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Place Branding as a Soft Power Tool: A Systematic Review, Bibliometric Analysis, and Future Research Directions

Noptanit Chotisarn[1], Thadathibesra Phuthong[2]*

[1]Thammasat Business School, Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand, [2]Faculty of Management Science, Silpakorn University, Phetchaburi, Thailand. *Email: phuthong_t@su.ac.th

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review examines place branding as a soft power tool through a bibliometric analysis of 70 publications from 2008 to 2024. This study uses the scientific procedures and rationales for systematic literature review protocol and the theories, context, characteristics, and methodology framework, revealing significant evolution in the field, with a peak research output in 2023. Six knowledge clusters emerge: Nation image and communication, international relations, cultural elements, foreign policy, public diplomacy, and cultural identity. The analysis demonstrates the increasing sophistication of theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches, particularly concerning digital transformation and crisis management. While Western institutions maintain their research dominance, emerging economies show growing participation. The study develops an integrated framework for evaluating place branding effectiveness, provides systematic analysis aligning theory with practice, identifies critical gaps through bibliometric analysis, and offers practical guidelines for digital place branding implementation. Future research should emphasize digital transformation integration, measurement framework development, stakeholder dynamics understanding, and crisis management approaches.

Keywords: Place Branding, Soft Power, Digital Diplomacy, Bibliometric Analysis
JEL Classifications: F59, M31, O35

1. INTRODUCTION

Place branding has fundamentally transformed how nations project influence and manage their global reputation, becoming a critical mechanism in international relations (Lee, 2023a; Skey, 2023). The world is increasingly interconnected, and nations leverage diverse platforms to build diplomatic advantage—from healthcare initiatives to mega-sporting events (Rookwood, 2019) and cultural diplomacy to digital engagement (Algan and Kaptan, 2021). This approach is seen as a strategic deployment of soft power through place branding, which has gained particular significance as nations seek to enhance their global standing without relying on traditional hard power approaches.

Recent research has shown the growing sophistication of place branding strategies, with nations integrating traditional cultural diplomacy with digital platforms and social media engagement (Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi, 2022). Studies have documented successful implementations across sectors, including vaccine diplomacy during global crises (Lee, 2023b) and cultural promotion through mega-events (Rookwood, 2019); however, our understanding of place branding as a soft power tool remains limited.

Examining the literature from 2021 to 2024 reveals three significant gaps. First, the short-term impacts of high-profile initiatives are well-documented; however, understanding of place branding's long-term effectiveness in soft power accumulation remains limited (Abe, 2024; Lee, 2023b). Second, research has focused on high-profile events while overlooking the sustained impacts of everyday place branding initiatives (Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi, 2022). Third, how digital transformation and global

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crises reshape place branding strategies across cultural contexts remains underexplored (Algan and Kaptan, 2021).

This study conducts a systematic review and bibliometric analysis of 70 publications from 2008 to 2024 to address these gaps, combining Joseph Nye's soft power theory with Simon Anholt's Nation Brand Framework (Anholt, 2004; Nye, 2004). We employ a three-part methodological approach integrating bibliometric analysis through performance analysis, science mapping (Donthu et al., 2021), content analysis using the theory, context, characteristics, and methods (TCCM) framework (Paul and Rosado-Serrano, 2019), and gap analysis (Mishra et al., 2021).

The research posits four research questions to address the gaps in the extant literature:

RQ1: What bibliometric trends emerge in place branding as a soft power tool?

RQ2: What existing and emerging themes characterize place branding in soft power projection?

RQ3: Which theories, contexts, characteristics, and methods dominate place branding research?

RQ4: What future research directions can advance place branding as a soft power mechanism?

This study develops an integrated framework for evaluating place branding effectiveness, providing a systematic analysis aligning theory with practice. This approach allows us to identify critical gaps through bibliometric analysis and offer practical digital place branding implementation guidelines (Chen and Wang, 2024; Tran, 2024).

The remainder of this paper is organized into five sections. Section 2 details the scientific procedures and rationales for systematic literature reviews (SPAR-4-SLR) methodology used to conduct the systematic review across three phases: Assembling, arranging, and assessing. Section 3 presents the findings from both bibliometric analysis and TCCM framework analysis, examining trends, clusters, and knowledge structures. Section 4 discusses the theoretical implications and practical applications based on the findings. Finally, Section 5 concludes with recommendations for future research and practice in place branding as a soft power tool, highlighting four key areas: Digital transformation integration, measurement framework development, stakeholder dynamics understanding, and crisis management approaches.

2. METHODOLOGY

Literature reviews are fundamental in academic research, systematically synthesizing and analyzing existing knowledge (Tranfield et al., 2003; Vrontis et al., 2021). This study employs the SPAR-4-SLR protocol to examine place branding as a soft power tool, ensuring a rigorous and transparent review process (Paul and Criado, 2020). The methodology encompasses three phases: assembling, arranging, and assessing. Figure 1 shows that each phase is designed to address the research objectives systematically.

The assembly phase first identifies the review domain and focuses on place branding as a soft power tool. The four research questions guide this study's examination of bibliometric trends, existing and emerging themes, prevalent theories, contexts, characteristics, and methods, allowing future research directions to be identified. Source quality is maintained through the Scopus database, which contains over 44,000 journals and is a comprehensive source for bibliometric data (Baas et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2021). The material acquisition process employed specific search keywords using TITLE-ABS-KEY for place branding terms and soft power-related terms: "TITLE-ABS-KEY ("place brand*" OR "city brand*" OR "nation brand*" OR "destination brand*") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("soft power" OR "public diplomacy" OR "cultural diplomacy")." This approach yielded an initial dataset of 369 publications.

