

# Image and Stereotype Formation in Digital Public Relations: Toward an Integrated Theoretical Framework

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## Abstract

The study aims to construct a framework between the image and the stereotype from this ideological difference in terms of digital PR (PR) and digital media so that an effective communication strategy can be established. PR has transformed from a reactive function that manages unit situations, nurture's organizational reliability, and shape's opinion into a strategic discipline over the past few decades. Digital PR agencies in the digital world prefer to engage audience members through a controlled and monitored content targeting lambda, while with limited explanatory output — and even control — on digital media; its main mission is just a transfer of information. Research has shown that images are active and multi-dimensional, including cognitive, emotional, and practical elements, and can be strategically phased to build an image through well-thought-out PR programs. In contrast, stereotypes are inflexible, oversimplified, and more resistant to change, and can reinforce bigotry. Researchers need to distinguish between these concepts in order to improve the audience's trust, persuade them, and address the decision-making processes. The difference between the two is clearly misunderstood, and through this study, a better understanding of digital communication can be gained, leading organizations to practical insight in encouraging positive perceptions while mitigating the negative impacts that stereotypes have on the electronic sphere.

**Keywords:** digital public relations, digital media, image, stereotype, organizational reputation

## 1. Introduction

Public relations (PR)— the evolution of relentless evolution is embodied not only in progressive business practices but also transformed and limned PR along the way, as contingent upon changing communication landscapes, organizational imperatives, and societal advances. The nature of development is thus synergetic with actions taken by agencies and practitioners to improve the communication processes and create indelible marks in the minds of their target audiences. The Conceptualism of PR emerged first as a perspective of creating communication management between organizations and their publics, which is propelled by mutual understanding and institutional reputation (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The meaning of PR is often devised in connection with a strategic communication medium that includes the management of an organization's reputation, the establishment/maintenance of relationships among organizational stakeholders as well as the media, and also assists in shaping decisions while facilitating the flow of communication within an organizational setting (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2006). They convey the essence of PR as a formal and systematic area within which advanced practices are executed as an informational activity. PR and media have a few things in common, but they are also very different in terms of how and where usage occurs. If one returns to the definition of media institutions, which defines them as places that produce news and share information, public relations would be primarily about managing communication strategically so as to use its content for the sake of the organization and lay out what it means by implication (Smith, 2017). As media and strategic communication become more objectively porous in a digital epoch, that distinction is becoming sharper. Digital PR (short for digital public relations) is a massive transformation in modern times of traditional old-style public relations, driven by advances in Internet technologies and high-bandwidth communication networks. Hence, communication is constantly on the move from linear or one-way to interactive, participatory development. The management of the organizational image has been made more difficult by digital environments since members of audiences are participating in the co-creation and interpretation of information (Heath & Johansen, 2018).

Thus, this research aims to conceptually and functionally analyze public relations characteristics, distinct between media practices and conversion in digital time. The study also seeks a consistent framework of the role in which public relations may participate in creating images for an organization or creating stereotypes, as this can be understood today within a mass-mediated environment. It provides a theoretical basis for examining how meanings are produced and negotiated through new communication systems in modernity.

## 2. Literature Review

More recent scholarship in the area of digital public relations has drawn attention to a radical reconceptualization of organizational communication in digital spaces. PR practice and scholarship have moved away from classic one-way models of communication towards interactive frameworks which position the co-construction of meaning by organizations and audiences in networked media contexts (Macnamara, 2020; Taylor & Kent, 2021). In this environment, organizational image has become a dynamic and ever-evolving impression sculpted through social media engagement by various stakeholders in both user-generated content and algorithmically facilitated exposure (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2021; Kietzmann et al., 2020). The prevalence of visual and multimodal communication enhances the role played by images and symbolic representations in determining public perception in digital spaces (Jewitt, 2021; Kress, 2020).

Simultaneously, work on the formation of stereotypes has established that environments associated with digital media contribute dramatically to the construction, consolidation and spread of our oversimplified mental pictures of social and political actors. While stereotypes serve the role of cognitive heuristics that facilitate efficient processing of complex social information, in the digital ecosystems these stereotypes become amplified through algorithmic personalization, selective exposure and engagement-driven content dissemination (Sunstein, 2021; Pariser, 2020). A number of recent empirical studies similarly highlight how social media are especially adept at quickly circulating stereotypical representations via user activity, sharing behaviours and viral content dynamics (Marwick & Lewis, 2020; Boyd, 2020). In addition, progress in computational high quality and visual media technologies has been shown to reiterate and, in certain situations, amplify say demographic and social barriers within the era of digital content material programs (Bianchi et al., 2022; Fraser et al., 2023).

