

Strategic Imagination as a Research Domain: An Integrative Review and Future Agenda

Imaginação Estratégica como Domínio de Pesquisa: Uma Revisão Integrativa e Agenda Futura

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ABSTRACT

Strategic action is inherently future-oriented, yet strategy research has largely emphasized how organizations interpret environments and make decisions based on existing information, leaving the construction of imagined futures underexplored. This study examines how imagination has been mobilized in the strategy literature and what this reveals about the conceptual foundations of strategic thought. An integrative review of 31 studies published between 1994 and 2026 shows that imagination is present but fragmented and conceptually inconsistent. Across the literature, it appears in three main forms: as a source of novelty, a metaphor for strategic vision, and a cognitive tool for anticipation. Although these perspectives recognize its relevance, they remain closely tied to frameworks of managerial cognition and decision-making. By synthesizing these patterns, the article argues that imagination constitutes a latent yet underdeveloped dimension of strategic thinking. It introduces strategic imagination as an emerging research domain and proposes a future research agenda, particularly from a sociocultural perspective, to examine how organizational futures are collectively imagined, articulated, and legitimized.

Keywords: Strategic Imagination; Strategic Thinking; Strategic Research; Future orientated strategy; managerial cognition.

RESUMO

A ação estratégica é inerentemente orientada para o futuro, no entanto, a pesquisa em estratégia tem enfatizado, em grande medida, como as organizações interpretam ambientes e tomam decisões com base em informações existentes, deixando a construção de futuros imaginados pouco explorada. Este estudo examina como a imaginação tem sido mobilizada na literatura de estratégia e o que isso revela sobre os fundamentos conceituais do pensamento estratégico. Uma revisão integrativa de 31 estudos publicados entre 1994 e 2026 mostra que a imaginação está presente, porém de forma fragmentada e conceitualmente inconsistente. Na literatura, ela aparece sob três formas principais: como fonte de novidade, como metáfora para visão estratégica e como ferramenta cognitiva para antecipação. Embora essas perspectivas

reconheçam sua relevância, elas permanecem estreitamente vinculadas a estruturas de cognição gerencial e tomada de decisão. Ao sintetizar esses padrões, o artigo argumenta que a imaginação constitui uma dimensão latente, porém subdesenvolvida, do pensamento estratégico. O texto introduz a imaginação estratégica como um domínio de pesquisa emergente e propõe uma agenda de pesquisas futuras — particularmente sob uma perspectiva sociocultural — para examinar como os futuros organizacionais são coletivamente imaginados, articulados e legitimados.

Palavras-chave: Imaginação estratégica; Pensamento estratégico; Pesquisa em estratégia; Estratégia orientada para o futuro; Cognição gerencial.

1. INTRODUCTION

Strategy is fundamentally concerned with how organizations envision and enact futures, involving the anticipation of change, the formulation of visions, and the construction of organizational positions over time (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Whittington, 2002; Chen et al., 2023). Yet, despite this future-oriented character, much strategy research remains anchored in models of environmental interpretation and decision-making based on available information (Gavetti & Levinthal, 2000; Walsh, 1995; Helfat & Peteraf, 2015), in which the future is conceived primarily as an analytical extension of the present (March, 1991; Gavetti et al., 2005).

From this perspective, theories of imagination offer a particularly relevant conceptual foundation for strategy research. Across philosophy, psychology, and sociocultural theory, imagination has been understood as a fundamental human capacity through which individuals project possibilities, construct representations of absent or hypothetical states, and explore alternative courses of action (Abraham, 2020; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). While cognitive processes, like perception and attention, are often associated with the interpretation of available information, imagination has been described as enabling actors to project possibilities beyond immediate conditions. This capacity is especially relevant for strategy, where actors frequently need to articulate visions, narratives, and courses of action oriented toward organizational states that do not yet exist. Despite this theoretical affinity, the role of imagination in strategy research remains relatively unclear, with studies mobilizing the concept in diverse and sometimes inconsistent ways.

This orientation may create a theoretical tension. If strategic action often involves conceiving courses of action directed toward organizational states that do not yet exist, how do actors generate and legitimize such possibilities when they cannot be directly inferred from available data? While the strategy literature extensively examines interpretation, cognition, and decision-making, it offers fewer conceptual tools to explain how actors construct representations of futures that extend beyond current realities. Starting from this theoretical tension, this article turns to the phenomenon of imagination, defined here as the ability to mentally represent possibilities not directly derivable from immediate reality (Abraham, 2020; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016), and investigates how it has been mobilized in strategy literature.

More than verifying its presence, we examine how imagination has been conceptually incorporated into the field. Strategic studies frequently invoke imagination to explain novelty, vision, or anticipation, yet rarely delimit it as an explicit analytical construct, typically integrating it into established categories linked to managerial cognition and decision-making (Walsh, 1995; Helfat & Peteraf, 2015). The problem addressed in this article is therefore not the absence of imagination in strategy research, but the way the phenomenon has been conceptually accommodated within dominant theoretical frameworks.

