



VIETNAM'S GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY: ASSESSING THE PERCEIVED IMPLICATIONS OF THE CANCELLED 2020 GRAND PRIX

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ABSTRACT

The cancellation of the 2020 Vietnamese Grand Prix, initially planned as a flagship of Vietnam's geopolitical ambition, constituted a major disruption to the country's soft power strategy. Rather than interpreting the cancellation solely as a logistical setback, this study frames it as a diagnostic moment for assessing Vietnam's institutional capacity for resilience and strategic diplomacy. Using a mixed-methods design that combines document analysis, a stakeholder survey (n = 97), and thirty semi-structured interviews, this study examines how the event's termination shaped stakeholder perceptions of Vietnam's soft power and international reputation. Statistical analyses (analysis of variance [ANOVA] and regression) and thematic coding reveal that while stakeholders recognised the event's strategic intent, the cancellation highlighted significant coordination gaps and a "narrative vacuum". This study introduces and operationalises the concept of "exit diplomacy" – the strategic capacity to narrate a withdrawal to preserve reputational capital. Comparative insights from Singapore and Malaysia further highlight the strategic divergence between resilience, managed withdrawal, and silence. Results indicate that while government officials prioritised long-term resilience planning, the private sector expressed higher economic anxiety and emphasised the need for soft power diversification. This study concludes that for emerging middle-powers, the ability to curate a withdrawal narrative is as critical to soft power resilience as the capacity to host. Finally, five actionable strategies are proposed, including the establishment of an Event Resilience Unit within the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

Keywords: COVID-19, economic development, event cancellation, Formula 1, geopolitical strategy

INTRODUCTION

The cancellation of the 2020 Vietnamese Grand Prix, initially planned as a pivotal event in Vietnam's geopolitical and economic strategy, was widely interpreted as a significant disruption to the nation's ambitions for enhancing international prestige. In the evolving geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia, Vietnam has emerged as a nation of growing significance. With economic progress, political stability, and a more confident foreign policy, it is reshaping its image from a war-scarred state into a modern economy and an active regional player. The cancellation, therefore, represented more than a logistical or financial loss; it arrested a pivotal effort by Vietnam to project its national identity through soft power diplomacy.

Over the past decade, scholars have noted that Vietnam has cultivated soft power through developmental competence, diplomatic balance, and the symbolism of modernisation (Vuving 2009). In this respect, hosting a Formula 1 event was not merely a sporting exercise but also an act of soft power building. Such an initiative was intended to project Vietnam as a dynamic, technologically capable and globally connected nation-state, moving beyond the perception of hosting simply a sports event. Here, soft power becomes a strategic necessity for middle-power diplomacy. While traditional soft power focuses on attraction (Nye 2004), for emerging middle-powers like Vietnam, it functions as a mechanism to signal relevance and strategic autonomy in a contested region (de Swielande et al. 2019).

Within the broader discourse of middle-power diplomacy, Vietnam's aspirations mirror those of other emerging ASEAN actors seeking visibility without confrontation (Beeson and Lee 2015). The Hanoi Grand Prix was designed to showcase this middle-power posture: cooperative, trade-driven, and strategically autonomous. Its sudden cancellation amid the COVID-19 crisis provides a critical diagnostic case for examining how disruption may influence a rising power's reputation and strategic signalling. Rather than relying on designs aimed at causal identification, this study adopts a comparative interpretive approach, contrasting Vietnam's experience with regional peers such as Singapore and Malaysia, where Formula 1 operations were differently affected, to situate Vietnam's cancellation within the broader pandemic shock and to analyse how governance signals were perceived during crisis. As a transnational commercial organisation, Formula 1 operates within global political-economic dynamics that may diverge from host-state diplomatic objectives, making event cancellation salient beyond immediate financial considerations (Sturm 2014; Næss 2017). In Vietnam's case, the Grand Prix was also linked to broader ambitions to attract tourism, foreign investment, and international visibility, reinforcing expectations of reliability and global readiness.

To clarify the article's core contribution, this study foregrounds "exit diplomacy" as an interpretive lens for understanding how states seek to preserve reputational capital when withdrawing from high-profile international commitments. Conceptually distinct from reactive crisis communication, exit diplomacy emphasises proactive narrative work that reframes termination as a prudent, autonomy-affirming choice aligned with national priorities. The comparative analysis that follows uses Singapore and Malaysia as regional benchmarks to interpret how stakeholders perceived Vietnam's post-cancellation narrative management.

This study seeks to address four central questions:

1. How did stakeholders interpret the cancellation of the 2020 Vietnamese Grand Prix as signalling changes in Vietnam's geopolitical strategy?
2. What economic risks and implications did stakeholders associate with the cancellation, particularly regarding tourism and infrastructure investment?
3. How did stakeholders perceive the cancellation's influence on Vietnam's international standing and future hosting credibility?
4. What lessons can be learnt from this experience for future crisis management and strategic repositioning?

This study is guided by a conceptual framework (as shown in Figure 1) that captures the cascading impacts of mega-event cancellation on geopolitical strategy, economic development, and reputational standing. Unlike a purely linear crisis model, Figure 1 incorporates feedback dynamics to show how reputational and economic perceptions co-evolve, informing stakeholders' expectations and subsequent strategic signalling. Specifically, it models how a perceived "narrative vacuum" in crisis signalling is associated with heightened economic anxiety, which in turn informs future strategic positioning and exit diplomacy preferences.

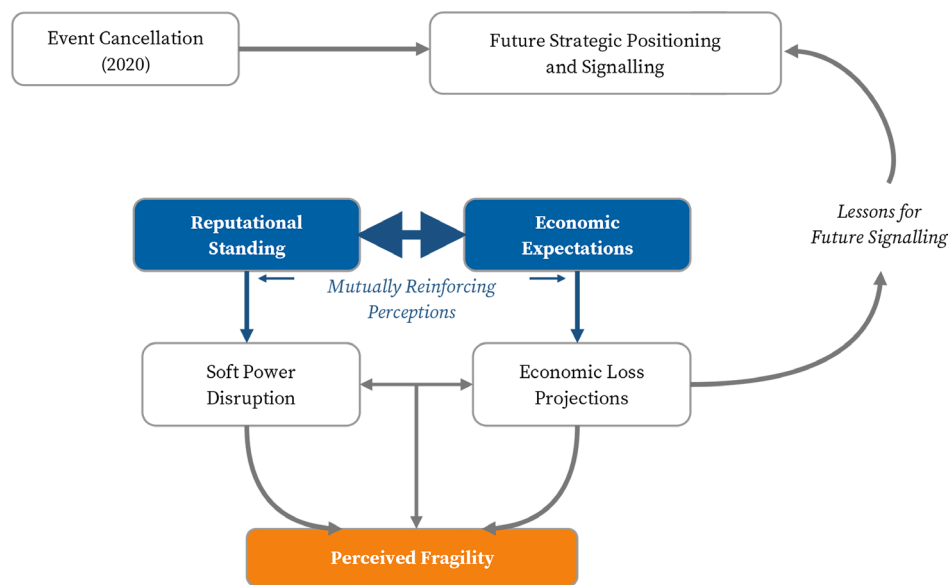


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for evaluating geopolitical and economic implications of mega-event cancellations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly interest in the context of emerging economies, particularly at the intersection of international sporting events, geopolitical strategy, and national development, has increased over time. As countries seek to project soft power, enhance global visibility, and stimulate domestic economic growth, mega-events like the Olympics, FIFA World Cup, and Formula 1 races have become strategic platforms for sports diplomacy and soft power projection (Murray 2012).