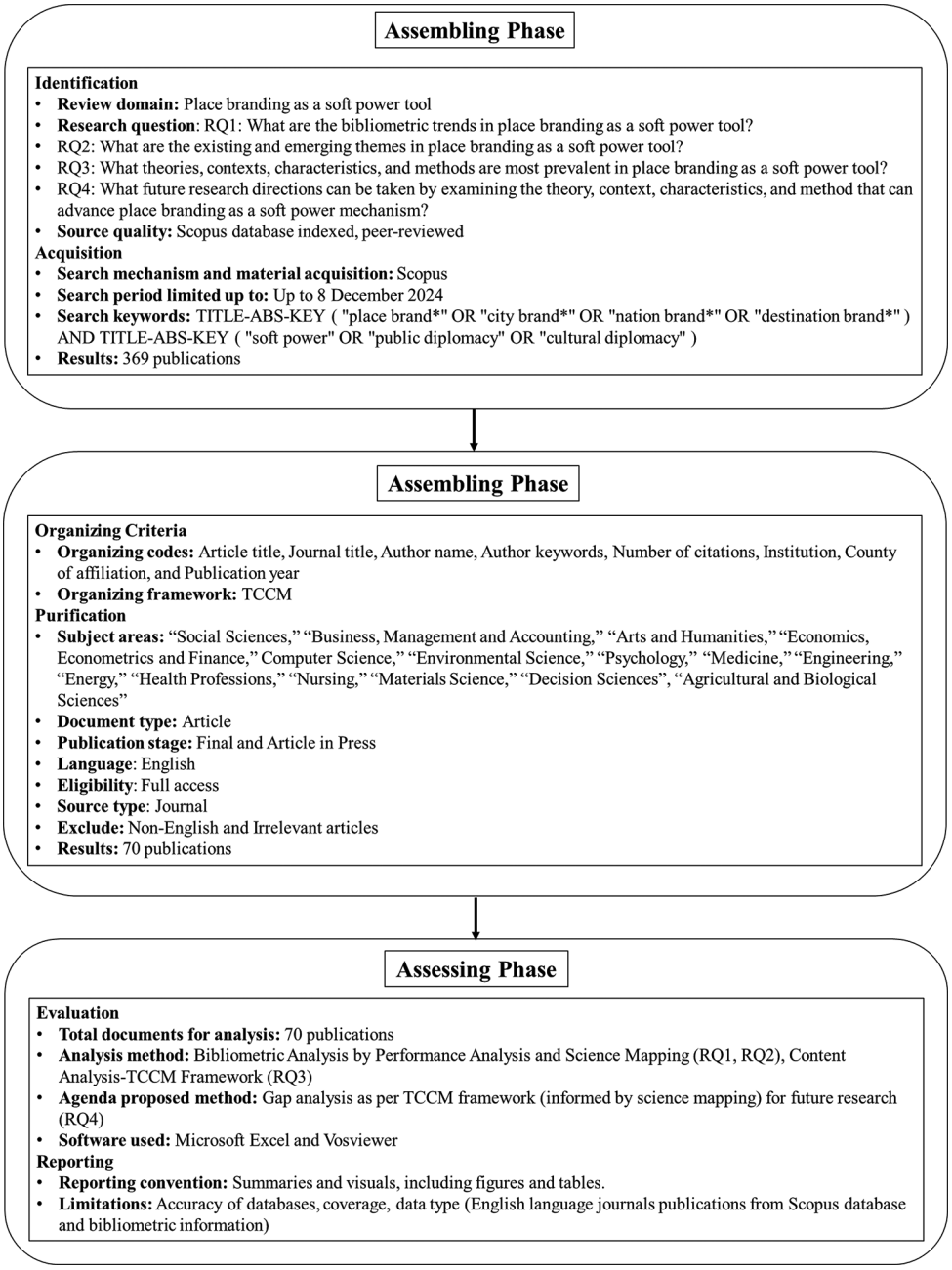
In the arranging phase, bibliographic data organization follows the TCCM framework to ensure comprehensive domain coverage (Paul and Rosado-Serrano, 2019). The organizing codes include article details, author information, citation metrics, institutional affiliation, country of origin, and publication year. The purification process applied specific inclusion criteria across multiple subjects, including social sciences, business/management/accounting, and arts/humanities. Only English-language, full-access journal articles were considered, resulting in a refined dataset of 70 publications.

The assessment phase incorporates both bibliometric and content analysis methods. Bibliometric analysis includes performance analysis (Noyons et al., 1999) and science mapping (Liu et al., 2013) and addresses the first two research questions regarding trends and themes (Donthu et al., 2021). Content analysis uses the TCCM framework to examine theories, contexts, characteristics, and methods prevalent in the literature, while gap analysis informed by science mapping identifies future research directions (Mishra et al., 2021).

This study utilizes Microsoft Excel for content analysis and descriptive statistics and VOSviewer for constructing and visualizing network clusters of themes emerging from keyword co-occurrence analysis (van Eck and Waltman, 2010). This combination of tools enables quantitative and qualitative literature analysis. This study follows academic conventions, presenting findings through comprehensive summaries, visual representations, and detailed analytical results (Bhukya & Paul, 2023; Kumar et al., 2022; Paul et al., 2021).

This methodology has limitations, including database accuracy and coverage constraints, a focus on English-language publications, and reliance on Scopus for bibliometric information. These limitations are common in systematic reviews but do not significantly impact the validity of the findings (Donthu et al., 2021). This systematic approach ensures a comprehensive review of the place branding literature while maintaining academic rigor and reproducibility.