To address this question, this article develops an integrative review of 31 studies published between 1994 and 2026 that directly or indirectly mobilize the phenomenon of imagination in strategy research. The analysis shows that, although recurrent, the concept appears in an oscillating manner, associated with creativity, used as a metaphor, or treated as a cognitive tool, remaining largely subordinate to established interpretive models. By organizing these forms of incorporation, the article contributes to identifying strategic imagination as an emerging research domain within strategy studies and advances a future research agenda aimed at understanding how organizational futures are collectively imagined and legitimized.

The article makes three main theoretical contributions. First, it clarifies how imagination has been mobilized in the strategy literature and explains why the concept has remained conceptually fragmented despite its recurrent presence. Second, it contributes to debates on the cognitive foundations of strategy by distinguishing imagination from cognition and

highlighting its role in the production of new strategic possibilities. Third, the study proposes a sociocultural research agenda that examines how organizational futures are collectively constructed through shared narratives, coordinated practices, and symbolic processes.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework on imagination and managerial cognition in strategy. The methodological procedures of the integrative review are then described. Subsequently, the results and discussion present the main patterns identified in the literature and outline a research agenda for the study of strategic imagination. Finally, the article concludes by summarizing its contributions and implications for future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Imagination: key concepts and theoretical lenses

Imagination can be understood as a fundamental human capacity that enables individuals to conceive situations, objects, and states that are not present in immediate reality (Abraham, 2020). It involves a cognitive and symbolic distancing from the here and now through which individuals mentally represent the absent, the hypothetical, or the not yet experienced. In this sense, imagination functions as an active process of meaning construction that supports the projection of alternatives to existing conditions (Warnock, 1976; Abraham, 2020). Through imaginative capacity, individuals become able to project possible futures, construct alternatives, and evaluate courses of action in the present (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). For the field of strategy, this characteristic implies that strategic action may include not only on the interpretation of the environment but also the ability to conceive organizational states that do not yet have direct empirical correspondence.

The literature recognizes that imagination manifests in heterogeneous forms, operating in spontaneous or deliberate modes and in conscious or unconscious ways (Abraham, 2020). This conceptual multiplicity makes imagination a challenging object of theoretical analysis, as different disciplinary traditions emphasize distinct dimensions of the phenomenon.

To address this diversity, Abraham (2020) proposes a systematization of imagination research through five theoretical lenses: (i) philosophical and conceptual; (ii) sociocultural; (iii) cognitive and neuroscientific; (iv) aesthetic; and (v) clinical and applied. The philosophical and conceptual lens examines imagination primarily in relation to intentionality and meaning-making processes. Within this tradition, imagination is treated as an oriented faculty through which individuals represent absent objects, possible events, or alternative worlds (Abraham, 2020; Kind & Abraham, 2020). Imaginative processes are therefore associated with the construction of narratives, moral reasoning, and temporal displacement, enabling individuals to mentally explore possible situations and evaluate courses of action. From this perspective, imagination functions as a condition for the articulation of meanings and the construction of possible worlds that guide human practice. The sociocultural lens shifts attention from the individual mind to the social practices and cultural contexts through which imagination is produced and shared. From this perspective, imagination is understood as a socially situated and culturally mediated process through which collective actors elaborate new combinations of meanings, practices, and forms of action (Zittoun, Glăveanu & Hawlina, 2020).

Cultural artifacts such as narratives, models, and symbolic tools function as mediators that stabilize particular visions while simultaneously enabling their transformation (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). In strategic contexts, this perspective highlights how organizational futures emerge through interaction, shared narratives, and collective sensemaking rather than solely through individual cognition. The cognitive and neuroscientific lens approaches imagination as

a set of mental processes involved in the internal simulation of experiences, scenarios, and states of the world. Within this tradition, imagination is treated as an integral component of cognition, closely linked to perception, memory, and action (Arzy & Dafni-Merom, 2020). Imagery processes play a central role in this perspective, allowing individuals to generate sensory representations of situations even in the absence of direct stimuli. Imagination therefore supports the recombination of past experiences and stored perceptual information, enabling individuals to mentally simulate possible scenarios and navigate complex environments.

The aesthetic lens approaches imagination through experiences of sensibility, symbolic expression, and aesthetic engagement. Within this perspective, imagination is mobilized in processes related to art, music, literature, and other forms of symbolic experience that evoke emotional, sensory, and interpretive responses (Abraham, 2020). Rather than emphasizing problem-solving, this lens highlights how imagination enables individuals to experience, reinterpret, and attribute meaning to reality through aesthetic forms. Finally, the clinical and applied lens examines imagination in relation to altered, atypical, or intervention-oriented states, focusing on both ordinary and extraordinary manifestations of imaginative experience (Abraham, 2020). This perspective encompasses phenomena such as dreaming, meditation, hypnosis, hallucinations, and conditions involving disruptions or transformations in imaginative functioning. In addition, applied approaches investigate how imagination can be mobilized in therapeutic, educational, or developmental settings to support adaptation, wellbeing, and cognitive change.

Together, these lenses illustrate the plurality of theoretical approaches through which imagination has been conceptualized across disciplines. Mobilizing Abraham's classification as an interpretive framework makes it possible to identify how different traditions of imagination research resonate within strategy studies and to examine how imaginative processes have been framed in strategic literature.