Thus, the overlap of digital public relations with image development and stereotype construction has become a major subject in interdisciplinary research. Organizational communicative strategies seek to build and control institutional image, but also participate in larger social and national discourses that help define the new public sense-making (Kent & Li, 2021; Castells, 2020). Image formation, when derived from organisational channels and sent through a digital medium so close the system, becomes an active relationship. Yet, though the academic interest in this topical issue is rising, existing literature suffers from fragmentation and limited theoretical cross-fertilization between public relations theory and research on media framing or stereotypes. This gap highlights the importance of an integrated theoretical framework that incorporates how image formation and stereotype dynamics interact in digital public relations environments, which is the aim of this paper.

## 3. Method

The current research adopts a qualitative design, situated within an interpretivist epistemology underpinned by a constructivist ontological position. Given the conceptual and theoretical nature of the study, which aims to define and distinguish between “mental image” and “stereotype” in the context of digital public relations and digital media environments, such an approach is absolutely justified. This study adopts interpretivism due to the understanding that meanings are extracted from social construction, making them context-sensitive and shaped through discursive practices in digital environments. Constructivism is used in an ontological sense to conceptualize both mental images and stereotypes, not as stable or objective realities, but rather as autonomous and socially stratified cognitive and symbolic phenomena. The emerging literature concerning public relations, digital communication, and media studies still showcases a lack of conceptual clarity in separating the terminology of “mental image” from that of “stereotype,” even within the domain of digital communications. Previous scholarship has largely examined these concepts separately, often within narrow disciplinary boundaries and with little attention to how they interact in shaping public perception in digitally mediated contexts. Second, the rapid evolution of digital public relations—algorithmic mediation, participatory communication, and dominance of visual content—renders image and stereotype formation more complex. This illustrates an evident theoretical gap that calls for a more coherent conceptualization of how these constructs function in today's digital ecosystems. In light of this gap, the current study focuses on building an integrated conceptual framework that separates mental image from stereotype and shows how they interact in the context of digital public relations and the digital media environment. Thus, the following research question was guided by this study: How are mental images and stereotypes created and distinguished from each other in the context of digital public relations and digital media environments in relation to one another?

The study uses a qualitative conceptual analysis based on a systematic literature review and an interpretive synthesis of existing academic work. It is appropriate for theory-building research because it allows for the discovery of differences and delimitation of conceptual boundaries across related literature. In accordance with qualitative research principles (Bryman, 2012), the analysis is informed by context-dependent interpretation, conceptually rigorous detail, and theoretical integration. Additionally, the research incorporates systematic literature review methodologies with conceptual synthesis practices to identify and interpret the contribution of existing theoretical studies within public relations that contributed to notions of media frames, digital communication stakeholders, and stereotype dynamics (Krippendorff 2013; Pacheco-Vega 2018). The aspect of this study is that it systematically reconstructs the conceptual distinctions between mental image and stereotype by

way of iterative reading, comparison, and abstraction of key concepts. The idea behind the analytical process is breaking down what definitions are already out there in the literature and stitching them back together into a holistic conceptual framework. We conceptualize mental images as flexible, idiosyncratic, and contextually shaped cognitive representations, and stereotypes as more rigidly united socially shared and ideologically sanctioned categorical structures. This distinction is especially important in digital contexts, where both image construction and stereotype reinforcement are exacerbated by algorithmic filtering, fast-paced information flow, and participatory communication.

In sum, this methodological design of epistemology-ontology-conceptual analysis from interpretivist and constructivist perspectives provides a scope to study the mental image–stereotype relationship coherently. It responds directly to the articulated research gap and reinforces alignment between the research problem, research question, and analytical approach.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 *The Emergence of the Concept of Public Relations*