Figure 1: Structure of the review using SPAR-4-SLR for place branding as a soft power tool



3. RESULTS

3.1. The Bibliometric Trends in Place Branding as a Soft Power Tool (RQ1)

3.1.1. Significant trends in place branding and soft power research

Figure 2 illustrates significant trends in place branding and soft power research from 2008 to 2024. The frequency of publications trends upward, particularly accelerating from 2021 onward. The peak output of 18 articles in 2023 was followed by 13 articles as of December 8, 2024, suggesting a growing academic interest in place branding as a tool for soft power. Citation patterns exhibit interesting dynamics; Van Ham (2008) received substantial citations (229), indicating the work's foundational influence. A notable spike in citations occurred in 2022 (374 citations), coinciding with the increase in publication activity. Citations for publications declined from 2023 to 2024 (262 and 14, respectively), which is typical due to the citation lag time in the academic literature. The correlation between the number of articles and citations reveals three distinct phases. First, sparse but influential publications characterized the initial establishment phase from 2008 to 2014. Second, a steady growth phase occurred from 2015 to 2020, with moderate publication and citation rates. Third, increased research output has marked the recent intensification phase from 2021 to 2024. This evolution reflects the field's maturation and the growing recognition of place branding's importance in international relations and public diplomacy.

3.1.2. The most influential (top cited) articles and the publication outlets (journals) in place branding as a soft power tool

Table 1 presents the citation impact analysis, revealing key trends in place branding and soft power research. Van Ham's (2008) influential article, "Place Branding: The State of the Art," established foundational concepts and leads with 229 citations. Pamment's (2014a) work on soft power evaluation and Iwabuchi's (2015) study of Japanese cultural diplomacy follow with citation rates of 10.60 and 10.67/year, respectively. Recent articles by Lee (2023b) on China's vaccine diplomacy and Skey (2023) on sportscasting have also garnered significant attention, with 1st-year citations of 65 and 48, respectively, indicating a rising interest in new soft power strategies.

Figure 2: Significant trends in place branding and soft power research

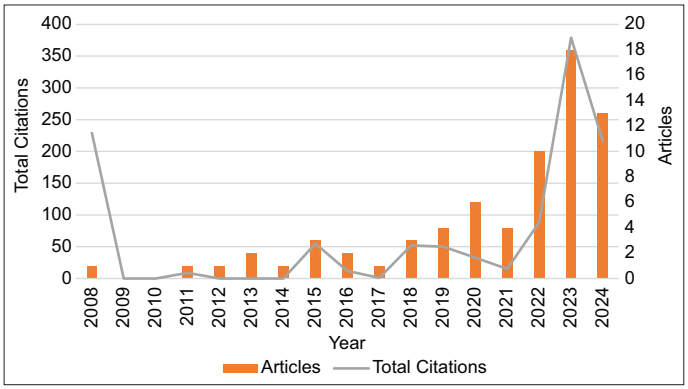


Table 2 shows that the International Journal of Cultural Policy has published 6 documents and received 212 citations, underscoring its importance in the field. Though established in 2008, Place Branding and Public Diplomacy has published the most articles (9) and achieved 100 citations, reflecting its specialized focus and influence. Although less frequently, high-impact general journals like the ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (H-index 124) and Public Relations Review (H-index 103) have also contributed significant articles. The journals span political science, cultural studies, sports management, and communication, illustrating the interdisciplinary nature of place branding research. Major publishers like SAGE, Routledge, and Palgrave Macmillan ensure the wide dissemination of these findings. While specialized journals lead in article quantity, influential research traverses various fields, highlighting the relevance of place branding as a soft power tool.

3.1.3. The most prolific contributors (authors and countries) in the literature on place branding as a soft power tool

Table 3 analyzes place branding and soft power research, highlighting key patterns in author productivity and national contributions. Van Ham (2008) is a particularly influential scholar, receiving 229 citations, demonstrating the lasting impact of his

Table 1: Most influential articles by citation impact on place branding and soft power research

Article title	Authors	Year	Total citations	Citations per year
Place branding: The state of the art	Van Ham	2008	229	14.31
Articulating influence: Toward a research agenda for interpreting the evaluation of soft power, public diplomacy and nation brands ion brands	Pamment	2014	106	10.60
Pop-culture diplomacy in Japan: Soft power, nation branding and the question of 'international cultural exchange'	Iwabuchi	2015	96	10.67
Nation Branding as Nation Building: China's Image Campaign	Barr	2012	74	6.17
Vaccine diplomacy: Nation branding and China's COVID-19 soft power play	Lee	2023	65	65.00
Sportswashing: Media headline or analytic concept?	Skey	2023	48	48.00
Soft power and dark heritage: Multiple potentialities	Clarke et al.	2017	40	5.71
Soft power, ideology and symbolic manipulation in Summer Olympic Games opening ceremonies: A semiotic analysis	Arning	2013	37	3.36
Heritage as soft power: Japan and China in international politics	Nakano and Zhu	2020	35	8.75
Access, security and diplomacy: Perceptions of soft power, nation branding and the organisational challenges facing Qatar's 2022 FIFA World Cup	Rookwood	2019	35	7.00

Table 2: Most influential journals by citation impact on place branding and soft power research

Journal	Documents	Citations	H-index	Start publication year	Publisher
The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science	1	229	124	1889	SAGE Publications Inc.
International Journal of Cultural Policy	6	212	58	1997	Routledge
Public Relations Review	1	106	103	1975	Elsevier B.V.
Place Branding and Public Diplomacy	9	100	35	2008	Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.
East Asia	1	74	23	1996	Springer Netherlands
International Review for the Sociology of Sport	1	48	70	1966	SAGE Publications Ltd
Social Semiotics	1	37	41	1991	Routledge
Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal	1	35	26	2011	Emerald Group Publishing Ltd.
Russian Journal of Communication	1	30	11	2008	Taylor and Francis Ltd.
International Journal of Diplomacy and Economy	1	23	9	2012	Inderscience
The British Journal of Politics and International Relations	1	22	55	2005	SAGE Publications Ltd

early work. The University of Bath also stands out, as three authors, Bull (1987), Clarke (2004), and Deganutti (2014), have garnered 40 citations for their collaboration on soft power and heritage. Most top cited authors are affiliated with European institutions, especially in the United Kingdom (UK), underscoring Europe's pivotal role in shaping the field's theoretical foundations.