Specifically, Vietnam's partnership with Formula 1 is rooted in Joseph Nye's (2004) concept of soft power, which he defined as the ability of one country to influence others globally through attraction and shared values rather than coercion. For developing countries such as Vietnam, which lack the military or economic reach of established powers, soft power provides an effective route to gain influence on the world stage.

Beyond Nye's framework, scholars have analysed Vietnam's evolving soft power strategy. Vuvung (2009) refers to the moral authority of Vietnam, grounded in resilience, cultural identity, and diplomatic moderation, as a key source of attraction, illustrating how the state increasingly employs cultural diplomacy, multilateral engagement, and developmental success as tools of influence. These studies show that Vietnam's foreign-policy behaviour already aligns with middle-power diplomacy: assertive but cooperative efforts to gain legitimacy and visibility.

Mega-sporting events have become prominent mechanisms for projecting such influence. As Grix and Houlihan (2014) state, global sports competition is a stage for projecting national identity, stability, and infrastructural capability. In this context, Anholt (2007: 3) and Grix and Lee (2013: 524) connect mega-events to "nation branding" and "event diplomacy", respectively, demonstrating how states employ them to manage reputation and legitimacy. Formula 1's massive global media reach, commercial ties, and international following have rendered it an especially effective tool for soft power signalling.

Within Southeast Asia, soft power has been carefully nurtured through such events (Henderson et al. 2010). Singapore has relied on its Formula 1 Night Race as a means to boost its image in the eyes of the world as a global business and tourism centre and as a carefully staged expression

of sporting nationalism (Tan and Bairner 2014). Malaysia sought similar benefits through the Sepang Grand Prix (1999–2017), though with mixed results. Vietnam's decision to host a Grand Prix followed this regional pattern and represented a bold step towards positioning itself as a modern, globally connected nation capable of leveraging mega-events for strategic diplomacy and international branding. To operationalise exit diplomacy for empirical study, this framework evaluates three critical dimensions: (1) narrative control, referring to the consistency and authority of the withdrawal message; (2) temporal strategy, involving the timing of communication relative to the disruption; and (3) substitute engagement, which entails providing alternative value or digital pivots to maintain partner interest.

By assessing these dimensions, emerging powers can move from reactive crisis management toward a proactive preservation of soft power capital even when flagship commitments are terminated. Beyond diplomatic signalling, however, mega-events are frequently justified by projected “event legacies” (Preuss 2007: 211), though scholars caution that inflated projections often overlook substitution effects and public debt burdens (Baade and Matheson 2004). In developing economies, this tension between strategic ambition and fiscal risk is acute.

The impacts of hosting sporting events on the economy have differed greatly from case to case. The Rio 2016 Olympics, for instance, left Brazil with underused facilities and substantial fiscal pressure, while the Korean Formula 1 Grand Prix in Yeongam was discontinued amid financial and organisational challenges, leaving underutilised infrastructure. By contrast, Singapore's Formula 1 race has delivered more consistent benefits through targeted tourism promotion and integrated city-branding strategies. These comparisons underscore that economic outcomes hinge less on the event itself than on governance capacity and long-term planning. As Chalip and McGuirly (2004) argue, successful economic performance requires combining events with broader destination marketing, a strategy more complex than simple logistics. This is even more true in developing economies such as Vietnam, where hosting mega-events aligns with modernising approaches and global visibility. Yet, this visibility creates exposure. Since mega-events are inherently vulnerable to global disruptions (Ritchie 2009), they necessitate robust crisis-management frameworks that span pre-event planning to post-cancellation recovery. Efficient handling of crises through risk-reduction techniques and preparedness plans along with communication tactics becomes crucial in such scenarios.

In his work, Ritchie (2009) stresses the significance of crisis-management frameworks before an event, during an event, and after an event. These encompass scenario-based planning, stakeholder collaboration, and reputation building and management. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that many countries lacked adaptability and resilience in event planning. While Singapore relied on its established legacy to withstand a two-year hiatus, Vietnam faced challenges in rescheduling and ultimately failed to reintroduce the race after 2020. The events underscored perceived weaknesses in their institutions and logistical setups. This outcome reflects how emerging middle-power states such as Vietnam continue to strengthen administrative and communication systems in response to sudden global disruptions.

The way a country handles event cancellations can impact its reputation positively if done transparently and swiftly according to literature (Toohey and Veal 2007). Maintaining communication with stakeholders and outlining future plans are crucial aspects of mitigating any negative effects caused by cancellations as demonstrated in Vietnam's response to a recent event cancellation. Transparent crisis communication and proactive engagement with international partners are therefore central to preserving national credibility and soft power reputation during event disruptions. To contextualise Vietnam's experience, Singapore and Malaysia share similarities that can clarify Vietnam's approach to Formula 1 racing events. The way Singapore has incorporated the Formula 1 night race into its tourism and economic strategy is seen as a

successful example to learn from. According to Henderson et al. (2010), Singapore's Formula 1 event not only attracts tourists but also enhances the reputation of the city-state, positioning it as a vibrant global destination rather than just a business hub, though they also note these benefits come with high hosting costs and local disruptions. These features, policy continuity, cross-sector collaboration, and brand integration, serve as key variables in assessing how effectively states convert sporting events into long-term diplomatic and economic capital.

On the other hand, the Sepang Grand Prix yielded mixed results. Scholars such as De Rycke and Van Hove (2019) note that despite initial buzz, the event eventually struggled to deliver sustained economic returns that could justify the rising costs of hosting. Ultimately, the race was discontinued in 2017 due to these increasing hosting fees and a significant decline in ticket sales (Benson 2017). This contrast illustrates the complexity of balancing effective power projection and financial sustainability. The Malaysian case thus highlights economic sustainability and media longevity as crucial comparative indicators when evaluating the endurance of soft power projects.

Vietnam's strategy resembled Singapore's aspirations but may have fallen short in terms of organisational capability and sustained policy alignment essential for achieving its goals. Stakeholders interpreted the pandemic disruption as highlighting perceived constraints in institutional coordination. As a result, the Southeast Asian examples showcase the range of outcomes that can arise when developing economies engage with large-scale diplomatic events.

Vietnam's short-lived experience demonstrates how middle-power ambitions must be supported by institutional resilience and long-term planning to achieve sustainable soft power outcomes. Together, these contrasting cases provide the analytical backdrop for assessing Vietnam's unrealised potential and inform the comparative variables visualised in Figure 2.