Public relations have evolved alongside changes in communication systems, organizational needs, and media environments. As organizations expanded, public relations emerged as a discipline concerned with relationship building, reputation management, communication transparency, and accountability (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The profession developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in response to industrialization, the growth of mass media, and the increasing need for organizations to address public opinion strategically. Early pioneers such as Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays played a key role in shaping the field. Lee promoted transparent communication between organizations and their publics, particularly during crises (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000). Bernays introduced psychological and sociological principles into public relations practice, emphasizing its role in influencing public attitudes and behavior (Bernays, 1928; Tye, 1998). Contemporary scholarship, however, reexamines these contributions within broader discussions of persuasion, power, and social influence. With the development of mass media and later digital technologies, public relations evolved from a publicity-oriented function into a management discipline focused on relationship building, organizational communication, and stakeholder engagement (Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Grunig, 2008). The digital age further transformed the field through social media and interactive platforms that enable real-time, two-way communication and user-generated content, reshaping organizational image and reputation (Macnamara, 2020; Kent & Lane, 2021). Consequently, contemporary public relations extend beyond message dissemination to encompass continuous interaction, stakeholder monitoring, and collaborative meaning-making (Kotwal, 2019; Vroomen & Zoonen, 2015; Bencherki et al.).

### 4.2 *Functions of Public Relations*

At the heart of public relations is the establishment, enhancement, and maintenance of relationships between organizations and their stakeholders. Public relations is no longer viewed merely as a communication tool but as a strategic management function that fosters credibility, trust, and mutual understanding (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). In contemporary communication environments, PR encompasses information dissemination, reputation management, stakeholder engagement, and crisis communication. A key function of public relations is the strategic dissemination of information through appropriate channels, including press releases, corporate reports, websites, and social media platforms. This function promotes transparency, reduces misunderstandings, and supports informed public engagement (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006). Reputation and crisis management also represent essential PR functions, particularly in an era of rapid information exchange and increased media scrutiny. Effective crisis communication requires timely responses, message consistency, and stakeholder engagement to minimize reputational damage and maintain public trust (Coombs, 2014). Relationship management remains a central dimension of modern public relations, emphasizing dialogue, responsiveness, and long-term engagement with stakeholders such as customers, employees, investors, and communities (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). Public relations also contribute to communicating organizational values, social initiatives, and corporate responsibility, thereby supporting ethical behavior and shaping public discourse (Heath, 2013). The development of digital communication technologies has expanded these functions through social media and online platforms that enable real-time interaction and immediate feedback. As a result, public relations have become a more strategic, relational, and digitally integrated function that contributes to organizational reputation, stakeholder trust, and long-term sustainability (Macnamara, 2020; Kent & Lane, 2021).

### 4.3 *The Distinction between Public Relations and Media*

Although public relations and media are closely related, they perform distinct functions within the communication process. The primary difference lies in purpose and control. Public relations is a strategic organizational function concerned with managing relationships between organizations and their stakeholders, shaping reputation, and supporting organizational objectives. Unlike media organizations, public relations practitioners have substantial control over message content, timing, and communication channels (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006). In contrast, the media functions as an independent institution that disseminates information to the public. Journalists and media organizations determine how information is selected, framed, and presented, limiting organizational control over coverage (Micquel, 2010). A further distinction relates to scope.

Public relations encompass activities such as reputation management, crisis communication, internal communication, and community engagement, with a focus on long-term relationships and strategic objectives. Media organizations primarily focus on informing mass audiences and reporting news, rather than advancing organizational goals (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Although public relations and media maintain a complementary relationship, they are not interchangeable. The media serves as one channel through which public relations messages may reach audiences, but organizations must also rely on direct communication channels such as social media, events, and corporate communication. Understanding this distinction enables organizations to use both functions more effectively within their communication strategies (Heath, 2013).

#### *4.4 Digital PR and Digital Media*

And in this new digital age PR (PR) and the media have become so intertwined. Digital transformation has delineated what way organizations interact with their stakeholders, and in order to create successful communication strategies (Adenuga, 2025; Uygun and Dongola, 2022), one must know how PR and digital media will play different roles that should be prepared for.

#### *4.5 Definition and Scope*

Digital PR (Digital public relations) is the practice of gaining online coverage for your company, brand or organization through digital media. That includes engaging with stakeholders via digital channels — social media, blogs, online portals online and other units of digital communication. Digital PR takes place outside traditional promotion; It deals with reputation management, branding and interaction with the audience (Lakshmana, 2015; Dongola & Uygun, 2022). Attributes of Digital PR, in terms of designing matches with campaigns that meet organizational goals and are adapted to the dynamic nature of online communications so that the material will continue to be repeated with the target group. On the other hand, digital media includes or consists of (in some cases stored) material data that used some form of output from a computer. Such content includes (text, audio, videos and images and graphics shared through basic platforms like websites or social media networks and /platforms. The distribution of message over such a wide margin, mainly occurs through digital media acting as information channel. Although organizations can contribute content to these platforms, editorial decisions, platform algorithms or public engagement mechanism are generally beyond their scope of control (Abraham, 2020).