Geographically, the research landscape reveals a clear dominance of Western nations, with the United States (16 documents and 273 citations) and the UK (14 documents and 279 citations) leading in productivity and impact (Table 4). In comparison, Sweden demonstrates remarkable efficiency with the highest average citations per article (32.60), despite fewer publications (5 documents), suggesting high-quality contributions. Australia follows a similar pattern, with 5 documents averaging 27.40 citations each. The global distribution map reveals interesting dynamics. While Western nations dominate in citation impact, emerging economies like China (4 documents) and India (4 documents) show increasing participation but lower citation rates (3.25 and 0.25 citations per article, respectively).

Figures 3-5 show the collaboration networks, indicating limited international co-authorship, with most collaborations occurring within individual institutions or countries. The limited international co-authorship patterns suggest the potential for greater international research collaboration. The United States serves as a key connector in these networks. At the same time, nations engaged in place branding and soft power strategies tend to generate more related research.

Author contributions have shifted from individual theoretical works, like Van Ham's, to more collaborative and empirical research. The concentration of high-impact studies in Western institutions raises concerns about geographical biases, emphasizing the need for diverse perspectives, especially from regions using place branding strategies.

A notable trend is that traditional institutions in Europe and North America continue to excel in citation impact, while universities in Asia and the Middle East contribute more to literature, though with lower citation rates. This situation may be due to the emerging nature of their research and language or visibility barriers in English-language publishing. In contrast, Sweden and Australia have successful models for impactful research from less dominant academic centers.

This analysis shows that place branding and soft power research are strong in Western institutions, but the field is becoming more geographically diverse; however, citation influence remains concentrated. This disparity highlights opportunities for international collaboration and the need to incorporate perspectives from emerging economies when implementing place branding strategies.

3.2. The Existing and Emerging Themes in Place Branding as a Soft Power Tool (RQ2)

3.2.1. Knowledge clusters via co-word analysis

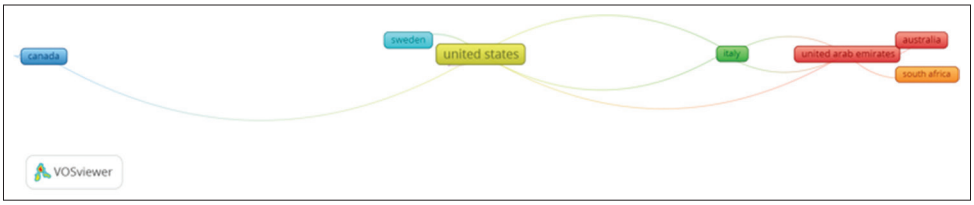
Co-word analysis is a bibliometric tool used to identify and visualize relationships among terms, topics, and keywords in any scientific field (Rojas-Lamorena et al., 2022; Muñoz-Leiva et al., 2015). Unlike methods that rely on bibliographic metadata, this approach examines article content (Zupic and Čater, 2014) and produces knowledge clusters that reflect prevalent themes (Mukherjee et al., 2022; Ozturk, 2021). Analyzing the relationships among keywords in the review dataset allows us to clarify the intellectual structure of place branding as a soft power tool. Figure 6 presents a network visualization map created with VOSviewer, which identifies 31 frequently co-occurring terms from 230 keywords, resulting in 6 clusters that align with the threshold of 2 recurrences (Halder et al., 2021).

Table 5 presents 31 terms that summarize their frequency and the strength of connections among keywords. Six knowledge clusters

Table 3: Most prolific authors by productivity contribution to place branding and soft power research

Author	Affiliation	Documents	Total citations	H-index	Start publication year
Van Ham, Peter	Belgian College of Europe, Brugge, Belgium	1	229	11	1990
Barr, Michael	Newcastle University, Newcastle, United Kingdom	1	74	7	2009
Skey, Michael	Loughborough University, Loughborough, United Kingdom	1	48	18	2006
Cento Bull, Anna	University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom	1	40	11	1987
Clarke, David	University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom	1	40	6	2004
Deganutti, Marianna	University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom	1	40	3	2014
Nakano, Ryoko	Kanazawa University, Kanazawa, Japan	1	35	8	2006
Zhu, Yujie	Australian National University, Canberra, Australia	1	35	10	2012
Zamorano, Mariano Martín	Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain	1	33	7	2014
Simons, Greg	Turība University, Riga, Latvia	1	30	11	2006

Figure 3: Co-authorship network (for countries)

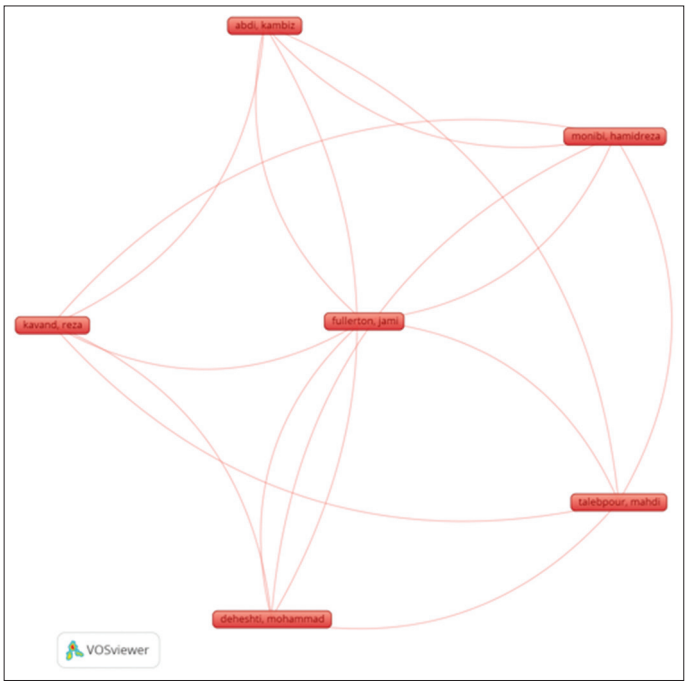


form the framework of place branding research as a soft power mechanism; these clusters are logically organized to reflect their essence, with identification achieved through sensemaking and interrater agreement, following Tinsley and Weiss (2000).

