation contributes to the creation and promotion of a positive country image. The research will contribute to the ongoing discourse on the dynamic relationship between digitalisation and a country's global image, and more specifically this article addresses the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. What literature exists that explores the relationship between digitalisation and country image?

RQ2. Can a conceptual framework be developed from the extant literature to act as a basis for primary research?

Following this introduction, the research method is set out. Section 3 then directly addresses the two RQs in the Results section. This is followed by a discussion of some of the emergent themes in section 4. Section 5 provides a conclusion to the paper, highlighting key issues and suggesting possible future research agendas.

2. Research Method

The overall research approach is qualitative and inductive, based on an interpretivist paradigm. A scoping literature review was the main applied methodology used to address the RQs. Various academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science and Science Direct were accessed to search the existing literature. This allowed the identification of key sources and the construction of the provisional conceptual framework for the research project (which will subsequently involve in-depth interviews with appropriate local and central authority personnel and industry representatives). This is essentially qualitative research, which Mason (2017) concluded, because of its intensity, provides a powerful source of information for analysis. Bell et al. (2018) (p. 97) have observed that a literature review can provide “a means of gaining an initial impression” of relevant themes, whilst Porter et al. (2002) noted that a scoping review involves a “broad scan of contextual

literature” through which “topical relationships, research trends, and complementary capabilities can be discovered” (p. 351).

A literature review is a way of collecting and synthesizing previous research (Tranfield et al., 2003) and can provide a firm foundation for advancing knowledge and facilitating theory development (Webster & Watson, 2002). Here, the study expands on the two main concepts—digitalisation and country image—to develop the provisional conceptual framework to address the two RQs noted above.

3. Results

3.1 RQ1. What Literature Exists That Explores the Relationship Between Digitalisation and Country Image?

In contemporary literature, the intersection of digitalisation and country image has become a compelling area of study, reflecting the increasing importance of digital platforms in shaping perceptions of countries. The digital landscape is constantly evolving, and nations worldwide recognise the significance of projecting a positive and appealing country image through various digital platforms (Ahmed et al., 2021). Experts have identified digitalisation as the defining characteristic of our current era (Gebayew et al., 2018). The role of digitalisation in shaping a country's image is a complex and evolving phenomenon that requires further exploration and analysis. Furthermore, the digital divide between urban and rural areas within a country can exacerbate inequalities and distort the true representation of its development progress. As digital technologies continue to advance and permeate every aspect of society, policymakers, marketers, and scholars must understand how countries use these tools to shape their image and influence global perceptions.

Lee and Kwak (2020) emphasize the importance of social media in nation branding and argue that digital platforms have become indispensable tools for shaping and managing a country's image, offering unprecedented opportunities for engagement and influencing a country's image in the digital age. Research findings revealed that digitalisation has facilitated the dissemination of information about countries, both positive and negative, and has played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion. Manor's (2020) studies explore the impact of digitalisation on Israel's image and digital diplomacy. They highlight how digitalisation has transformed diplomacy, allowing countries to communicate directly with international audiences through social media, digital campaigns, and online initiatives. The study also explores the challenges and opportunities associated with digital diplomacy, highlighting its importance in shaping global perceptions. The widespread use of digital platforms in shaping a country's image also presents a range of challenges and ethical considerations. Digitalisation has brought about significant ethical implications in shaping a country's image on the global stage. Lee (2021) submitted that the use of digital technologies by governments and businesses can influence perceptions of a country's values, governance, and societal norms. Issues such as data privacy, online surveillance, and the spread of misinformation have raised concerns about the trustworthiness and credibility of a country's digital presence. As countries strive to enhance their digital capabilities, it is crucial to consider the ethical implications of digitalisation on their overall image and reputation in the global arena. Due to global competition among countries, it has become the responsibility of every country to be concerned about their image and identity projecting to the rest of the world (Hakala et al., 2013; Saad, 2020). Digitalisation significantly impacts a country's tourist image, soft power, and global standing, with studies highlighting its role in destination marketing through user-generated content and online reviews.