#### *4.6 Target and Control*

The primary goal of digital PR is to influence and control the public perception of an organization. The PR subjects are in the business of crafting messages that align and reflect with their organization's values, assignments and strategic goals. They are also content with communication and timely management, which enables a strategic plan for message and reaction to new trends or crises. (Laxman 2015) A level of control never prescribed, this is a differentiator that characterizes digital PR as distinct from digital media. But the host of digital media platforms serves as an information diffusion infrastructure not a public assumption machine. The potential purpose of a platform may be to digitize ancient texts, but the platform and its algorithm priority dictate how (or whether) content can be seen/accessible, and organizations are left to either provide open materials or not. This difference highlights the need to understand both digital media opportunities and limits that inform public discourse (Abraham, 2020).

#### *4.7 Conversation and Connection*

An important aspect of digital PR is the emphasis on two -way communication. Organizations use social media platforms, commentary sections, online surveys and feedback mechanisms to link direct stakeholders. This allows interactive approach organizations to remove concerns, answer questions and create long relationships with the audience, which can increase confidence and reliability (Uygun and Dongola, 2022). Digital media platforms, while sometimes user contacts such as choices, shares and comments, act as channels mainly for one -way communication. The material is sent to wide target groups without a guarantee or response from the material. The difference between two-way involvement in digital PR and one-way spread in digital media emphasizes the strategic role of PR professionals in actively managing audience relations (Abraham, 2020).

#### *4.8 Measurement and Efficiency*

Measuring the effectiveness of digital PR campaigns is necessary to evaluate their effect. Common calculations include website traffic, social media involvement (likes, shares, comments), sentiment analysis, brand review and audience range. These indicators provide valuable insights into how communication efforts affect public opinion, inform future strategies and demonstrate a return (ROI) on the investment (ROI) to digital PR initiatives (Adenuga, 2025; Dongola and Uygun, 2022). Contrary to this, while digital media can provide content performance analysis, organizations typically have low control over explanatory results because the material spread is affected by platform algorithms and the behavior of the public.

Finally, while digital PR and digital media are linked in the modern communication scenario, they serve different goals. Digital PR is an active, strategic process that focuses on reputation management and engagement of the audience, while digital media mainly acts as a channel for providing content to the audience. Understanding these differences is necessary for organizations seeking to use digital units for effective communication in modern digital environments (Laxman, 2015; Abraham, 2020).

#### 4.9 *The Meaning and Scope of the Concept of Image*

The concept of image has received considerable scholarly attention over the past decades and has developed into a distinct field of study with its own theories and principles. Organizations, institutions, political parties, and states increasingly seek to build positive images among their audiences, making image management a central function within modern communication and public relations practices. Originally emerging within business studies during the mid-twentieth century, the concept later expanded into political communication, media studies, social psychology, public opinion research, and international relations. The rise of digital media has further intensified image construction and management, particularly among younger generations immersed in social media environments (Malkawi, 2024). Due to its multidisciplinary nature, no single definition of image has been universally accepted. Generally, image refers to the mental perceptions, impressions, and attitudes individuals form toward persons, organizations, groups, or states based on available information and experiences (Saleh, 2005: 159). As such, image plays a significant role in shaping knowledge, perceptions, and behavior (Khaddar, 1997: 21). The term image originates from the Latin word *\*imago\**, referring to representation. Webster (1977: 571) defines image as a shared mental perception regarding a person or object, while Merrill (1962: 203) describes it as a system of ideas, opinions, and attitudes that creates a general impression. Among the earliest scholars to address the concept was Walter Lippmann (1922), who argued that individuals construct mental representations of reality based on information rather than direct experience. These mental images simplify complex environments and influence perceptions and actions. Scott (1966: 62) identified three principal dimensions of image: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. Similarly, Boulding (1956: 6) argued that behavior is influenced by the images individuals hold, and that changes in image are often accompanied by changes in behavior. Media channels play a crucial role in image formation by providing information through which individuals interpret the surrounding world (Tuchman, 1978: 1). Overall, the literature suggests that image represents a perception, impression, value judgment, and meaning system that influences how individuals understand and respond to people, organizations, and social realities (Polat & Arslan, 2015: 1).