The co-word analysis visualization and Table 5 indicate that six knowledge clusters represent the intellectual structure of place branding as a tool for soft power research.

- Cluster 1 (Red)—Nation Image and Communication: This cluster focuses on "national image" and includes key terms like "disinformation," "social media," and "propaganda." Nations often incorporate distinctive cultural markers to communicate place identity (Tsiakis et al., 2022). The central node, "nation branding," highlights how nations use communication channels to manage their image (Bolin and Kunelius, 2023; He et al., 2019).
- Cluster 2 (Yellow)—International Relations and Place Branding: This cluster is dominated by "international relations" and "place branding," emphasizing the connection between place branding and international diplomacy, featuring entities like "Iran" and "Pakistan" (Beidollahkhani and Kahrazeh, 2021; Durrani, 2023).
- Cluster 3 (Blue)—Cultural and Diplomatic elements: This cluster links "culture," "diplomacy," and "visual communication," demonstrating how diplomatic and branding efforts use cultural elements (Johnson, 2018; Marc, 2020).
- Cluster 4 (Green)—Soft Power and Foreign Policy: Key nodes include "soft power" and "cultural diplomacy," showcasing how soft power is strategically applied in international relations (Das et al., 2024; Mazumdar, 2020).
- Cluster 5 (Purple)—Public Diplomacy and City Branding: This cluster focuses on "public diplomacy," also mentioning "city branding" and "reputation," illustrating how cities enhance their global standings (Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi, 2022; Sevin, 2024).
- Cluster 6 (Cyan)—Cultural Identity: The smallest cluster emphasizes "cultural diversity," "national identity," and "cool Japan," highlighting the use of cultural uniqueness in branding (Iwabuchi, 2015; Tamaki, 2019).

Figure 4: Co-authorship network (for authors)



The analysis reveals strong interconnections among the clusters, with "soft power" and "nation branding" as the most influential concepts. Place branding integrates various dimensions, suggesting that a holistic approach incorporating all six knowledge domains is essential for practical soft power objectives.

3.2.2. Co-citation analysis

Co-citation analysis examines how often two publications are cited together to identify a research area's intellectual structure and connections. Liu et al. (2015) and Small (1973) found this method effective for identifying influential works and recurring

Figure 5: Geographic heatmap for place branding as a soft power tool research

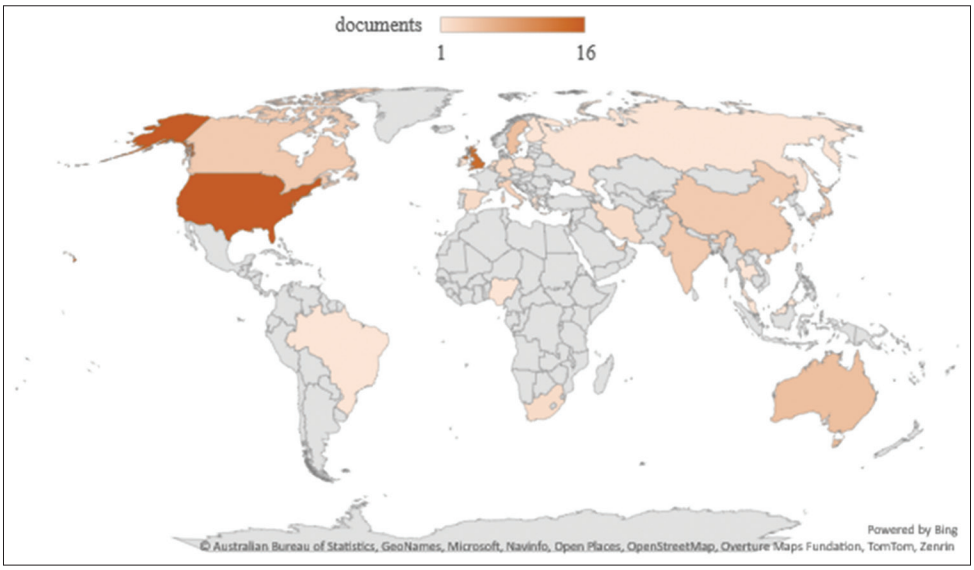


Figure 6: Knowledge clusters (themes) via co-word analysis on place branding as a soft power tool