2.2.- Strategy and Managers' Mental Processes: a brief overview

A significant stream of strategy research seeks to explain strategic action through the mental processes of managers. Within this tradition, strategy is understood as a phenomenon mediated by cognition, involving the ways individuals perceive environments, interpret information, and construct representations of competitive situations (Walsh, 1995; Gavetti & Levinthal, 2000; Helfat & Peteraf, 2015). This perspective has played a central role in shifting attention from strategic outcomes toward the cognitive mechanisms underlying strategic thinking.

At the same time, the field of strategy is characterized by considerable theoretical heterogeneity (Nerur et al., 2008). Different schools of thought coexist, each emphasizing distinct assumptions regarding the nature of strategy and the role of the strategist. Efforts to synthesize this diversity have produced influential typologies of strategic thought, such as those proposed by Mintzberg et al. (1998) and Whittington (2002), which organize the field into broad analytical perspectives.

Among these approaches, the cognitive school of strategy occupies a central position. This perspective focuses on the mental processes underlying strategic formulation, emphasizing cognitive schemas, mental models, and interpretive frameworks through which strategists make sense of competitive environments (Mintzberg et al., 1998). Strategy thus becomes understood as a phenomenon mediated by the strategist's mind, shifting analytical attention from outcomes toward the mechanisms through which individuals interpret problems and construct strategic representations.

This cognitive orientation remains influential in contemporary research, particularly in studies on the microfoundations of dynamic capabilities, which highlight managerial cognition and decision-making processes as key drivers of strategic adaptation (Helfat & Peteraf, 2015). In this tradition, managers' mental models and interpretive capacities are fundamental for identifying opportunities, interpreting environmental change, and reconfiguring organizational capabilities (Chen et al., 2023). Recent studies have further developed this perspective by examining strategic thinking as a complex mental process through which actors' structure and revise courses of action under uncertainty (Geier, 2024).

Within this movement, some works have begun to explicitly incorporate imagination into discussions of strategic thinking, suggesting that the ability to envision possible futures and articulate strategic narratives plays an important role in strategic activity (Rindova & Martins, 2022). Nevertheless, these contributions largely remain embedded within cognitive frameworks.

Although this cognitive perspective provides powerful explanations of strategic interpretation and decision-making, it also introduces analytical limitations. By privileging processes grounded in the interpretation of existing information, this tradition tends to emphasize forms of thinking oriented toward understanding the present rather than conceiving qualitatively new possibilities (Schacter & Addis, 2020). As a result, strategy research offers comparatively fewer analytical tools for explaining how actors generate representations of futures that cannot be directly inferred from current conditions.

2.3.- Exploring the relationship between imagination and strategy

Strategy inherently involves the conception of organizational futures toward which actors direct present action (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Whittington, 2002; Chen et al., 2023). Strategic formulation therefore requires more than the interpretation of current environments or the extrapolation of observable trends. It also involves the capacity to project possibilities, articulate future-oriented narratives, and imagine alternative organizational trajectories.

Given that imagination refers to the human capacity to represent absent or hypothetical states (Abraham, 2020), exploring the relationship between imaginative processes and strategic activity becomes theoretically consistent. While cognitive approaches explain how actors interpret environments and process available information, imagination contributes to understanding how actors construct representations of futures that extend beyond present realities.

From this perspective, imagination does not replace cognition but complements it. Cognitive processes support interpretation and decision-making based on existing conditions, whereas imagination enables actors to envision alternative futures, explore novel possibilities, and articulate strategic directions not directly derivable from the present (Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002). Considering these processes together provides a more comprehensive understanding of the mental dynamics underlying strategy, particularly in contexts characterized by uncertainty, discontinuity, and rapid change.

Despite this theoretical relevance, the role of imagination in strategy remains conceptually unclear. Although the concept appears in literature, it is often mobilized in fragmented ways and rarely treated as a central analytical construct. Understanding how imagination has been incorporated into strategy research therefore becomes necessary for clarifying its theoretical potential within the field. This gap motivates the integrative review conducted in this study.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopted the integrative literature review method, as proposed by Torraco (2005; 2016), guided by the following research question: how is imagination conceptualized and operationalized in academic research on strategy? The choice of this method is appropriate for the objective because it enables the critical synthesis of different theoretical approaches, favoring the identification of conceptual patterns and convergences, as well as analytical gaps in the field investigated (Torraco, 2016). It should be noted that the integrative review does not aim only to describe the field; rather, its purpose is to enable a critical and analytical understanding of scientific production, in order to identify theoretical gaps, new issues, and interpretations, allowing research to advance.

The bibliographic search was organized using the Web of Science and Scopus databases, selected for their interdisciplinary scope and indexing reliability. The descriptors “imaginat*” and “strategy” were used, applied to the title and keyword fields, considering only peer-reviewed articles. After removing duplicates between the databases, an initial set of 59 articles was obtained, which comprised the preliminary screening stage.

The screening was conducted by reading the abstracts, with the aim of verifying the relevance of the studies in relation to the focus of the research. At this stage, 28 articles were excluded because they did not use the term imagination in the research, either illustratively or without a conceptual definition. At the end of this process, the review corpus consisted of 31 articles, published between 1994 and 2026, which were read in their entirety.