It is a summary picture in the mind that consists of a set of ideas, perceptions, beliefs, and impressions formed through voluntary or involuntary influences as a result of planned or unplanned messages received from an object, a person, a society, or an organization (Polat & Arslan, 2015: 3). Based on these definitions, image perception emerges through direct or indirect interaction, whether consciously or unconsciously, with the subject in question. This perception may occur instantly or develop gradually over time, and it remains subject to continuous change. Image can reflect thoughts, value judgments, impressions, and broader systems of meaning, making its formation a complex and multidimensional process (Polat & Arslan, 2015: 4). The word “image” carries different meanings depending on individual perspectives. While some approach it positively, others argue that it may involve artificial or constructed attributes that are sometimes detached from reality. Regardless of these differing viewpoints, the concept of image has become an integral part of contemporary life (Özüpek, 2013: 99). In the context of digital communication environments, this complexity has further intensified, as media—particularly digital journalism and online platforms—play a significant role in shaping and reshaping public and political images (Malkawi, 2025). In general, image is formed through the interaction of knowledge, judgments, and relationships that take place in the mind of the individual, either about oneself or others. Personal image refers to how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. It represents a cognitive construct formed in both the individual’s own mind and in the minds of others. However, individuals often prioritize how they are perceived by others over their own self-perception, leading to a relative neglect of the internal dimension of personal image. Personal image can be categorized into three main types: self-image, which reflects how the individual sees himself or herself; perceived image, which represents how others perceive the individual; and desired (ideal) image, which reflects how the individual wishes to see himself or herself and how they intend to present themselves to others (Çakır, 2013: 19). A person’s answer to the question of how do you want to be known leads to clues about the ideal image in that person’s head. When designing the ideal image, the real character traits of the person, the requirements of his/her job or social position and the expectations of the person or audience in the relationship should be taken into account. At the same time, in order to achieve the ideal image, the person should consciously work on all the elements that make up his/her image or get professional help. The person should understand how he/she acts, how he/she speaks, how he/she looks, how he/she behaves, how he/she will be perceived, and choose a suitable path for himself/herself (Çakır, 2013: 20). The common feature of the definitions related to the image is that it is the sum of the thoughts that remain in our minds from a multivariate structure related to a person or institution. Image, speech, body language and behaviors for individuals and many different elements from appearance to communication structure for institutions play a role in shaping these thoughts (Aydın, 2014: 18). Image is people’s thoughts about an object, institution, or other person, and these thoughts may not always match the real one. In this case, everyone may have an image, but in order for this image to be positive, various image-enhancing activities must be carried out (Okay, 2003: 242). In the definition of image, (Boulding:1950) states that human knowledge consists of interaction with the following factors: The place where the individual lives and his/her position in the outside world, Time and historical knowledge of human civilization, Personal relationships, family and friends’ ties, Actions related to the natural world and the experience gained with them, Sensations and emotions. The

national image is defined by J. C Merrill (1962: 203) as follows: A public or widespread impression, idea, thought and attitude system, in the simplest terms, consists of a unified perception of a person, state or government. If public relations can play an important role in creating and enhancing the public image of different institutions and organizations, public figures and political leaders in different societies will be able to play the same role for their image. In this case, public relations vary between simplicity and complexity, depending on the environment that concerns these personalities or leaders. Leaders and personalities who implement their activities in society or in surrounding societies have easier relations with the masses in general because they can communicate with them in a simple way (Ajwa, 2003: 103). In this era, it has become imperative for politicians to have great experience in the art of communication. Because they present themselves to the masses and direct voters to their ideology and political programs, even before the emergence of advanced means of communication, they had to use the means of communication. But the development of means of communication in this century and the trust in them in political campaigns require them to be skilled specialists in the use of mass media and to educate themselves in the best way to achieve their goals. There is consensus among researchers and campaign experts on at least three things that may be relevant to the impact of the means of communication in these campaigns: (Malkawi, 2026) The campaign of public relations is a complex situation, the consequences of which cannot be solved with a single point. In Schram's view, local issues are confused with national issues, they are related to international issues, and past experiences are influenced by current experiences. A conscious and realistic political strategy should be based on both media and personal communication because they support each other. Election campaigns are as effective as they remind voters of their true intentions, ideological relationships, and interests (Schramm, 1973: 264). Issam Eddine Faraj (1988) image is the impressions of an individual about a person or other people or another group. The content of this image indicates that it has a profound effect on one's interaction with others (Asker, 1993: 22).