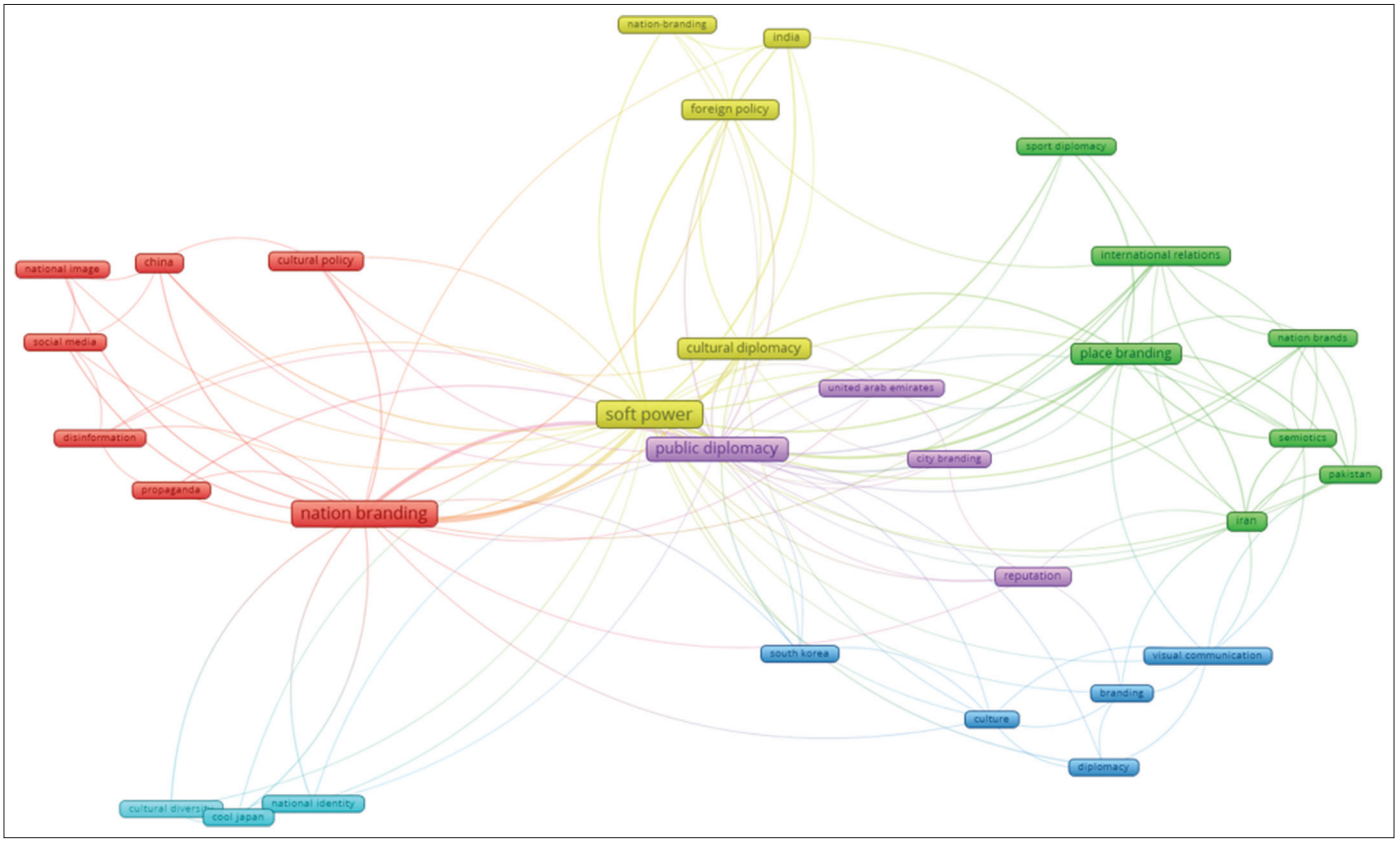


Table 4: Most prolific countries by citation contribution to place branding and soft power research

Country	Documents	Total citations	Average article citations
United Kingdom	14	279	19.93
United States	16	273	17.06
Sweden	5	163	32.60
Australia	5	137	27.40
United Arab Emirates	4	36	9.00
Japan	4	35	8.75
Canada	4	18	4.50
China	4	13	3.25
Italy	3	12	4.00
India	4	1	0.25

themes. Figure 7 presents the co-citation network, revealing four clusters centered on highly cited publications.

- Cluster 1 (Red) focuses on the fundamentals of nation branding and competitive identity, primarily based on Anholt (2004). This cluster emphasizes how countries manage their national brands for competitive advantage.
- Cluster 2 (Green) centers on soft power theory and public diplomacy, with Joseph Nye's (2004) foundational works as key references. This cluster explores how nations can enhance their international influence through cultural assets and values.
- Cluster 3 (Blue) examines sports diplomacy and mega-events, highlighting how countries use major sporting events to enhance their global image. Grix and Lee (2013) focus on the diplomatic benefits of hosting such events.
- Cluster 4 (Yellow) addresses cultural identity and diplomacy, investigating how nations project their cultural identity internationally and how this relates to broader concepts of cultural policy.

The analysis reveals strong connections, especially between nation branding (Cluster 1) and soft power theory (Cluster 2), indicating theoretical interplay. Key bridging articles, like those by Van Ham (2008) and Anholt (2004), illustrate the frameworks' broad influence.

This co-citation analysis highlights the intellectual structure of nation branding research, showcasing diverse yet interrelated theoretical approaches within a mature academic field.

3.2.3. Bibliographic coupling analysis

The bibliographic coupling analysis examines reference sharing between documents to identify significant current themes in a research field. This approach assumes that articles citing the same references are likely related (Donthu et al., 2021) and addresses the limitations of co-citation analysis (which focuses on historical origins) by highlighting contemporary trends and emerging themes. Together, co-citation and bibliographic coupling analyses offer insights into the intellectual structure of a field, encompassing past, present, and future research directions (Koseoglu et al., 2022).

Figure 8 presents the bibliographic coupling analysis of place branding and soft power literature and identifies four main research

clusters, highlighting current theoretical and empirical focus areas.

- Cluster 1 (Red) is the largest. This cluster features works from 2020 to 2022 that examine contemporary soft power applications and nation branding strategies. Key studies include Abdi et al. (2022) and He (2019), which focused on evaluating national branding initiatives and their outcomes.
- Cluster 2 (Green) centers on theoretical developments. Influential works include Clarke (2017) and Pamment (2014a; 2014b), which explored the relationships between nation branding, public diplomacy, and soft power.
- Cluster 3 (Blue) focuses on Asian case studies, particularly branding efforts in China and South Korea. Lee (2022a; 2022b) highlighted how these nations leverage cultural assets for soft power projection.
- Cluster 4 (Yellow) emphasizes how digital media impacts place branding. Works by Dun (2022) and Richelieu (2024a; 2024b) analyzed how social media transforms branding practices.