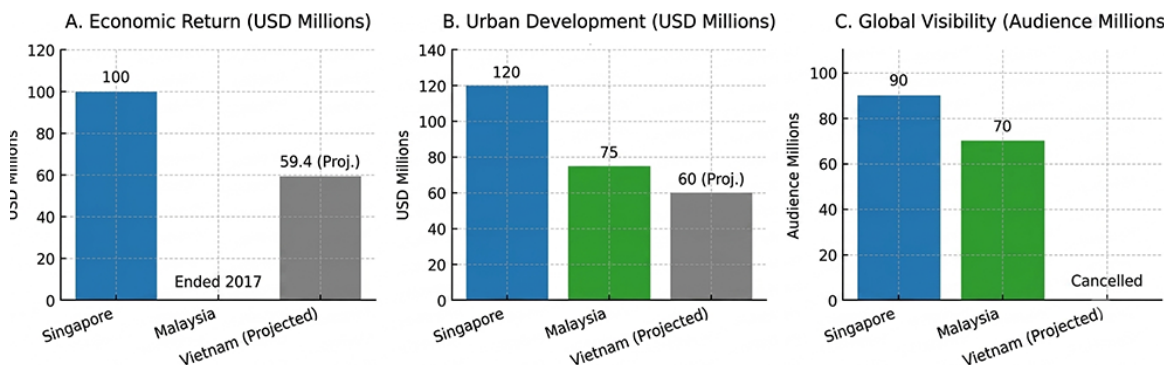


Figure 2: Comparative performance indicators for Southeast Asian Formula 1 events.

To ensure structured comparison, the figure evaluates Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia on identical indicators derived from Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore (2012), Singapore Tourism Board (2022), and Urban Redevelopment Authority, Singapore (2026) for Singapore; Reuters (2016), Watanabe et al. (2018), and Sepang International Circuit (n.d.) for Malaysia; and Forbes (2020), *Formula1.com* (2018, 2019), Hanoi Department of Culture and Sports (2020), and Tilke Engineers and Architects (n.d.) for Vietnam; together with Preuss's (2007) mega-event legacy framework as a cross-cutting interpretive anchor and the scenario-based analyses presented in this study. The figure is an illustrative synthesis of the comparative analysis presented in this article rather than harmonised statistical measurements; numerical values represent documented empirical evidence where available or scenario-based projections. For Malaysia, the data represent its final five years of operation (2013–2017) prior to discontinuation, while Vietnam's values reflect verified pre-event projections.

However, while literature exists on the advantages and drawbacks of hosting mega-sporting events, there is still a distinct paucity of research on the impacts of event cancellations, especially in emerging economies. The majority of research examines successful hosts and failed legacies, rarely addressing the strategic, economic, and reputational consequences of sudden cancellations due to crises. This gap became prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Vietnam's situation provides an intriguing case for exploring this neglected area. The Grand Prix was cancelled before its first edition, thus overturning conventional measurements of success or failure. In this way it creates a critical space in which to observe how countries might pivot, adapt, and recover from losing such symbolically loaded events. It also raises the question of the vulnerability of soft power strategies that depend on single-point, high-profile opportunities instead of sustained and multi-dimensional engagement.

Taken together, existing scholarship comprehensively theorises the soft power mechanics of hosting mega-events but remains largely silent on the reputational politics of withdrawal. While literature on crisis-management addresses logistical recovery, it lacks a strategic framework for how states can voluntarily or involuntarily terminate commitments without forfeiting legitimacy. This study addresses this theoretical gap by examining the cancellation not merely as a crisis to be managed, but as a case study in exit diplomacy, the strategic capacity to curate a withdrawal narrative that preserves national standing.

METHODS

This study utilised a mixed-methods design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure triangulation and coherence with soft power and middle-power diplomacy frameworks. Specifically, this study employs a comparative case study design. By systematically contrasting Vietnam's pandemic-era cancellation with Singapore's post-pandemic resumption and Malaysia's earlier strategic exit, this study comparatively examines specific governance and communication patterns within the context of the broader regional and global shock.

Singapore and Malaysia were selected as regional benchmarks based on three criteria: (1) shared membership in ASEAN, (2) established histories of hosting Formula 1, and (3) contrasting outcomes that provide analytical context. Singapore represents a model of "successful continuation" and resilience, whereas Malaysia illustrates a "strategic exit" driven by cost-benefit analysis. These cases allow for a triangulation of Vietnam's experience against established regional norms in event diplomacy, ensuring comparability through identical indicators of economic return and global visibility. Thirty interviews were carried out with stakeholders, including government representatives, business investors, tourism strategists, and media experts. Moreover, focus group conversations were organised with individuals from Hanoi's development and tourism industries.

Interviews and focus groups used purposive and snowball sampling to capture actors directly involved in, or knowledgeable about, event hosting and development in Vietnam. Inclusion criteria targeted individuals with experience in public policy, tourism or economic planning across government, private industry, and academia. The survey was distributed to a broader frame of 150 targeted stakeholders from these sectors, yielding 97 complete responses (64.7% response rate). While the quantitative sample size ($n = 97$) is modest compared to public opinion polls, it represents a robust coverage of the specific target population: elite stakeholders, government planners, and high-level tourism investors in Hanoi. Accessing this specialised group is challenging, and their expert insights hold higher validity for analysing strategic governance than a public survey. Furthermore, the inclusion of 30 in-depth interviews allows for methodological triangulation, ensuring that the statistical findings are contextualised by

deep qualitative evidence of the decision-making environment. Interview and focus-group participants formed a purposive subset of this wider frame. While the sampling strategy allowed for potential overlap, cross-verification indicated that approximately 15% of survey respondents also participated in the in-depth interviews. This limited overlap was used to deepen interpretation rather than to link individual-level records, so it does not compromise the independence of the quantitative estimates.

Qualitative data were thematically analysed in NVivo Release 14 (Lumivero, Denver, CO, USA) ($\kappa = 0.82$) using a hybrid deductive-inductive protocol. Quantitative data were analysed in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, US) using analysis of variance (ANOVA) and logistic regression. The demographic characteristics of the survey respondents are summarised in Table 1 while the instrument validity statistics are detailed in Table 2, and variable coding definitions are provided in the relevant results tables. Given the sample size ($n = 97$), all multivariate analyses (specifically the multivariate ANOVA [MANOVA] regarding strategic preferences and the regression models) are interpreted as exploratory and diagnostic of stakeholder sentiment patterns, rather than as confirmatory tests of population-level effects.