*The researcher conceptualizes the mental image as a set of perceptions and cognitive representations that emerge in an individual's mind in response to a particular stimulus. These representations function as a cognitive reaction shaped by exposure to observed behaviors, lived experiences, or verbal cues, and are influenced by the individual's existing knowledge, beliefs, information, and accumulated past experiences.*

#### 4.10 Image Functions

The image offers certain templates in the minds of individuals in terms of the decisions they will make later and the attitudes and behaviors they will exhibit. Here, the type of this spiritual and psychological process created by the image, which can be expressed as a spiritual programming, is explained by some functions. These functions can be listed as follows: (Okay, 2003: 242-243). Decision function: It will definitely affect the decisions that people will make on issues related to their images. Especially for those who are indecisive about certain issues, the image has an important effect in order to decide in the desired direction. Simplification function: Individuals will eliminate what they consider unnecessary for themselves by filtering the information that reaches them in any way, with the effect of their image. Layout function: The person will simplify and include the information he/she receives in one of the content meanings available to him/her. Orientation function: In cases where the information provided by the person/institution whose image is conveyed is incomplete or objectively insufficient, the person can still find a way by evaluating them. In other words, viewers can create an image in their minds with limited information or with information they previously had even when there is no information. At this point, it can be said that the image creates a spiritual subjective value instead of an unseen or partially seen objective necessity. Generalization function: Individuals usually generalize by transferring the subjects they know to the subjects they do not know through knowledge transfer. Especially the reflection of images related to certain occupational groups on all members of that profession is a result of this generalization function. Accordingly, the main goal in public relations is to ensure a positive relationship between the institution and the public and to make an impact on the current and potential behaviors of the public related to the institution. Organizations that strive for a good image have to develop positive and positive relationships with the public. The image formed in this way will contribute to the positive change of attitudes and behaviors towards the organization. As a result, we can say that the image has many different functions on the target audiences and those around. Positive and strong images in the eyes of the target audiences provide trust, belief and support in the society for the relevant persons and institutions. Thanks to these, the institution becomes successful and advantageous over its competitors. The most important reason behind the desire of individuals and institutions to have a positive image is the desire to obtain positive reflections of these functions (Okay, 2003: 242-243).

#### 4.11 Image Types

Every person, institution, object, and phenomenon possesses an image that may vary across different audiences and stakeholder groups. Accordingly, the literature identifies several types of images (Peltekoğlu, 2004; Okay, 2003; Balmer, 2007; Güzelcik, 1999; Polat & Arslan, 2015). Among the most important types is organizational image, which refers to the perceptions, impressions, and meanings held by organizational members and external stakeholders regarding an organization. Product image relates to the perceptions associated with a specific product, while brand image reflects the reputation and distinctiveness of a brand in the minds of consumers. The literature also distinguishes between self-image,

which reflects how an organization perceives itself, and external image, which represents how it is perceived by others. Other classifications include current image, referring to existing perceptions, and desired image, which reflects the image an organization seeks to achieve through strategic communication efforts. Similarly, positive and negative images represent favorable or unfavorable perceptions held by stakeholders. Additional categories include visual image, which is based on visual impressions and organizational presentation, and abstract image, which is associated with values such as credibility, social responsibility, and customer loyalty. Beach (1998) further identifies self-image, future image, work image, and project image as dimensions reflecting organizational identity, objectives, activities, and anticipated initiatives.

Overall, these classifications demonstrate that image is a multidimensional construct that encompasses both internal and external perceptions and plays a significant role in shaping organizational reputation and stakeholder relationships.

#### *4.12 Differences Between Image and Stereotype*

Before talking about the differences between image and stereotype, it was deemed necessary to explain exactly what these two concepts mean. Accordingly, when we look at a few sources on the subject, different information is obtained. For example, if we start with the concept of image, a few experts try to explain what it means.