Table 5: Terms for co-occurrence forming knowledge cluster on place branding as a soft power tool

Keyword	Occurrences	Total link strength
Cluster 1 Nation Image and Communication (keywords=7)		
China	3	8
Cultural policy	3	6
Disinformation	2	5
Nation branding	32	60
National image	2	5
Propaganda	2	6
Social media	2	6
Cluster 2 International relations and place branding (keywords=5)		
Cultural diplomacy	11	25
Foreign policy	5	17
India	4	14
Nation-branding	2	6
Soft power	43	92
Cluster 3 Cultural and diplomatic elements (keywords=5)		
Branding	2	6
Culture	2	8
Diplomacy	2	6
South Korea	2	6
Visual communication	2	8
Cluster 4 Soft power and foreign policy (keywords=7)		
International relations	3	14
Iran	3	13
Nation brands	2	9
Pakistan	2	11
Place branding	9	26
Semiotics	2	11
Sport diplomacy	2	5
Cluster 5 Public diplomacy and city branding (keywords=4)		
City branding	2	6
Public diplomacy	25	68
Reputation	3	7
United Arab Emirates	2	7
Cluster 6 Cultural identity (keywords=3)		
Cool Japan	2	6
Cultural diversity	2	4
National identity	2	5

The analysis shows strong interconnections between Clusters 1 and 2, indicating that contemporary practices are grounded in established theories. Clusters 3 and 4 represent emerging research directions. Notable works bridge these clusters, demonstrating a combination of theoretical and practical contributions.

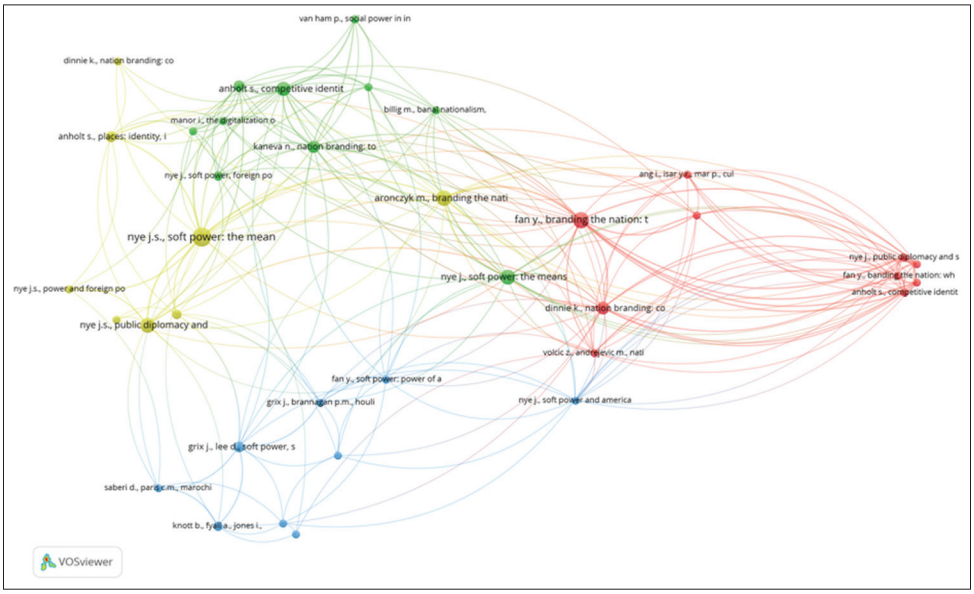
The overall analysis indicates a growing emphasis on measuring practical effectiveness, developing theoretical frameworks, studying Asian nations, and exploring digital transformation. Recent approaches to measuring city brand influence have employed intelligent semantic mining of big data (Zheng & Liao, 2023). This method effectively maps the intellectual structure of the field, providing insights into its current and future directions (De Campos et al., 2022).

3.3. Theories, Contexts, Characteristics, and Methods are Most Prevalent in Place Branding as a Soft Power Tool (RQ3)

3.3.1. Theory (T)

The analysis identifies key theoretical frameworks for place branding as a soft power tool. Joseph Nye's soft power theory is

Figure 7: Network visualization of co-citation analysis of the most cited articles



foundational, defining power as attraction through culture, political values, and foreign policies (Nye, 2004; Wüst and Nicolai, 2023; Lee et al., 2023a). Simon Anholt's Nation Brand Framework builds upon this, using the nation brand hexagon to analyze dimensions such as tourism, exports, and governance (Hurn, 2016).

Van Ham's (2008) social power theory expands traditional soft power concepts by incorporating agenda-setting and framing (Tran, 2024). The public diplomacy framework developed by Cull (2010, 2019) focuses on strategic communication with foreign audiences (Ragozin, 2023), intersecting with constructivist approaches that emphasize the social construction of national identities (Van Ham, 2008).

Recent theories, like Durrani's "negative watch" (2023), explore how negative branding can harm a nation's soft power, while the cultural branding model outlines how countries create "identity myths" (Holt, 2004; He et al., 2019).

Contemporary frameworks consider digital dimensions, exemplified by Zheng et al.'s domain expertise and word-embedding framework (2020), emphasizing emotional connections in place marketing (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013; Rodrigo et al., 2023).

These frameworks illustrate how nations leverage cultural assets for international influence. Models like sports diplomacy (Abdi et al., 2022) and cultural policy (Chen and Wang, 2024) analyze how various aspects contribute to soft power development. They address tensions between state initiatives, market forces, and traditional and digital communication strategies.

Recent contributions call for integrated approaches to understanding soft power dynamics, place identity, and international relations in the interconnected world. This request indicates that future theoretical work will likely continue to focus on integrating traditional concepts and emerging digital technologies. Table 6 summarizes the theories used in this research.