Table 1: Demographic profile of survey respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	%
Stakeholder group	Government/public sector	39	40.2
	Private sector (tourism/invest)	38	39.2
	Academic/industry expert	20	20.6
Location	Hanoi (host city)	68	70.1
	Other regions	29	29.9
Experience	Less than five years	18	18.6
	Five years to ten years	45	46.4
	More than ten years	34	35.1

The Soft Power Perception Index aggregates three survey items capturing national image, symbolic pride, and perceived diplomatic influence ($\alpha = 0.81$). International media exposure was operationalised as a single-item measure assessing the frequency with which respondents consumed global news coverage regarding the event (measured on a five-point scale from 1 = Never to 5 = Daily). The Reputation Resilience Index combines three indicators of trust recovery, reputational persistence, and stakeholder confidence ($\alpha = 0.82$). The Economic Impact Concern Index captures worry about direct revenue loss and stalled investment or infrastructure associated with the Grand Prix cancellation ($\alpha = 0.84$). Together, these indices operationalise this study's core theoretical dimensions of soft power perception, economic risk, and reputational stability, aligning with the conceptual framework. Reliability and convergent validity statistics for Soft Power Perception Index, Reputation Resilience Index, and Economic Impact Concern Index are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Factor loadings and reliability statistics for constructed indices

Construct/measurement items	Factor loading	Cronbach's α	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
1. Soft Power Perception Index		0.81	0.83	0.62
i. Hosting the Grand Prix would have significantly enhanced Vietnam's national image globally.	0.82			
ii. The event served as a key symbol of Vietnam's modernisation and urban development.	0.78			
iii. The Grand Prix was an effective tool for increasing Vietnam's diplomatic visibility in ASEAN.	0.75			
2. Reputation Resilience Index		0.82	0.88	0.70
i. I am confident in Vietnam's ability to recover trust among international partners.	0.88			
ii. Stakeholders remain confident in Vietnam's capability to host future mega-events.	0.84			
iii. Vietnam's long-term reputation remains strong despite this specific event failure.	0.79			
3. Economic Impact Concern Index		0.84	0.89	0.74
i. I am concerned about direct revenue loss for local businesses (tourism, services).	0.91			
ii. The cancellation has led to stagnation of infrastructure investments in the area.	0.85			
iii. Future foreign direct investment (FDI) in the region will be negatively impacted by this cancellation.	0.81			

This triangulated approach ensured a comprehensive exploration of how stakeholders interpreted the cancellation and strengthened both validity and reliability by integrating cross-verified findings across data sets.

RESULTS

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to measure the Soft Power Perception Index among stakeholders such as government officials, business entities, and academic/research institutions. While government officials reported higher mean symbolic valuation ($M = 3.31$) than the private sector ($M = 3.01$), the difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.136$), suggesting shared recognition of strategic intent (Table 3).

Table 3: Descriptive statistics by stakeholder group

Stakeholder group	Mean (Standard deviation)		
	Soft Power Perception Index	Reputation Resilience Index	Economic Impact Concern Index
Government ($n = 39$)	3.31 (0.65)	3.18 (0.70)	2.84 (0.60)
Private sector ($n = 38$)	3.01 (0.72)	2.80 (0.85)	3.66 (0.65)
Academic ($n = 20$)	3.10 (0.58)	3.25 (0.75)	3.00 (0.70)
Total ($n = 97$)	3.15 (0.67)	3.05 (0.79)	3.19 (0.74)

For reporting clarity, the results are presented across four perception domains: geopolitical signalling, economic concern, reputational confidence, and strategic interpretation. Table 4 reports the logistic regression predicting high economic concern (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.39$; $\chi^2 = 18.45$, $p < 0.001$). Respondents directly involved in Formula 1 planning and those in the tourism/hospitality sector show significantly higher odds of elevated concern, whereas government role is not a significant predictor.

Table 4: Logistic regression predicting high economic concern

Predictor	B	Standard error	Wald	df	p-value	Odds ratio	95% confidence interval for odds ratio
Formula 1 planning role	1.06	0.35	9.17	1	0.003	2.88	[1.44, 5.76]
Tourism sector	0.90	0.34	7.01	1	0.008	2.45	[1.26, 4.76]
Government role	-0.45	0.38	1.40	1	0.236	0.64	[0.30, 1.35]
Constant	-1.20	0.40	9.00	1	0.003	0.30	

Stakeholder Perceptions and Strategic Preferences

While the aggregate Soft Power Perception Index showed no significant difference between groups (as shown in Table 3), an item-level analysis revealed divergence on specific symbolic indicators. Specifically, government officials attributed significantly higher ratings to the event's modernisation value compared to private-sector respondents (Kruskal-Wallis $H = 11.83$, $p = 0.002$), even if their broader soft power expectations converged. Pairwise comparisons confirmed that while state actors were more likely to describe the event as a critical geopolitical asset, market stakeholders remained more sceptical of its realised value. Factor analysis further identified strategic soft power, urban image modernisation, and ASEAN leadership signalling as the primary dimensions of stakeholder perception (explaining 71% of variance). Additionally, demographic analysis indicated a generational divide, with younger professionals (aged 25 years old to 39 years old) significantly more likely to view the event as a symbol of progress compared to older cohorts ($\chi^2 = 13.94$, $p = 0.007$).

Stakeholders described the cancellation as symbolically significant and expressed concern about missed opportunities. Conversations reflected participant perceptions that a potential geopolitical opportunity may have been missed. The Grand Prix, according to a government official, was a chance to showcase national development and demonstrate that Vietnam is able to accommodate foreign tourists in a troubled region.

Young professionals expressed dismay about the halt in progress and concern that the cancellation could affect perceptions of Vietnam's strategic momentum. In-depth discussions showed that these individuals supported a flexible approach to diplomacy that includes multiple

forms of influence rather than reliance on a single flagship event. Focus-group members reinforced these findings, viewing the Grand Prix as a chance to refresh Vietnam's image in a progressive and youthful manner. They highlighted alignment with Hanoi's Smart City 2030 plan and noted accelerated improvements in public Wi-Fi access, LED lighting, and synchronised traffic-management systems. This illustrates the intersection between soft power and urban-policy modernisation, consistent with event-legacy scholarship (Preuss 2007).

Participants reported increased interdepartmental coordination during the event-planning period; cooperation improved markedly under the tight Formula 1 timelines, and several initiatives persisted even after the event's cancellation. One organiser remarked, "The competition created a sense of urgency; we had specific deadlines and exposure that drove collaboration among various government bodies". This qualitative evidence was coded under the theme of *institutional collaboration*. Participants described a perceived symbolic gap following the cancellation, which they associated with missed opportunities to contest existing international narratives and signal regional leadership ambitions. Participants also noted the absence of virtual engagement or public-relations recovery initiatives following the cancellation.