The level of stability in a country's government and political system can have a significant impact on its image. While it is a general assumption that the concept of country image plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and influencing the decisions of individuals and organizations regarding travel, investment, and trade. Such areas of concern include political stability, economic strength, cultural heritage, international relations, natural beauty, and social issues. So, countries with stable governments and peaceful societies are often perceived more positively by outsiders. Anyanka (2018) submits that image is an important aspect when describing a country, while Anholt (2009) concludes that using images themselves may not be a direct measurement of a country's competitiveness. However, the importance of images is greater in the modern digital age (Thompson, 2020). A comprehensive understanding of the current state of place branding, including the branding of countries in the context of trade, tourism, or international relations, and the shaping of a country's image, is essential for fostering positive perceptions and achieving sustainable global engagement (Govers, 2020). Furthermore, nations need to ensure that technology is used to promote shared prosperity and enhance democracy, rather than restrict freedom and opportunities both nationally and internationally.

In this era, digital security is crucial because it forms the foundation of a country's economic and social development and national security. Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez (2021) reveal how technological advancements, communication strategies, and audience responses influence perceptions of nations, forming the basis for understanding digital nation branding. According to Ylianttila et al., (2020), digital security has become a significant concern for nations because it affects the security of digital infrastructure, individual privacy, and confidentiality, as well as a country's national security. A positive image can in turn lead to increased economic and political influence for the country. Modern innovative technology such as blockchain technology helps countries to identify potential threats, share information easily, and protect mechanisms in them that have the sensitivity to protect information, and the level of digital security of a country can significantly impact its national image. As a result, technology can be leveraged to improve national security and economic stability in the nation. Schwab and Sala-i-Martin (2016) emphasize the importance of innovation in keeping countries competitive and enhancing their global image. Countries with advanced security systems and protocols, such as surveillance technology or emergency response systems may be perceived as more secure. The role of digitalisation in shaping a country's image is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon that warrants careful examination.

Cai & McKenna (2023) investigated how digital affordances, such as social media platforms, influence the creation of a national destination image. While not expressly focused on country image, it does provide insights into how digitalisation affects impressions of locations with an emphasis on tourism management. Jin et al. (2021) investigated the effect of digital technology in improving country's image through a case study of South Korea. This study looks at how digital technologies, including social media and mobile applications, help to shape South Korea's image as a tourist destination. It emphasizes the importance of digitalisation in maintaining and developing a positive national image. A country's image can be greatly influenced by the stability of its government and political system. Yang et al. (2021) investigate how digital change influences destination image through a study of Chinese outbound tourists. This study looks at the impact of digital transformation, such as e-commerce, mobile payment, and social media, on the destination image perceived by Chinese outbound tourists. It emphasizes the role of digitization in altering perceptions of countries as travel destinations. Lee and Kwak (2020) undertook a thorough analysis of the effects of digitalisation on a country's image, with a particular emphasis on the role played by the political system and internet freedom as moderators. This research delves into how digitalisation shapes people's perceptions of a country's image, with a keen eye on how the political landscape and internet regulation may affect these outcomes. It suggests that the impact of digitalisation on a country's image may vary depending on the political climate and the level of internet governance in place.

3.2 RQ2. Can a Provisional Conceptual Framework be Developed From the Extant Literature to act as a Basis for Primary Research?

A conceptual framework can provide a theoretical basis for understanding the impact of digitalisation on a country's image, which will be applied to Nigeria's specific circumstances in due course. Figure 2 depicts the provisional conceptual framework based on the literature review, reflecting the interactions between the key concepts involved.

3.2.1 Impact of Social Media

In recent years, the rise of online platforms has created a significant shift in communication patterns (Lüders et al., 2022). Social media is a recent addition to the realm of information and communication technology, particularly in Africa (Orngu, 2018). Social media has become the dominant platform for information sharing, offering both benefits and drawbacks. At first, social media platforms have become essential in shaping our interactions and cultural expression, providing numerous advantages such as effortless communication and collaboration, streamlined data management, and access to extensive information. According to Collins et al. (2021), while it can be a blessing, it has also led to significant suffering. The lack of regulation opens the door to misuse, resulting in many forms of criminalities. Social media plays a significant role in shaping Nigeria's global image. While it has the power to connect millions of people and provide access to information, it also presents risks to personal safety and societal well-being. Mobile internet and social platforms have allowed citizens to engage with the government and access news, promoting transparency and accountability. However, the government has yet to fully grasp the potential of digital platforms in combating misinformation, projecting a positive image, and engaging with international audiences. The impact of social media on Nigeria's image is multifaceted, encompassing global perception, cultural representation, economic implications, political influence, diaspora engagement, and challenges related to misinformation.