Table 01 - Methodological Procedure

Review steps	Description of the steps	Results Obtained
Step 01: Selection criteria	Database	Clarivate Analytics Web of Science & Scopus
	Years of Search	Until January 2026
	Search Terms	“imaginat*” and “strategy” in Business, Management & Economics
	Partial Articles Total	465 articles
	Search Terms	in Title and Keywords
	Partial Articles Total	147 articles
	Document Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles
	Partial Articles Total	59 articles
	Duplicate Removal	28 articles excluded
	Final Review Corpus	31 articles
Step 02: Analysis criteria	Time Span of Publications	1994 - 2026
	Full-text reading of the selected corpus	31 articles analyzed in full
	Thematic Analysis Analytical Framework	Based on Braun & Clarke (2012) Linked to Abraham’s Conceptual of Imagination (2016)
	Coding Process Critical Analysis	

Source: Prepared by the authors (2026)

The articles were analyzed using thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun & Clarke (2012), linked to the conceptual framework of imagination developed by Abraham (2020). The

procedure began with an in-depth reading of the texts, aiming to familiarize them with the corpus and identify regularities in the way imagination is theoretically mobilized in strategy literature. Based on this process, coding stages were conducted, enabling the construction of analytical categories that reflect different approaches in the literature, as explained in the next section. Rather than assuming imagination to be a homogeneous concept, the analysis explored whether and how different framings emerged within the literature.

4. RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the integrative review through two complementary levels of analysis. First, the studies are examined according to the theoretical lenses through which imagination has been approached, allowing us to identify how different traditions frame the phenomenon within strategy research. Second, the analysis identifies recurring patterns in the conceptual use of imagination across the literature. The analysis suggests that imagination appears in strategy research through distinct and uneven theoretical lenses. Rather than consistently emerging as an independent analytical construct, the concept frequently appears embedded within broader explanatory frameworks, particularly those centered on cognition and interpretation. This pattern may indicate a recurrent yet conceptually unstable position of imagination in the field. The integrative review identified a total of 31 articles that comprise a heterogeneous corpus, both in theoretical and methodological terms, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the concept and its appropriation by different analytical traditions.

To guide this analysis, we adopted as a reference the classification proposed by Abraham (2020), which organizes the study of imagination into five broad operational categories: (i) Philosophical and Conceptual Lens; (ii) Sociocultural Lens; (iii) Cognitive and Neuroscientific Lens; (iv) Aesthetic Lens; and (v) Clinical and Applied Lens. Using Abraham's framework as an analytical lens, the review reveals that strategy research selectively mobilizes only a subset of the possible perspectives on imagination.

The results indicate that only three of these categories are present in the strategic literature analyzed. Categories (iv) Aesthetic Lens and (v) Clinical and Applied Lens, although relevant in other fields of knowledge, were not central or mobilized in the studies included in the corpus. In addition, some of the studies analyzed did not explicitly address imagination as a theoretical construct. This distribution is not merely thematic: it indicates that the way imagination appears in strategy depends directly on the theoretical framework adopted by the field. Each of the identified lenses will be detailed below.

4.1.- Philosophical and Conceptual Lens

In the philosophical tradition, imagination is understood as an intentional faculty associated with the attribution of meaning and the construction of narratives about experience (Kind; Abraham, 2020). In this framework, imagination allows the subject to represent the absent, explore possibilities, and symbolically organize the lived world, articulating dimensions of the real, the possible, and the fictional. Studies associated with this approach show how imagined narratives structure collective interpretations, legitimize political projects, and stabilize identities by giving historical coherence to human actions (Donglai, 2001; Archambaud, 2024). However, as Abraham (2020) argues, imagination does not occupy an independent explanatory position in this lens: it operates mainly in support of processes of interpretation, judgment, and meaning. Thus, the focus falls on understanding the meaning attributed to reality, rather than on the mechanisms by which new possibilities are produced, keeping imagination integrated with other mental faculties that organize experience.

In studies of the corpus aligned with the philosophical-conceptual lens, strategy is approached primarily as a narrative construction of collective meaning. Donglai (2001) analyzes creation narratives in specific traditions to show how imagined visions structure forms of social organization and guide political action, bringing strategy closer to processes of symbolic interpretation. Similarly, Kennedy, Parkins, and Johnston (2018) investigate local consumption movements and demonstrate that strategic practices emerge from the articulation of shared imaginaries about community and sustainability, rather than from instrumental calculation. Archambaud (2024) highlights how identities and political projects are sustained by imagined reconstructions of the past, which guide collective decisions in the present. Together, these works treat strategy less as a rational choice and more as historical and narrative interpretation, in which imagination provides symbolic coherence to action, but is not isolated as an independent analytical mechanism.

4.2. Cognitive and Neuroscientific Lens

In the cognitive approach, imagination is treated as an internal simulation process strongly associated with perception, memory, and decision-making (Arzy & Dafni- Merom, 2020). Here, the mind is understood primarily in relation to its immediate environment: imagining corresponds to the activation of mental representations that aid in the evaluation of alternatives and the anticipation of consequences, functioning as an extension of information processing mechanisms. Empirical research explores this phenomenon through mental imagery, analyzing its effects on choice, consumption, and innovation and making it amenable to experimental measurement (Cowan & Ketron, 2019; Busca et al., 2021). As indicated by Abraham (2016; 2020), in this lens, imagination is not a domain, but an auxiliary component of cognitional resource that supports prediction, decision-making, and problem-solving. The result is its incorporation into explanatory models centered on the interpretation of the environment, in which the future tends to be approached as a projection inferred from information available in the present.