Beyond symbolic signalling, the analysis based on statistics and qualitative information indicates that worries about reputation were notably associated with one's role in an organisation and exposure in media outlets. A one-way ANOVA revealed differences between groups in terms of their Reputation Resilience Index scores ($F [2, 94] = 3.22, p = 0.044$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$). Specifically, individuals from the private sector exhibited more concern than government officials (mean difference = 0.38, $p = 0.034$). Games-Howell post-hoc tests were employed due to unequal variances and group sizes, confirming that these group disparities were statistically observable despite the limited sample size. To further explore predictive factors, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict Reputation Resilience Index scores. Diagnostic checks confirmed the model's validity: multicollinearity was negligible (Variance Inflation Factor [VIF] values < 1.1), residuals were normally distributed, and the Durbin-Watson statistic indicated no significant autocorrelation. The overall model proved statistically significant ($F [2, 94] = 35.75, p < 0.001$), explaining 43.2% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.432$). International media exposure ($\beta = 0.41, p < 0.001$) and stakeholder role ($\beta = 0.32, p = 0.001$) emerged as the distinct key predictors. The results of the multiple regression analysis predicting the Reputation Resilience Index are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Multiple regression analysis predicting Reputation Resilience Index

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI	VIF
Constant	0.12	0.15	–	0.82	0.415	[–0.18, 0.42]	–
International media exposure	0.57	0.10	0.41	5.70	< 0.001	[0.37, 0.77]	1.02
Stakeholder role	0.53	0.12	0.32	4.41	0.001	[0.29, 0.77]	1.02

Interview analysis revealed that participants perceived a "narrative void" following the cancellation, attributing this sentiment to the absence of effective communication planning. Business representatives noted that the failure to engage in public-relations efforts had consequences, contrasting Vietnam's silence with the strategic communication adopted by Malaysia when it voluntarily concluded its hosting duties in 2017. While Malaysia's exit was planned rather than crisis-induced, stakeholders treated it as a benchmark in "how to end an event without losing face", a lesson they felt was not fully applied in Vietnam's case. This observation aligns with existing scholarship on strategic reputation management and event-diplomacy exit narratives (Fombrun and van Riel 2004; Anholt 2007), which emphasise message control as part of national-image maintenance. The theme of exit diplomacy was identified based on three coding criteria: (1) explicit comparisons to the closure of other regional events

(e.g., Malaysia), (2) references to a “narrative vacuum” or lack of official spokespersons, and (3) expressions of uncertainty regarding future international commitments. Focus-group participants also voiced concern about Vietnam’s lack of adaptation or of communication framing the cancellation in a narrative of resilience, leaving many feeling let down that they missed the chance to maintain symbolic standing and safeguard global image. This sentiment was vividly captured in the qualitative coding for narrative gaps. As one senior tourism executive remarked during an interview: “We had no story to tell and no pivot to virtual engagement or future plans like Singapore did. We simply went silent”. Similarly, a government official in a focus group noted: “Malaysia ended their hosting gracefully; we just stopped, and we did not know how to end the story without losing face”. This recurrent pattern was coded under the theme “communication vacuum”.

The Reputation Resilience Index averaged 3.05 points (Standard deviation = 0.79). More than a fifth of government participants reported lower levels of concern (22%), whereas higher proportions of private-sector stakeholders (61%) and international observers (48%) expressed elevated reputational worries. A chi-square test ($\chi^2 [1] = 14.26, p = 0.001$, Cramer’s $V = 0.38$) showed a significant link between reputation concern and stakeholder involvement. The need for strong crisis communication is critical, as seen from real-world examples: Japan proactively managed the delay of the Tokyo Olympics to protect its reputation, while Vietnam’s lack of response inflamed perceptions of instability and weakness. This comparison places Vietnam’s experience within a regional soft power rivalry and highlights communication itself as a key differentiating strategy. Overall, the implications for reputation extended far beyond losing a single event; it exposed deeper weaknesses in Vietnam’s strategic communication that amplified harm and eroded partner confidence. This conclusion integrates empirical evidence with the theoretical argument that reputational resilience is a core component of sustainable soft power and a defining characteristic of middle-power behaviour. Taken together, these findings correspond to the reputational risk component of the framework, in which weak crisis communication and perceived institutional fragility undermine Vietnam’s image as a capable and confident middle-power.

To address these vulnerabilities, this study also examined stakeholders’ forward-looking strategic preferences. A separate principal component analysis was conducted on the strategic preference items. This yielded three distinct components that accounted for 67.9% of the variation: resilience planning, soft power diversification, and institutional learning. Construct validity and internal consistency were shown as all communalities were over 0.60 and factor loadings exceeding 0.70. An exploratory MANOVA was conducted to examine differences in strategic preferences across the three stakeholder groups. Box’s M test was non-significant ($p > 0.001$), satisfying the assumption of homogeneity of covariance matrices required for multivariate analysis. Because Box’s M is highly sensitive to departures from multivariate normality, a conservative threshold of $p < 0.001$ was used to evaluate significance, following standard conventions (Tabachnick and Fidell 2013). Wilks’ λ was used as the multivariate test statistic to assess overall significance. The MANOVA indicated a significant overall effect of stakeholder role on strategic preferences (Wilks’ $\lambda = 0.804, F [6, 184] = 5.61, p < 0.001$). Follow-up univariate analyses indicated significant differences across all three dimensions: resilience planning ($F [2, 94] = 6.21, p = 0.003$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.12$), soft power diversification ($F [2, 94] = 4.88, p = 0.010$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.09$), and institutional learning ($F [2, 94] = 3.45, p = 0.035$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$). Government representatives preferred resilience planning, while private-sector participants emphasised soft power diversification, and academics rated institutional learning as their top priority. These distributions mirror this study’s conceptual dimensions, resilience, diversification, and learning, as core pillars of sustainable soft power and middle-power strategy, while remaining indicative rather than definitive given the exploratory design. The major policy misstep identified was the absence of a proactive storytelling approach after the cancellation. Participants explained that by failing to maintain consistent messaging or use digital platforms to sustain the event’s online

visibility, the state lost an opportunity to leverage its hard-won exposure and influence. The finding highlights the communicative component of soft power, narrative production and digital diplomacy, as crucial to states' strategies of modern-day diplomacy (Nye 2004; Anholt 2007).

Feedback from focus groups indicated that planning was fragmented because agencies pursued separate objectives without a unified framework. This lack of coordination caused communication breakdowns and missed opportunities to deliver cohesive messages. Subsequently, this phenomenon of "institutional fragmentation" was coded and confirmed through the triangulation of three separate focus group transcripts for analytic consistency.

Survey participants endorsed five forward-looking approaches: (1) integrating crisis-management into event preparation; (2) establishing quick-response communication teams, (3) expanding soft power initiatives beyond large-scale events, (4) creating inter-agency collaborative task forces, and (5) formalising scenario-based planning exercises. These recommendations were based on factor-score means of greater than 3.8 on a five-point scale representing high consensus at the stakeholder level.

Overall, these observations emphasise the need for Vietnam to shift from event-driven diplomacy toward systematic institutional frameworks. Although the Grand Prix encounter was disrupted, it became a testing ground for building strategic resilience under conditions of uncertainty in future soft power initiatives. Stakeholders proposed specific actions for each enhancement plan. For instance, resilience preparation should involve simulation drills and periodic joint exercises among stakeholders. Soft power diversification could include widening digital-outreach initiatives through global engagement on social-media platforms. Institutional learning requires post-event evaluations to systematically capture insights and integrate them into future planning. Each of these proposals came through with support from a minimum of 65% of respondents, using open-ended survey items, to show a broad pragmatic agreement.