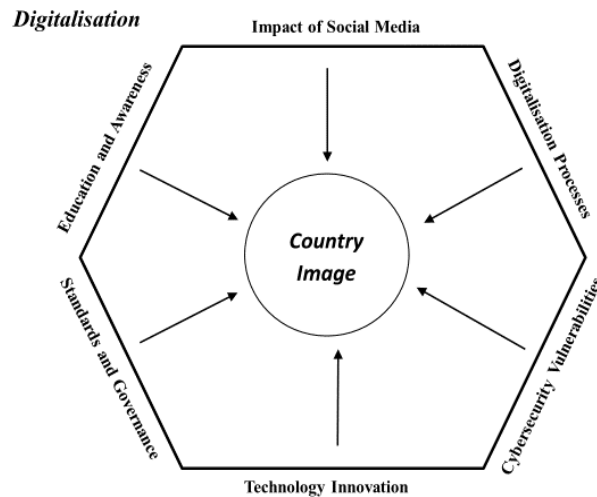


Figure 2: Provisional Conceptual Framework for the Study

3.2.2 Digitalisation Processes

The process of digitalisation leads to an increase in organisational productivity and efficiency, and its success depends on how effectively it is implemented, particularly in the context of process re-engineering (Wynn & Felser, 2023). Digitalisation is a driving force for change in technology and society, and as such, it has implications for both internal and external relationships of individual countries. Countries create their images through international interaction, and these images have an impact on foreign economic and other relationships. In the past, country images were based on hard and soft power resources, such as military, economic, and cultural strength. However, in today's information society, a country's ability to manage its digital information and its global accessibility will play a significant role in shaping its image and relationships with other countries. Nigeria's policies and objectives to improve its capabilities in the digital global environment and promote the development of its identity and the well-being of its societies are closely related to this topic. Nigeria has made significant progress in this regard, with the deployment of digital health platforms, e-learning initiatives, and mobile banking services. These initiatives have improved access to vital services, particularly in underserved areas, thereby enhancing Nigeria's image as a country committed to leveraging technology for social development and inclusion.

A related aspect is the provision of necessary support infrastructure. Investing in infrastructure and leveraging digital opportunities can enhance global competitiveness and digital leadership (Johnson-Hart, 2023). Nigeria is facing various challenges due to a lack of technological infrastructure, including internet connectivity, mobile networks, and digital services, which significantly impact Nigeria's digital transformation journey. Investments in broadband infrastructure, data centers, and e-government platforms are crucial for supporting digital innovation and inclusion. Technology infrastructure availability plays a crucial role in shaping Nigeria's image by impacting investment attractiveness, digital inclusion, business competitiveness, quality of life, global reputation, and addressing existing challenges and disparities (Adeleke, 2021).

3.2.3 Cybersecurity Vulnerabilities

The 21st century has seen significant technological and informational advancements, leading to a rise in global risks and uncertainty. One notable consequence of this progress is the emergence of new forms of criminal activity, such as cybercrime, resulting from globalization and digital transformation (Armencheva et al., 2019). These impact national security, economic growth, trust and confidence, global reputation, policy and governance, capacity building, and collaboration. Oyewole et al., (2024) opine that safeguarding data and organizational resources from cyber threats is imperative in light of the complexity of cyber-attacks and the impact of digital footprints. The increasing reliance on digital platforms and the interconnectedness of systems expose the country to potential cyberattacks and data breaches (Deora & Chudasama, 2021). For instance, social media has proved to have the potential in Nigeria to reach millions all around the world but poses danger not just to the society, but even unintended consequences to the individual who is at the receiving end, including the security of life. Cybersecurity and Vulnerability in Nigeria affecting perceptions of national security, economic growth, trust and confidence, global reputation, policy and governance, capacity building, and

collaboration. Cyberattacks, data breaches, and online fraud highlight the importance of cybersecurity awareness, capacity-building, and proactive measures to safeguard digital assets and mitigate vulnerabilities among Nigerians. So, therefore, Countries' technology can be leveraged to improve national security and economic stability with advanced security systems and protocols (Kitchin, 2020).