In studies associated with the cognitive lens, strategy is treated as a process of choice supported by mental simulations and anticipation of consequences. Work on product evaluation and innovation shows that scenario visualization influences judgments and decisions by allowing alternatives to be evaluated before action (Zhao et al., 2012; Cowan & Ketron, 2019; Hilken et al., 2022; Busca et al., 2021). In organizational contexts, imagination appears as a resource for formulating solutions, improving performance, and guiding strategic behavior, functioning as a psychological mechanism that expands decision-making capacity under uncertainty (Roos & Victor, 1999; Savvas, 2016; Campos & Sanchez, 2016; Gustina et al., 2025). More recent studies on narratives and the construction of futures show that strategists combine knowledge and mental projection to evaluate possibilities and structure choices, keeping strategic action anchored in individual cognitive processes (Rindova & Martins, 2022, 2023, 2024; Bosone et al., 2026). Together, these works treat imagination as an extension of information processing: it allows for the simulation of courses of action and reduces uncertainty, while remaining integrated with explanatory models centered on the decision-makers' cognition.

4.3. Sociocultural Lens

Finally, the sociocultural lens shifts the analytical focus to collective practices and culturally mediated experiences, treating imagination as a phenomenon that is distinct from, yet articulated with, cognition. From this perspective, while cognitive processes are predominantly

associated with the mind's relationship with the present and with stimuli from immediate reality, imagination refers to the ability to project future possibilities and explore states not yet given (Abraham, 2020). The two processes operate simultaneously and complementarily, but they are not equivalent: cognition is often associated with the organization of current experience, whereas imagination has been described as expanding the horizon of possible futures. Thus, imagining is not only a form of mental processing, but a capacity linked to the cultural trajectory of the subject and the social practices in which they participate.

Works in this tradition show that the production of alternatives, the contestation of established orders, and the formulation of new courses of action depend on shared and historically situated symbolic repertoires (Zittoun, Glăveanu & Hawlina, 2020; Felin & Zenger, 2009; Handelman & Weijo, 2024). In this framework, creativity is approached less as an independent cognitive phenomenon and more as a manifestation of imaginative activity, that is, as a visible expression of processes through which individuals and collectives elaborate possible futures based on available cultural resources.

In studies aligned with the sociocultural lens, strategy is understood as a collective process of constructing possibilities and reorganizing practices. Studies on learning and strategy formation show that the creation of new courses of action depends on the circulation of shared interpretations and the recombination of organizational experiences (Szulanski & Amin, 2001; Gibbert, 2004). Research on entrepreneurship and institutional change indicates that strategic actors formulate conceptions of how the world could function and, based on these, guide behaviors and collective coordination (Felin & Zenger, 2009; Thompson, 2018). More recent studies emphasize deliberate practices of future building, such as collaborative methods and participatory foresight processes, in which imagining becomes a structured social activity (Finn & Wylie, 2021; Durante et al., 2024). In contexts of social mobilization and the market, shared visions of the future also sustain strategic coalitions and guide coordinated action (Handelman & Weijo, 2024).

Although studies in the corpus mobilize elements associated with the sociocultural dimension—especially when dealing with collective processes, coordination, and shared construction of meanings—this mobilization rarely appears articulated with an explicit theoretical basis of imagination. In these cases, the phenomenon functions as an empirical context to explain social practices, rather than as an analytical principle structuring strategic explanation. Thus, the sociocultural lens is not absent from literature but occupies a peripheral position: it describes collective dynamics without redefining the conceptual apparatus of the field. Consequently, even when strategic action is analyzed as a shared production of futures, imagination remains subordinate to already established interpretive or cognitive models.

4.4. Implicit Approach to Imagination

In addition to approaches that mobilize imagination as a theoretical construct, the review identified works in which it appears implicitly, diffusely, or instrumentally, without being formally presented as an analytical category. Glaser's (1994) seminal text, for example, when discussing organizational adaptation as a reaction in uncertain contexts, emphasizes the human character of strategic formulation, suggesting processes of projection and recombination of possibilities that approximate imagination, although this is not defined or conceptualized in the article.

More recent studies on the construction of futures recognize the importance of imagination in reflecting on social transformations, but treat it transversally, as an element that supports the field (Milojević and Izgarjan, 2014). These works indicate that, even when not

directly theorized, imagination permeates central debates on strategy and change, suggesting its conceptual relevance and opening space for investigations in literature.