Perceived Economic Implications and Financial Exposure

This section demonstrates that the economic fallout was driven not only by direct revenue loss but by the "substitution effect" of stalled infrastructure projects, creating a climate of anxiety that the absence of a clear exit narrative failed to mitigate.

A breakdown of the numbers revealed a high level of concern over finances among respondents working in tourism and hospitality in Hanoi. Descriptive comparisons showed that their Economic Impact Concern Index scores were consistently higher than those of investment planners and respondents based outside Hanoi. Given limited cell sizes, this study reported one-way comparisons (as shown in Table 3).

Logistic regression indicated that Formula 1 planning involvement (odds ratio = 2.88; 95% confidence interval: 1.44–5.76) and tourism sector ties (odds ratio = 2.45; 95% confidence interval: 1.26–4.76) significantly associated with heightened economic concern (as shown in Table 4). Additionally, a cluster analysis with three groups pinpointed participant profiles: those highly concerned (38%), those moderately concerned (44%), and those optimistic about resilience (18%).

Many people mentioned that they faced issues such as cancelled hotel agreements and wasted money on promotions that could not be recovered due to the pandemic's impact on travel and the events-industry infrastructure. For instance, in one week alone, over fifty corporate group block-bookings were cancelled, leading to a reported direct revenue loss of approximately USD0.34 million (captured as Scenario A in Table 6). However, this figure represents only verified corporate cancellations. When including the full projected visitor volume of 100,000 attendees

(Scenario C), the cancellation implies a potential dual exposure: USD21.2 million in sunk costs (marketing and logistics) and an estimated USD39.6 million in foregone visitor spending. These figures were cross-referenced with survey data, municipal tourism reports, and stakeholder interviews to minimise reliance on any single data source. The results of a one-way ANOVA indicated that there are differences in concern levels across sectors ($F [2, 94] = 16.92, p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.26$). Specifically, professionals in tourism and hospitality showed higher Economic Impact Concern Index scores than government officials (mean difference = 0.82, $p = 0.001$). Conceptually, the Economic Impact Concern Index items capture three aspects of concern: direct revenue loss, investment stagnation and infrastructure fragility, and FDI. Together, these dimensions correspond to the framework variables of economic development and reputational influence, linking quantitative outcomes to this study's theoretical constructs on soft power and middle-power resilience.

Some specifics detailed the effects of the cancellation on businesses around Hanoi. One of the major hotel groups in the city was looking forward to a healthy level of occupancy for the race weekend, but it was seriously damaged by the cancellation and had to halt planned property improvements. This hotel group was included as a representative case because of its significant pre-booked Formula 1 inventory, public disclosure of cancellations, and sectoral importance within Hanoi's tourism economy. In addition, some companies that invested in marketing activities for the event could not recoup their investment. These qualitative observations were coded under the themes direct loss and infrastructure stagnation.

Stakeholders suggested alternative methods, such as using event space for cultural and commercial events rather than race functions. These examples signal a need to have better economic-readiness programmes as a whole. This is in line with literature on crisis-readiness and adaptive legacy planning (Toohey and Veal 2007; Ritchie 2009). The findings are consistent with insights gathered from interviews and focus-group discussions, where participants highlighted disruptions in investment talks and a lack of strategies for repurposing Formula 1-related facilities. One city planner pointed out that the actual expenses extended beyond infrastructure to include the time and organisational focus redirected from essential priorities. This supports the claim that non-attendance at an event bears upon economic viability and state-capacity signalling which is central to middle-power behaviour in soft power diplomacy.

Respondents indicated that the decision to cancel was associated with perceived monetary setbacks and raised worries about Vietnam's reputation with investors in the long run. Stakeholders indicated that the apparent lacklustre response in adapting or reallocating resources swiftly appeared to erode investor trust, particularly when contrasted with nations that had contingency plans to manage similar disruptions. To quantify the scale of this disruption, this study modelled potential financial exposure under three scenarios.

Given the absence of input-output tables for cancelled projects, this study applies a conservative tourism multiplier of 1.5 (Fourie and Santana-Gallego 2011) to visitor spending estimates. This approach provides a diagnostic range of potential visitor expenditure losses (USD14.9 million to USD59.4 million), exclusive of the USD21.2 million in direct sunk costs, rather than a precise net welfare calculation, acknowledging the high leakage and substitution effects typical of imported mega-events in emerging economies.

To structure this analysis, Table 6 presents three scenarios. Scenario A (baseline) reflects verified financial exposure based on municipal tourism logs for cancelled corporate bookings. Scenarios B and C represent illustrative projections based on pre-event capacity assumptions of 25% and 100%, respectively. The standard tourism multiplier of 1.5 is applied exclusively to visitor spending to account for indirect and induced effects, while sunk costs are treated as non-multiplied financial losses because they do not generate secondary economic effects.

Base values for visitor spending and sunk costs were derived from municipal tourism logs originating from the Hanoi Department of Tourism and verified through nationally published media reports that directly cited official departmental statistics (*Vietnamnet* 2021), as well as organiser disclosure documents verified during stakeholder interviews. To acknowledge the inherent uncertainty in economic ripple effects, gross revenue exposure was tested across a range of multipliers (1.3 to 1.8). This yields an exposure range of USD12.9 million to USD17.8 million for Scenario B (moderate capacity) and USD51.5 million to USD71.3 million for Scenario C (high capacity). These ranges serve as diagnostic indicators of potential financial exposure rather than precise net welfare calculations.

Table 6: Scenario-based estimates of the economic impact of the Vietnam Grand Prix cancellation

Cost component	Scenario A: Baseline (verified) (USD million)	Scenario B: Conservative estimate (USD million)	Scenario C: High-impact (optimistic) (USD million)
1. Projected visitor spending			
i. Accommodation	0.34	6.10	24.60
ii. Food and retail	0.00	3.80	15.00
Subtotal (visitor injections)	0.34	9.90	39.60
2. Sunk costs (direct financial loss)			
i. Ticket refunds	12.00	12.00	12.00
ii. Marketing/logistics	9.20	9.20	9.20
Total sunk costs	21.20	21.20	21.20
3. Estimated gross revenue exposure			
Calculation: Visitor spending $\times$ 1.5 multiplier	(0.34×1.5)	(9.9×1.5)	(39.6×1.5)
Illustrative gross economic impact (projected)	–	14.85	59.40

DISCUSSION

The cancellation of the 2020 Vietnamese Grand Prix was widely perceived as extending beyond the loss of a sporting event, raising concerns about Vietnam's broader efforts to build national reputation and influence through soft power strategies. This study sheds light on how external interruptions can expose perceived weaknesses within domestic systems and stimulate debate on reform. These findings extend theoretical understandings of soft power by illustrating how emerging middle-power states rely on symbolic events to project credibility, and how disruptions may highlight gaps between national image and institutional capacity.

While the pandemic was a universal shock, empirical findings reveal that stakeholder perceptions of the cancellation diverged significantly by sector, exposing distinct vulnerabilities in domestic governance. Within this constrained context, the absence of a coordinated withdrawal narrative appears to have amplified stakeholder uncertainty, drawing attention to the role of exit communication in managing reputational risk. These patterns indicate that reputational vulnerability was linked not to cancellation alone, but to uneven narrative control among actors most exposed to international signalling environments. This is central to what this study conceptualises as exit diplomacy.