3.2.4 Technology Innovation

The integration of digital technologies is considered a crucial driver of innovation (Lee & Trimi, 2021). For example, the development of information and communication technology (ICT) and digital innovation are essential for a country's global competitiveness. Additionally, digital platforms play a significant role in promoting international collaboration, partnerships, and information exchange, which ultimately contributes to a positive global image (Melissen and Wang, 2019). However, the study also showed that the increased use of digital platforms may facilitate cultural exchange, knowledge sharing, and improved diplomatic relations. It is important to note that technological advancement is outpacing the ability of policies and regulations to provide protection and ensure that technology is channeled for positive rather than nefarious purposes. The impact of technology innovation in Nigeria is multifaceted and influences perceptions of economic growth, competitiveness, global recognition, social impact, digital inclusion, policy support, collaboration, and partnerships (Ajayi & Mohammed, 2022). The deployment of digital health platforms, e-learning initiatives, and mobile banking services has improved access to vital services, particularly in underserved areas, thereby enhancing Nigeria's image as a country committed to leveraging technology for social development and inclusion.

3.2.5 Standards and Governance

Establishing regulatory standards and governance frameworks is essential to ensure the responsible use of digital technology, protect user data privacy, and promote digital trust. Effective governance mechanisms facilitate collaboration between government agencies, industry stakeholders, and civil society to address emerging challenges and promote ethical practices. The use of standards and governance in digitalisation is essential for shaping a country's image by ensuring quality, reliability, interoperability, compliance, consumer protection, international collaboration, capacity building, and innovation. For instance, in Nigeria, adoption of common technical standards for digital payments and financial services has facilitated interoperability among banks, fintech companies, and mobile money operators, enhancing the country's image as a conducive environment for digital innovation and business integration. The establishment of regulatory bodies like the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) have strengthened Nigeria's regulatory environment for digital technologies, enhancing its image as a transparent and regulated market for digital investments and activities (Ezeigweneme et al., 2024). "Digital diplomacy" can also be viewed as an element of governance, and can project a positive image to international audiences. The proliferation of mobile internet and social media platforms, enables citizens to access news, participate in online discussions, and engage with government agencies, thereby fostering transparency and accountability (Abdulquadri et al., 2021).

3.2.6 Education and Awareness

Digital technology contributes to global economic competition and progress in developing countries and sustainability. The key to the journey towards a Smart nation vision requires skills, confidence, and motivation to use technology. Government must foster a digitally inclusive society and empower citizens to leverage technology for personal and professional development. Wong et.al. (2023) submit that competencies in various areas such as computer literacy, ICT literacy, information literacy, data literacy, and media literacy become a basic need of any society. Digital literacy is the ability to define, access, manage, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies and networked devices for participation in economic and social life. Educational initiatives, training programs, and public awareness campaigns play a vital role in promoting responsible digital citizenship and mitigating online risks (Aminu et al., 2021). These digital technologies have transformed the way we learn and acquire knowledge through online learning platforms, educational software, and digital libraries have revolutionized education by offering flexible and interactive learning opportunities (Mtebe & Raphael, 2018). Education and awareness are critical variables in the digitalisation process in Nigeria, impacting perceptions of digital literacy, empowerment, cybersecurity, digital rights, policy advocacy, international collaboration, and cooperation.

4. Discussion

The provisional conceptual framework provides the platform for developing primary research on the relationship between digitalisation and country image in Nigeria. However, certain aspects warrant further discussion at this stage.

Firstly, the world of digital transformation offers great opportunities for government organizations to improve their efficiency, productivity, transparency, and accountability. It also serves as a valuable tool for driving government reform and addressing complex societal issues. Intelligent governments are a new phenomenon that utilize cutting-edge technologies and innovative strategies to develop strong and adaptable administrative frameworks. They invest in emerging technologies and creative strategies to gain a comprehensive understanding of their environment, accurately evaluate situations or individuals, and make swift and responsive decisions to tackle perceived challenges. A prime example of digital transformation is the creation of a digital economy, which prioritizes seamless and user-centric experiences as citizens expect public services to be accessible, efficient, and flexible. Digital transformation involves a complete shift of an entity into the digital economy, including tools, activities, people, and management, signifying a change from non-digital.