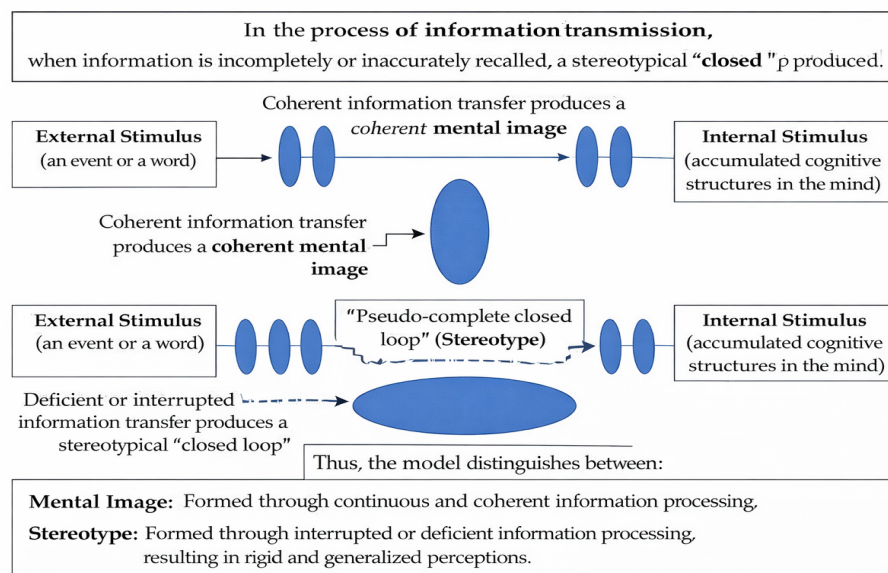
#### *4.13 The Concept of Image*

First, according to the great Egyptian expert Ali Ajwa, the image is “the final result of personal impressions formed within groups towards a particular person or system, a particular person or gender, a facility, a local or international organization, a particular profession, or something else. These impressions, which have an impact on human life, are formed through direct and indirect experiences and are mostly caused by the beliefs of these individuals” (Ajwa, 2003: 9-10). At the same time, the Webster Dictionary defines the concept of image as follows: Image is a common mental perception among the members of a certain group, which expresses the impression of this group towards a certain person or something (Ajwa, 2003: 4). According to psychologist Allport, “even if people get a few facts and those facts are small, people make a big generalization” (Chomsky, 2002: 22). Depending on what has been identified above, according to the scientist Scott, the image consists of three important elements about a person, nation or anything in man, they can be counted as follows: The first is the set of cognitive qualities by which one can mentally perceive this thing. The second is the emotional element, which is motivated by liking or disliking. The third element is the behavioral element represented in the series of practical answers given to the subject that the person deems appropriate according to the qualities he/she performs in his/her mind” (Taş, 1993: 27). “The image is only the impressions of one individual or another or other people, other groups, and the content of this image also deeply affects the individual's interactions with others” (Al-Askar, 1993: 22).

#### *4.14 The Concept of Stereotype*

According to some experts: the concept of stereotype has a negative meaning and is defined based on the information written in the Harvard dictionary as follows: The term is defined as a very simplified picture of certain categories of persons, institutions or events that share the basic characteristics of a large group of people. This image is often accompanied by prejudice. This term refers to the generalization of the characteristics of social groups attributed to the characteristics of the members of a particular group without taking into account the differences between the members of this group and making these generalizations distorted and suspicious by ignoring these differences (Zoabi, 2006: 18). According to the above-mentioned information, the following can be said about the concept of stereotype: “It is a simplified thought of any group or person related to ethnic, social, sexual or religious reasons using the media. It is also the characterization of people by many generalizations, characterized by inaccuracy and injustice. Stereotype is actually associated with racial discrimination and often leads to racial hatred” (Saleh, 2005: 155-156). Stereotype: Cultural heritage is positive or negative judgments, qualities and general judgments arising from subjective impressions based on cognitive accumulation as a result of the ideological dimension and prejudices carried by another group (Dakuki, 1996: 156). Stereotype: a set of judgments, qualities, and general estimates of positive or negative importance about a group, a group or individuals united by race, nationality, homeland, or religion (Nasr, 1995: 12). After explaining what the concepts of image and stereotype mean, what differences can be mentioned between the two concepts: The image can be changed because it is not fixed. But the stereotype, on the contrary, resists change and is very difficult to change. The stereotype is usually partial and negative at the same time, but on the contrary, the image can sometimes be positive and negative in different situations (Hijab, 2007: 176). As information increases in the image, the image becomes clearer and clearer, but as information on a subject increase in the stereotype, intolerance can sometimes lead to racial discrimination. The purpose of those who try to create images in people's minds is to expand people's thoughts and life knowledge by giving real information, but those who try to create stereotypes (usually groups and institutions) have an economic, political, social purpose and benefits (Zoabi, 2006: 29). Finally, Saleh adds that the stereotype needs more effort, facts and information to persuade (Saleh, 2005: 157). As a result, the concept of stereotype and the concept of image cannot be combined because there are huge descriptive differences between them. The following model was designed by the researcher to explain how there is a difference between the two concepts using the above research.