Vietnam's reliance on the Grand Prix to elevate its international reputation created dependence on a visibility-and-modernisation narrative. The sudden cancellation produced an informational void that many stakeholders repeatedly described as a "lack of cohesive narrative", particularly

among younger professionals in tourism and foreign-investment sectors. This insight provides empirical evidence that international-media exposure and stakeholder role significantly predicted reputation concern, thereby connecting perception and narrative gaps.

As synthesised in Table 7, integrating the survey patterns with stakeholder narratives clarifies why the disruption was interpreted as diagnostic rather than merely disruptive. While respondents converged on the event's soft power intent, reputational and economic anxiety were intensified by the perceived narrative vacuum following cancellation, highlighting exit diplomacy as a mechanism of expectation management rather than a purely communicative add-on.

Table 7: Joint display of quantitative-qualitative integration on strategic disruption

Quantitative finding	Qualitative evidence (quotes)	Exit diplomacy interpretation
Shared soft power intent: Overall Soft Power Perception Index mean of 3.15	Participants described the event as a critical opportunity to “showcase national development” and demonstrate administrative capacity.	Indicates high narrative control during the hosting phase, which collapsed upon cancellation.
High economic anxiety: Private-sector Economic Impact Concern Index mean of 3.66 ($p < 0.001$)	“We had no story to tell...We simply went silent”.	Interpreted as reflecting the “narrative vacuum” and poor temporal strategy.
Trust elasticity: Reputation Resilience Index factor loading of 0.88 for “trust recovery”	“Reputational defeats become chances to recalibrate”.	Stakeholders perceive that soft power can be preserved via substitute engagement.

Findings from multiple data sources reinforce this pattern. Stakeholders who were more exposed to global media and directly engaged in Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) planning were also the most concerned about reputation and the most supportive of reform initiatives. The event's non-occurrence effectively paused Vietnam's international outreach, prompting reconsideration of diplomatic-engagement strategies. This pause encouraged a shift toward more reflective, resilience-oriented diplomacy.

The significant MANOVA results (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.804$, $p < 0.001$) reveal a critical divergence in strategic priorities between the public and private sectors. While government representatives prioritised long-term resilience planning, private-sector actors emphasised immediate soft power diversification, a gap that the “narrative vacuum” only intensified. This statistical evidence provides the empirical rationale for the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism to lead the proposed Event Resilience Units. By centralising leadership within the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Vietnam can align these differing sectoral priorities into a unified narrative control strategy, ensuring that future disruptions are met with a cohesive institutional response rather than fragmented effort.

These priorities align with recognised practices in adaptive event diplomacy (Chalip and McGuirty 2004; Houlihan 2013), indicating Vietnam's gradual evolution from event-driven visibility toward system-based governance. This shift is essential for middle-power soft power frameworks that require institutionalisation, inter-ministerial coordination, and narrative coherence to maintain international credibility during crises.

Exit diplomacy refers to the strategic narration and management of withdrawal from high-profile international commitments in ways that preserve reputational capital. Vietnam faced challenges during its Formula 1 debut in a region where such soft power increasingly functions

as a diplomatic instrument. Viewed through this lens, the findings suggest that Vietnam's experience diverged significantly from regional precedents due to the absence of a coordinated accompanying narrative.

Table 8 synthesises these comparative signals alongside the interview-coded themes on communication gaps and exit diplomacy, highlighting the contrast between Singapore's continuity, Malaysia's managed exit, and Vietnam's narrative vacuum.

Table 8: Comparative analysis of strategic responses to Formula 1 disruption in ASEAN
(interpretive synthesis)

Feature	Singapore (resilient continuity)	Malaysia (managed strategic exit)	Vietnam (interrupted debut and narrative vacuum)
Event status	Resumed after pandemic hiatus	Discontinued (pre-pandemic)	Cancelled before first staging (pandemic)
Primary strategic intent	Policy continuity and city-brand reinforcement	Cost-benefit pragmatism and reputational risk control	Modernity and visibility signaling as an emerging middle-power
Narrative posture (as perceived by stakeholders)	Future-oriented continuity ("return/ready" signaling; maintained presence)	Message-controlled exit ("we choose to stop"; framed as rational choice)	Narrative vacuum (limited explanatory framing and weak substitute engagement)
Reputational implication (interpretive)	Signals institutional resilience and adaptability	Preserves reputational capital via "exit diplomacy"	Heightens perceived fragility due to strategic silence

As summarised in Table 8, Vietnam's narrative vacuum contrasts sharply with Singapore's continuity and Malaysia's managed exit. Malaysia's earlier withdrawal serves as a useful comparative benchmark: it suggests that terminating a Grand Prix need not damage national reputation when the decision is proactively framed as a pragmatic cost-benefit choice. It is important to note the structural difference in these exits: Malaysia's withdrawal was a calculated, voluntary strategic pivot, whereas Vietnam's was an involuntary disruption forced by the pandemic. However, the divergence in reputational outcome underscores that regardless of the trigger, the capacity to operationalise an exit narrative determines whether a state retains or loses soft power credibility. By contrast, the perceived vulnerability in Vietnam's case was associated less with the cancellation itself (an outcome largely unavoidable during the pandemic) than with the limited post-cancellation narrative work that followed, specifically the absence of sustained digital engagement or a visible recovery campaign. This contrast highlights how withdrawal, when poorly narrated, may signal uncertainty, whereas managed exits can function as reputational resilience.

The findings are also consistent with nation-branding and risk-governance perspectives (Anholt 2007; Grix and Brannagan 2016), which interpret mega-events as tools to manage national reputation under conditions of uncertainty. Vietnam's Formula 1 initiative, and its subsequent cancellation, thus illustrates how governments deploy event diplomacy both to amplify soft power narratives and to demonstrate administrative resilience when faced with global crises.

According to the evidence presented, the reputational harm remains reparable. Vietnam's effective management of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020–2021 provides an alternative demonstration of state capability and offers a foundation for strategic repositioning. This interpretation is supported by the Reputation Resilience Index, in which the "trust recovery confidence" item exhibited the highest factor loading (0.88; see Table 2). This pattern suggests that stakeholders do not view reputational loss as permanent; rather, their confidence is elastic

and can be restored through alternative demonstrations of state competence, such as effective public-health governance. This comparative perspective provides empirical balance by contrasting temporary event-specific losses with longer-term credibility gains in public-health and crisis governance. Participants repeatedly described the crisis as an opportunity to diversify Vietnam's soft power tools rather than a permanent setback.