Secondly, digital transformation offers immense potential for becoming more proficient, productive, transparent, and accountable (Sarker et al., 2018). Technological infrastructure, including internet connectivity, mobile networks, and digital services, significantly impact the digital transformation journey. Technology innovation has a multifaceted analytical impact on the country's image, influencing perceptions of economic growth, competitiveness, global recognition, social impact, digital inclusion, policy support, collaboration, and partnerships. The proliferation of mobile internet and social media platforms enables citizens to access news, participate in online discussions, and engage with government agencies, thereby fostering transparency and accountability (Abdulquadri et al., 2021). Investments in broadband infrastructure, data centers, and e-government platforms are crucial for supporting digital innovation and inclusion. Technology infrastructure availability plays a crucial role in shaping Nigeria's image by impacting investment attractiveness, digital inclusion, business competitiveness, quality of life, global reputation, and addressing existing challenges and disparities (Adeleke, 2021).

Thirdly, education and awareness are critical variables in the digitalisation process and impacting perceptions of digital literacy, empowerment, cybersecurity, digital rights, policy advocacy, international collaboration, and cooperation. Cybersecurity and vulnerability in Nigeria have a multifaceted analytical impact on the country's image, affecting perceptions of national security, economic growth, trust and confidence, global reputation, policy and governance, capacity building, and collaboration. As digitalisation accelerates in Nigeria, cybersecurity threats pose significant risks to individuals, businesses, and critical infrastructure. Cyberattacks, data breaches, and online fraud highlight the importance of cybersecurity awareness, capacity-building, and proactive measures to safeguard digital assets and mitigate vulnerabilities among Nigerians (Adejumo, 2023).

Fourthly, the advancement of digital technologies has paved the way for Smart/Intelligent governments, which utilize innovative strategies and emerging technologies to establish resilient governance structures. By leveraging digital tools, governments can improve their efficiency and service delivery, while creating accessible channels for citizens to engage with the government. Governments around the world are implementing digital innovation projects to refine their processes and enhance their business strategies. According to Welby & Tan (2022), digital government entails delivering public value through new methods and making services and procedures digital by default. This requires the integration of ICT in public sector reform from the outset. The proposed innovation is not limited to national, regional, or local government levels, but extends to public sector services like transport, education, and healthcare, as well as various government agencies, and regulated and semi-regulated services, which vary by country. The roadmap for policymakers, professionals, and researchers is to understand the intricacies of the digital era and harness its potential for inclusive and sustainable development (Sharma and Gupta, 2024).

5. Conclusion

Nigeria is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon with far-reaching implications for socioeconomic development and global competitiveness (Chingoriwo, 2022). By addressing key challenges, leveraging opportunities, and embracing digital transformation holistically, Nigeria can position itself as a leading digital economy and a beacon of innovation in Africa and beyond (Oladeinde et al., 2023).

This paper has set out some key issues and a provisional conceptual framework that will provide the platform for primary research in this area. The end-goal is to enhance Nigeria's global image through targeted marketing, social media campaigns, and improved digital presence. This will improve the perception of Nigeria among investors, visitors, and stakeholders, increase FDI, boost tourism, facilitate meaningful engagement with stakeholders, utilize data-driven decision-making, and reinforce digital skills among stakeholders. Policy recommendations will be developed based on implementation insights and lessons learned. Digitalisation greatly impacts a country's image, enabling it to promote its culture, legacy, economic potential, and achievements to a global audience. It combats disinformation and preconceptions, fostering two-way communication and transparency. However, digitalisation alone does not provide a solution; serious efforts to address socioeconomic growth, governance, and human rights are required. Authenticity and communication consistency are also essential for developing a lasting national image. Nations may improve their reputation and attract investment by embracing innovation, utilizing digital platforms, and implementing strategic communication tactics.

Further research could also apply this framework to other nations in the developing world to help advance the deployment of digital technologies in support of national image progression. This could provide the basis for cross-country comparisons, and the development of theoretical perspectives in what remains a relatively unresearched field of study.

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