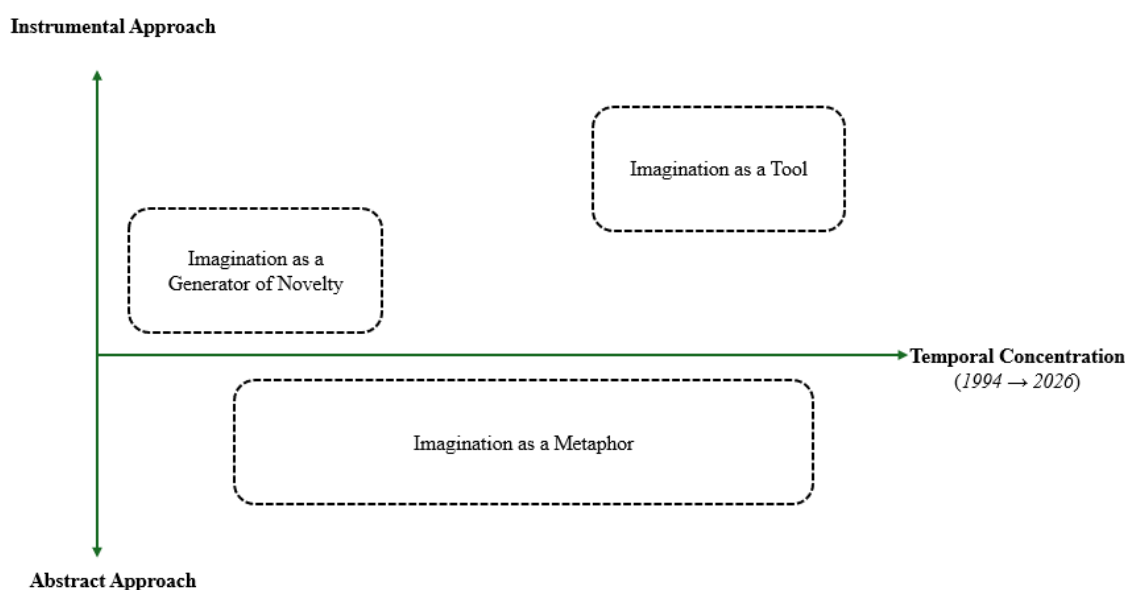
4.5. Summary of the analysis of theoretical lenses

The analysis suggests that imagination does not appear to have consolidated as an independent theoretical construct in the reviewed literature. Although elements associated with the sociocultural dimension appear in some studies, especially when addressing collective processes, coordination, and shared construction of meanings, they are rarely articulated with an explicit theoretical basis of imagination. In these cases, the phenomenon functions as an empirical context for strategic action, rather than as an explanatory analytical principle. Thus, the sociocultural lens is not absent, but occupies a peripheral position: it describes collective dynamics without underpinning the conceptual apparatus of the field. As a consequence, even when strategy is treated as a shared production of futures, imagination remains subordinate to already established interpretive or cognitive models.

4.6. Temporal Patterns in the Conceptualization of Imagination

The temporal analysis suggests a recurring pattern in how imagination has been incorporated into strategy research over time. Rather than clearly evolving toward conceptual consolidation, the literature shows a recurring tendency to accommodate imagination within pre-existing theoretical frameworks. The initial milestone of 1994 corresponds to the oldest study identified in the review (Glaser), in which imagination occupies a marginal place in theoretical argumentation, being mobilized mainly in a metaphorical way, without systematic conceptual development. From the mid-2000s, especially around 2004, a more frequent association between imagination and creativity is observed based on the generation of novelty. However, it is in the post- pandemic period, starting in 2021, that a clearer inflection in the literature on imagination becomes evident, marked by the emergence of an explicit concern with the future.

Figure 02 - Modes of Conceptual Accommodation



Source: Prepared by the authors (2026)

This temporal pattern reveals three recurring modes through which imagination is conceptually accommodated: a) imagination as the generation of novelty; b) imagination as metaphor; and c) imagination as a tool, with a predominantly cognitive bias. These modes emerged from a systematic process of thematic analysis, aimed at identifying recurring patterns of meaning, conceptual uses, and theoretical frameworks throughout the analyzed corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2012), and will be detailed below.

4.6.1. Imagination as a generator of novelty

In the older studies in the analyzed corpus, imagination appears predominantly associated with the generation of ideas or the production of novelty, being treated as a desirable result of the strategic process and not as an analytical phenomenon (Ogilvie, 1998; Szulanski & Amin, 2001; Gibbert, 2004). In these works, imagination emerges as a condition for innovation or creative solutions to organizational problems, often without its own conceptual delimitation. Instead of constituting a theoretical object, imagination is absorbed by constructs already consolidated in the area, especially those linked to creativity and divergent thinking.

This pattern may reflect the influence of the managerial cognition tradition in strategy research, in which strategic action is understood primarily as a process of information interpretation and problem solving (March, 1991; Walsh, 1995; Gavetti & Levinthal, 2000). In this context, the production of novelty tends to be treated as an extension of already theorized cognitive mechanisms, such as exploration, recombination, and learning, to reduce the need for a specific concept for the imaginative phenomenon.

Therefore, when imagination is mobilized in these studies, it appears to be integrated into existing explanatory models: not as a process of constructing possibilities, but as a stage of creative thinking involved in solving strategic problems. When treated as synonymous with creativity, imagination does not appear to add limited conceptual differentiation in these studies. Strategic action continues to be understood from problem-solving processes, in which novelty appears as a cognitive product, rather than as an expression of the construction of future possibilities. Thus, instead of opening its own field of investigation, imagination is incorporated as the initial stage of an already theorized process, remaining subordinate to existing explanatory models.