**Figure X.** A conceptual model illustrating the formation of **mental images versus stereotypes** based on the continuity or disruption of information processing between external and internal stimuli.

**Figure 1.** Differences Between Image and Stereotype (Source Author)

#### 4.15 Formation Factors of Images

According to Regent hale, creating a good image takes approximately two to five years, and it is necessary to act step by step to create an image. The phases proposed by Regent hale are: Analysis of the current situation: What will be investigated here is the image of the local, product and field/branch of activity and the image of the customer and employees. Analysis of the situation to be reached: Here, a vision description is made according to corporate identity orientations and corporate philosophy, and the future image is described in whatever way it is desired. In accordance with the desired image, corporate identity measures are selected and put into practice. Here, the opinions of the target groups and the obstacles and problems that may be encountered during the implementation are determined. At the end of a certain process, analyzes are made about how the image changes (quoted by Okay, 2005: 258). The good or bad image changes that actually occur depend on the following factors: Obligation to comply: When a problem is encountered in a technical opinion or definition, not only the object but also the image is damaged. Unavoidable effect of the environment: The image gets old over time or loses its old power in the process of life. Resistance of image: In the concept of image, there is often a resistance to change in the first place. Anxiety about the unknown reveals the feeling of rejecting the new (Özüpek, 2013: 106-107).

#### 5. Conclusion

These findings emphasize the need to investigate image/stereotype in relation to digital public relations. While both constructs seek to shape opinions, they are formed and adapted very differently and lead to different communicative outcomes. The image is thus conceived as a fluid, three-dimensional entity deliberately built over time through strategic intent, personal interaction, and social behavior. Due to its evolutionary character through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, it can adapt itself with respect to the changing societal requirements, and an incessant feedback process takes place (Scott, 1966; Toss, 1993). Stereotypes, on the other hand, are described as fairly stable cognitive generalizations often resistant to change in the face of evidence to the contrary. In digital spaces, stereotypes are perpetuated. This may be an additional part of how bias and prejudice have been established. Such a scenario requires intentional messages to rectify (Zobby, 2006; Saleh, 2005; Hijab, 2007). Further, the results show a strong separation between digital public relations and digital media. Digital PR is the interactive one-way and two-way communication among an organization (Laxman, 2015; Uygun & Dongul, 2022) that helps create positive perceptions while maintaining an image. On the other hand, they assert that digital media is mostly a dissemination method with restricted control over the interpretation and framing (Abraham, 2020). Additionally, the findings show that mental images play a crucial role in shaping people's feelings, choices, and actions. Such images are both constructed and perpetuated through communication practices, organizational behavior, and symbolic visual cues. A good image, therefore, not only creates credibility, trust, and legitimacy of institutions, but also provides competitive advantages both nationally and internationally (Right, 2003;



Polat & Arslan, 2015). The results also suggest that countering stereotypes necessitates organized, evidence-based messaging based on factual and hereditary contextual information with the aim of neutralizing embedded cognitive biases. Digital communication has to be approached from the angle of technical knowledge, yes, but also media literacy and an audience analysis, as well as how well you understand the platform itself. Hence, digital public relations practitioners essentially create customized communication strategies rooted in the values of organizations and aligned with audience expectations while addressing the possibility of misinterpretation as well as mitigating stereotypical framing. Earlier, the difference between image and stereotype is not only about theoretical discussion, but it actually involves important implications for strategic communication practice as well. More advanced knowledge of image-forming mechanisms and longevity of stereotypes can help organisations improve reputation management and bring about a more level playing field in audience perceptions.

### *5.1 Limitations of the Study*

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it is primarily theoretical in nature and relies on a literature-based approach, which limits the extent of empirical validation. Second, the focus of the study is restricted to the conceptual relationship between image and stereotype within the context of digital public relations, which may not fully capture broader communication environments. Finally, the absence of primary data collection limits the ability to generalize the findings across different populations and organizational settings.

### *5.2 Future Research Directions*

Further studies are suggested to investigate the empirical effects of digital public relations on progressiveness during different phases of image formation within distinct demographic & organizational spheres and its impact in alleviating stigmas.

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No additional data are available.

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