This study highlights a conceptual change from focusing on event hosting to event resilience, a necessary focus in developing economies like Vietnam which cannot rely on one mega-event to anchor national strategy. Findings show growing acknowledgement among stakeholders of the value of scenario planning, durable infrastructure, and digital-engagement alternatives. These measures extend beyond risk management: they strengthen long-term diplomatic reputation and institutional preparedness. The Grand Prix episode was not merely a missed opportunity; it shed light on serious governance problems surrounding Vietnam's ability to coordinate effectively across ministries in preparation for a future defined by perpetual change. This emphasises the notion that reputation strength rests on inter-ministerial coordination, which is a characteristic of mature middle-powers. As a theoretical reflection, Vietnam's experience demonstrates the limits of event-based soft power strategies in the current era. The pandemic exposed the fragility of symbolic diplomacy when not anchored in adaptive institutions (Ritchie 2009; Grix and Brannagan 2016). Vietnam's governance model enables rapid policy execution and reform but still faces obstacles of horizontal coordination among agencies.

Lessons from other ASEAN states suggest practical avenues for improvement. As seen in established regional benchmarks, a collaborative governance style, characterised by flexibility and coordination, is essential for nurturing credibility in times of crisis. This regional benchmark correlates with ASEAN soft power dynamics and policy considerations of Vietnam's institutional reform. In contrast, another party viewed the cancellation as a strategic respite that averted, for Vietnam, the high fiscal fallout that other regional Formula 1 sponsors faced. Resources and political attention have now been redirected to the country's incredibly successful pandemic response, which is increasingly regarded as a source of international credibility and soft power. This counterinterpretation underscores that reputational outcomes can be ambivalent: the absence of an event may simultaneously avert economic exposure and generate alternative credibility through crisis management.

Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges several limitations. Regarding causal inference, a quantitative difference-in-differences or synthetic control approach was evaluated but deemed unsuitable for this specific case. The validity of these models depends on the parallel-trends assumption and the existence of a control unit that is not exposed to the treatment shock. Here, the COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a universal, simultaneous shock across ASEAN, meaning that all plausible comparison cases experienced major tourism and investment downturns at the same time. Under these conditions, any regression-based counterfactual would be statistically confounded, because pandemic effects cannot be separated cleanly from cancellation effects through time-series variation alone.

Consequently, this study adopts a comparative case design. By systematically contrasting Vietnam's cancelled Formula 1 trajectory against Singapore (post-pandemic resumption after a two-year hiatus) and Malaysia (pre-pandemic exit), and triangulating these contrasts with survey and interview evidence, the analysis identifies divergences in strategic resilience and crisis communication. While quantitative isolation of economic effects is confounded by the universal pandemic downturn, this qualitative contrast reveals specific institutional gaps that remain observable even when broader economic trends run parallel.

Finally, the quantitative component of this study ($n = 97$) is designed to be exploratory and diagnostic rather than confirmatory. The reported economic figures draw on triangulated pre-event estimates and a simplified multiplier analysis, rather than on computable general equilibrium models. Consequently, these figures should be read as scenario-based estimates of gross exposure, intended to contextualise the scale of disruption, rather than as precise econometric calculations of net welfare loss. Furthermore, because the survey employed non-probability sampling of stakeholders, the findings provide rich expert insight but are not statistically generalisable to the wider population of Vietnam's tourism and investment professionals. Readers should note that response bias may naturally exist, as stakeholders with significant financial exposure were likely more motivated to participate than those less affected.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has demonstrated that the cancellation of the 2020 Vietnamese Grand Prix should be understood not merely as a disrupted flagship initiative but as a critical test of exit diplomacy for emerging middle-powers. By exposing vulnerabilities in coordination and communication, the case illustrates that the strategic capacity to narrate a withdrawal is just as vital to soft power resilience as the logistical capacity to host. While quantitative evidence showed heightened concern among tourism stakeholders, the Reputation Resilience Index suggests that confidence remains recoverable, provided that future event diplomacy is embedded in broader systems of narrative management and inter-ministerial collaboration. By synthesising empirical data and comparative evidence, this study proposes five actionable strategies to strengthen Vietnam's national brand and global event diplomacy.

First, Vietnam should institutionalise scenario-based planning by establishing an Event Resilience Unit within the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism to move beyond static event preparation. This unit must coordinate with the Prime Minister's Office to develop pre-approved communication templates and "digital pivot" protocols (e.g., virtual spectator engagement) for high-profile disruptions. Embedding these scenarios in public-administration training will align Vietnam with international standards in crisis governance.

Second, Vietnam should diversify its soft power instruments by reducing reliance on single, spectacle-driven mega-events. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should expand soft power investments across digital diplomacy, cultural exports, and multilateral leadership. A diversified portfolio enhances reputational resilience, as credibility is maintained through multiple channels rather than a single flagship display.

Third, public-private coordination should be strengthened through the establishment of a National Event Advisory Council. This council would include tourism leaders and urban developers to institutionalise trust and implementation capacity, ensuring that market actors are not left in a "narrative vacuum" during crises.

Fourth, narrative management should be professionalised through the creation of a dedicated National Branding Office responsible for managing international communication during major disruptions. This office should track global perception trends and conduct media training for senior officials. By professionalising communication, Vietnam can transform reactive messaging into strategic exit diplomacy.

Finally, Vietnam should take a leadership role in ASEAN-level event diplomacy by proposing a regional framework for mega-event resilience. Joint initiatives, such as shared research on event governance and regional sports-diplomacy summits, would reduce competitive duplication and reinforce Southeast Asia's collective soft power.

Beyond these policy implications, future studies should examine the long-term evolution of Vietnam's soft power and international image after the Grand Prix cancellation, assessing whether diversification efforts successfully mitigate reputational risks. Longitudinal mixed-method designs could trace how perceptions change among domestic and international audiences over time. Comparative studies between political systems, comparing, for example, Vietnam versus Singapore and Malaysia could provide insights into how different governance systems approach crisis, reputation, and event diplomacy. Such inquiry would not only deepen theoretical understanding of middle-power adaptation but also provide policymakers with practical guidance for designing more robust and inclusive strategies for global engagement.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

The research protocol, approved by the Khon Kaen University Ethics Committee (HE673503), focused on three standardised themes: strategic intent, impact assessment, and resilience. All participants provided informed consent, and data collection adhered to institutional regulations for anonymity and privacy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that the study was carried out without any financial or commercial ties that might be interpreted as a potential conflict of interest.

NOTE

- * Dr. Indraruna is a lecturer in Political Science and International Affairs at Khon Kaen University in Thailand. His academic work focuses on the intersection of global affairs and unconventional themes within international relations. He teaches extensively at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, including courses for the Master of International Affairs and Politics programme. Indraruna's research portfolio is highly interdisciplinary, exploring niche and emerging topics in political science. His recent work examines the geopolitical implications of international sporting events, specifically focusing on Vietnam's strategic positioning. Furthermore, his broader research interests extend to non-traditional security and environmental diplomacy, including the politics of orbital debris (space junk), water resource management in Central Asia, and the role of "elephant diplomacy" in international relations. He is also currently exploring the political dimensions of aircraft development. Drawing upon his extensive travels throughout Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, Indraruna brings a richly comparative and global perspective to his research and teaching in international affairs.

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