4.6.2. Imagination as Metaphor

A second recurring form of mobilizing imagination in strategic literature occurs when the term is used as a descriptive or rhetorical resource, without explicit conceptual delimitation (Salaman & Storey, 2009; Alam, 2012; Burt & Nair, 2020; Bansal et al., 2025). In these works, imagination appears associated with vision, inspiration, commitment, or organizational change, functioning as explanatory language for complex phenomena, but without becoming a properly defined analytical object. Unlike studies that assimilate it to creativity, here the imaginative act is not reduced to a specific cognitive mechanism and remains open, yet conceptually indeterminate.

This metaphorical use is consistent with a historical characteristic of the field of strategy, where broad concepts operate as interpretive categories rather than as delimited constructs (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Whittington, 2002). When describing strategic processes, such as commitment to innovation, purpose building, or anticipation of change, authors resort to imagination to express dimensions of organizational action that are not directly observable. However, this mobilization does not imply its theorization. The concept acts as a language for articulating the phenomenon, not as an explanation.

As a consequence, imagination occupies a paradoxical place, in which it is considered necessary to understand strategic action, but remains outside the conceptual scope that would explain it. It operates as a tacit assumption of strategic practice, without its processes, conditions, or forms of manifestation being systematically investigated. This movement preserves the coherence of existing theories, since organizational action continues to be explained by interpretation, decision, and adaptation, while imagination remains an interpretive backdrop.

Thus, unlike the first pattern, in which imagination is absorbed by established constructs, here it is maintained as an auxiliary language of the field. The phenomenon is neither denied nor reduced, but it is also not delimited.

4.6.3. Imagination as a Tool

Finally, there is a growing trend in strategy literature to treat imagination in an operational way, especially in debates on scenario building and strategic anticipation. In these works, imagination is portrayed as a cognitive tool, often anchored in contributions from psychology focused on visualizing future states or overcoming informational uncertainties (Finn & Wylie, 2021; Rindova & Martins, 2022, 2024; Bosone et al, 2026). Although this approach represents an advance in explicitly recognizing the role of imagination in strategic thinking, it tends to restrict the phenomenon to an instrumental function, emphasizing its practical utility at the expense of its procedural, social, and symbolic complexity.

The strengthening of this trend can be understood in light of recent transformations in the competitive environment, marked by intensified global competition, market volatility, and the growing dissolution and overload of information (Rindova and Martins, 2023). In this scenario, there is a tendency toward the standardization of creative processes, increasingly translated into widely disseminated and replicable methods, reducing their differentiating potential in the strategic field. It is precisely in this context that imagination emerges in these works as a tool for the creation and projection of organizational projects and, potentially, competitive advantage.

Practices such as strategic foresight and the construction of future narratives take center stage as mechanisms for dealing with the future, favoring the incorporation of imagination as an applied skill, oriented toward anticipation and risk reduction. As a result, imagination becomes operationalized as a technique for anticipating and evaluating possible futures, while its broader role in enabling the creation of novel strategic possibilities remains theoretically underexplored.

4.6.4. Summary of the results of the temporal patterns

Taken together, the three patterns identified—imagination as novelty, metaphor, and tool—indicate that imagination is not absent from the strategy literature. On the contrary, it appears recurrently but is consistently accommodated within existing explanatory structures. When associated with the generation of novelty, it is absorbed by consolidated constructs from cognitive studies; when mobilized as descriptive language, it remains outside the analytical apparatus and operates as metaphor; and when operationalized, it is framed as a decision-support tool. Across these patterns, imagination rarely appears as a stabilized independent theoretical construct.

This pattern suggests that the central challenge is not the empirical absence of imagination, but the systematic way in which it is incorporated without altering the dominant explanatory assumptions of the field. Strategic literature implicitly recognizes the need to

account for the construction of future possibilities, yet continues to frame this process through models centered on environmental interpretation and information processing. As a consequence, imagination emerges as a recurrent but conceptually underdeveloped dimension of strategic thinking, pointing to the potential consolidation of strategic imagination as a distinct research domain within strategy studies.

5. DISCUSSION

This review advances the argument that imagination has been systematically incorporated into strategy research without becoming an independent analytical construct. Instead, it has been consistently subordinated to dominant explanatory frameworks centered on cognition, interpretation, and decision-making. This pattern reveals a deeper theoretical tension within strategy theory. Although strategy is inherently concerned with the construction of futures, the future is typically conceptualized as a projection derived from present knowledge and environmental signals. As a result, strategic research has become highly sophisticated in explaining how organizations interpret complex environments yet comparatively limited in explaining how they generate qualitatively new possibilities that cannot be directly inferred from existing conditions.

Strategic literature is robust in explaining how organizations interpret complex contexts, but less developed in understanding how they produce qualitatively new courses of action. One possible explanation for this limitation lies in the peripheral position occupied by sociocultural approaches within the literature reviewed. Studies that address collective processes and the shared construction of futures rarely use imagination as an analytical foundation, treating it more as an empirical context than as an explanatory mechanism. As a result, strategy is predominantly investigated as a process of adaptation and interpretation rather than a process through which new possibilities are conceived and articulated.

Because the cognitive lens was the most prominent perspective identified in the corpus, the findings also contribute to ongoing debates on the microfoundations of strategy. Research on managerial cognition and dynamic capabilities has emphasized the role of managers' mental processes in shaping strategic action (Gavetti & Levinthal, 2000; Helfat & Peteraf, 2015; Teece, 2007). Within this tradition, strategic thinking is largely explained through mechanisms of perception, interpretation, and decision-making under bounded rationality. Although these approaches have significantly advanced the understanding of how organizations interpret environments and adapt to change, they tend to treat future-oriented reasoning primarily as a cognitive extension of present knowledge. Rather than replacing cognition, imagination allows strategists to construct representations of possibilities that are not directly inferable from available information, thus contributing to the generation of new strategic alternatives and the exploration of novel courses of action (Felin & Foss, 2005; Gavetti, 2012).

The findings also resonate with growing interest in strategy research on the role of future-oriented thinking in organizational life. Strategic foresight and related approaches have emphasized the importance of exploring possible futures in contexts characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and discontinuity (Rohrbeck & Kum, 2018; Vecchiato, 2012). However, much of this literature has focused on methodological tools for anticipating environmental change rather than on the underlying processes through which futures become conceivable and collectively articulated. A similar implication emerges when considering the strategy-as-practice perspective, which has emphasized strategy as a socially situated activity performed through everyday practices, interactions, and discourses (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Whittington, 2006). From this viewpoint, strategy is not only a matter of analytical decision-making but also a process of collective sensemaking and meaning construction.

Collective imagination thus plays a role in enabling organizational actors to move beyond the interpretation of current realities and to engage in the social construction of new strategic possibilities (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Based on this diagnosis, suggest that future research can advance the study of strategic imagination through multiple theoretical pathways. Rather than privileging a single perspective, the review demonstrates that each theoretical lens highlights different mechanisms through which imagination contributes to strategy. Table 3 summarizes potential avenues for future research emerging from the five theoretical perspectives identified in this review.

Table 3. Theoretical Pathways for Development of Strategic Imagination Research

Theoretical Lens	How imagination is currently conceptualized	Main limitation identified	Future research opportunities
Philosophical and Conceptual	Narrative and meaning construction	Limited attention to how possibilities are generated	Examine how imagined futures shape strategic narratives, legitimacy, and organizational identity
Cognitive and Neuroscientific	Mental simulation and decision support	Imagination treated primarily as information processing	Investigate how imagination generates possibilities beyond existing knowledge structures
Sociocultural	Collective construction of futures	Limited theoretical development within strategy research	Explore how futures are socially imagined, negotiated, and stabilized in organizations

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Taken together, these pathways suggest that the development of strategic imagination does not depend on the adoption of a single theoretical perspective. Rather, each lens illuminates distinct dimensions of how organizational futures are conceived, interpreted, and enacted. In this sense, strategic imagination emerges not as a replacement for existing approaches, but as a conceptual domain capable of integrating different strands of strategy research around the question of how futures become conceivable and actionable.

This article contributes to the field of strategy by systematically organizing the way imagination has been mobilized in the literature. The review shows that the phenomenon is not absent, but rather incorporated in a recurring manner as creativity, metaphor, or tool, remaining subordinate to models centered on the interpretation of the environment and informed decision-making. By highlighting this pattern, the study shifts the debate from a supposed empirical gap to a theoretical framework limitation, explaining why imagination appears frequently but without conceptual consolidation. In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing discussions on the microfoundations of strategy by showing that imagination represents an underexplored dimension of managerial cognition, complementing established explanations of how strategists perceive, interpret, and evaluate strategic alternatives.

As a second contribution, the work highlights the tension between the future orientation of strategic action and the predominance of cognitive approaches focused on the present. By distinguishing imagination and cognition as complementary processes, the article offers an analytical framework capable of integrating different uses of the concept in the literature. In this sense, the study contributes to emerging discussions on future-oriented strategy by

suggesting that strategic action involves not only the interpretation of environmental signals but also the imaginative construction of organizational futures.

As a third contribution, the study proposes theoretical pathways for advancing strategic imagination research. By identifying distinct opportunities associated with the philosophical, cognitive, and sociocultural lenses, the review demonstrates how different traditions can contribute to the development of strategic imagination as an emerging research domain. The review also suggests practical implications by encouraging organizations to recognize imagination as a relevant dimension of strategic thinking.

6. CONCLUSION

This review started from the recognition that strategy is inherently future-oriented, yet the literature offers limited analytical tools for explaining how organizational futures are conceived. By examining how imagination has been mobilized in strategy research, the study shows that the phenomenon is not absent but incorporated in a conceptually unstable manner, typically subordinated to frameworks centered on cognition, interpretation, and decision-making. This pattern suggests not an empirical absence of imagination in the field, but a limitation in the prevailing theoretical frameworks through which strategic action has been analyzed.

By making this pattern explicit, the article contributes to repositioning imagination within strategy research. Rather than treating it as a peripheral or auxiliary element, the review suggests that imagination represents a latent but underdeveloped dimension of strategic thinking. The article also highlights that the development of strategic imagination as a research domain may benefit from multiple theoretical perspectives. While cognitive approaches contribute to understanding how actors mentally construct possibilities, philosophical and sociocultural perspectives draw attention to the narrative, symbolic, and collective processes through which futures become meaningful and actionable. Rather than replacing existing approaches, strategic imagination offers a conceptual space through which these complementary perspectives can be integrated in the study of future-oriented strategic action.

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