3.3.2. Context (C)

The content analysis identifies key industries and influential authors who use branding as a soft power tool. Tourism is a primary

Figure 8: Bibliographic coupling network visualization of the documents

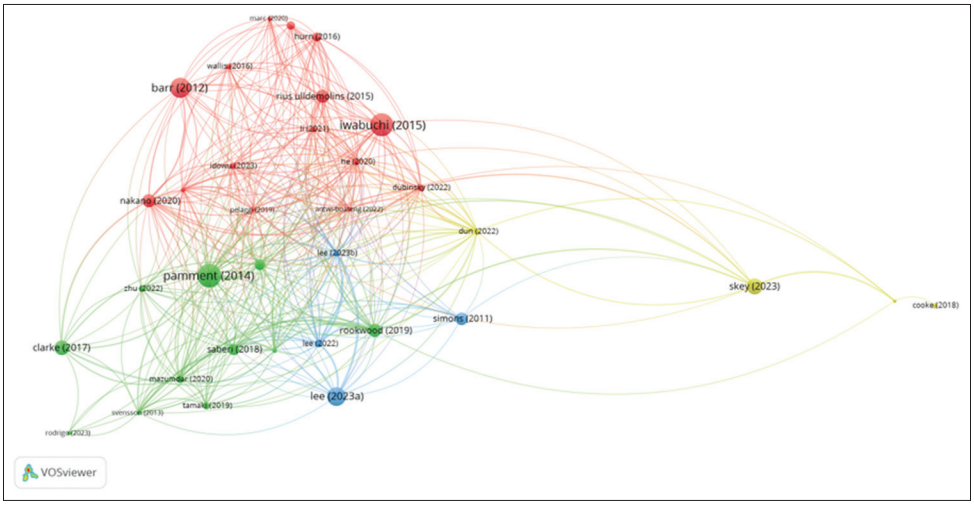


Table 6: The theories utilized in place branding as a soft power tool research

Theory	Main concepts	Application in place branding	Sources
Soft Power Theory	Power through attraction vs coercion; Culture, political values, foreign policies	Foundation for nation branding strategies; Cultural influence analysis	Nye (2004)
Nation Brand Hexagon	Six dimensions: tourism, exports, governance, investment, culture, people	Country brand assessment; Cultural asset leverage	Anholt (2004)
Social Power Theory	Agenda-setting, framing, digital place branding	Modern international relations; Digital communication strategies	Van Ham (2008)
Public Diplomacy Framework	Strategic communication, Cultural exchange, Media engagement	Foreign audience engagement; Cultural program development	Cull (2010, 2019)
Negative Watch Theory	Soft power loss analysis; Reputation damage assessment	Risk management; Brand protection strategies	Durrani (2023)
Cultural Branding Model	Identity myth creation; Cultural asset leverage	National narrative development; Brand authenticity	Holt (2004)
Domain Expertise Framework	Computational analysis; Media text assessment	Quantitative brand measurement; Digital impact analysis	Zheng et al. (2020)
Sports Diplomacy Model	Sporting events; Human capital; Media coverage	International influence building; Cultural exchange	Abdi et al. (2022)
Cultural Policy Framework	Cultural institutions, Creative industries	Urban soft power development; Cultural asset management	Chen and Wang (2024)

sector, with Saberi et al. (2018) and Rodrigo et al. (2023) focusing on how nations leverage tourism infrastructure and marketing. Cultural industries, particularly media and entertainment, are also essential, as indicated by Lee's (2022) analysis of South Korea's film industry and Iwabuchi's (2015) exploration of Japan's pop culture diplomacy.

Sports and mega-events are also significant. For example, Richelieu et al. (2024a, 2024b) created a typology of nations using sports for branding, while Rookwood (2019) examined Qatar's World Cup hosting as a soft power strategy. Cultural diplomacy initiatives can leverage participatory approaches to enhance engagement (Cooke et al., 2018). Mashiah (2024) explored tech-driven storytelling in nation branding, highlighting the growing importance of technology and innovation.

Van Ham (2008) is the most cited author (229 citations), providing foundational insights. International art exhibitions have emerged as significant platforms for cultural diplomacy initiatives (Ma, 2023). Iwabuchi (2015) and Pamment (2014a) follow with 96 and 106 citations, respectively. The literature reflects a shift from traditional diplomatic methods to more integrated strategies involving multiple industries, especially among emerging economies. Recent studies showcase this integration trend across sectors, including Lee (2023b) on vaccine diplomacy and Durrani (2023) on negative branding.

Research is moving toward a more holistic understanding of how the cultural, economic, and diplomatic dimensions interact in soft power strategies. Table 7 summarizes the key industries involved in place branding research.

Place branding is an important soft power tool that has been extensively studied across various regions. Van Ham (2008), a key figure in this field, established essential frameworks for understanding place branding in international relations.

Several authors focus on Asian countries, especially China, where Barr (2012) and Lee (2023b) investigated China's use of cultural diplomacy and nation branding. At the same time, Iwabuchi (2015) and Tamaki (2019) analyzed Japan's "cool Japan" initiative and South Korea's K-pop diplomacy, respectively.

In the Middle East, Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi (2022) and Saberi et al. (2018) explored how the United Arab Emirates and Qatar use cultural events for branding. Research by Pamment (2014b) in Europe highlighted the UK's "GREAT Britain Campaign" and Nordic public diplomacy strategies.

Additionally, Simons (2011) addressed Russia's branding in post-Soviet contexts. The literature has shifted from a Western-centric focus to include diverse perspectives, with Cogan (2024) and Das et al. (2024) examining how emerging powers tailor soft power strategies to their contexts. The literature has shifted from a Western-centric focus to incorporate diverse perspectives, with Cogan (2024) and Das et al. (2024) examining how emerging powers tailor soft power strategies to their contexts. Nations increasingly leverage broadcasting platforms to cultivate cultural diplomacy initiatives (Zhu, 2022).

Recent works by Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea (2024) and Mashiah (2024) showed increasing attention to digital diplomacy and non-state actors in nation branding. The literature emphasizes

Table 7: Key industry in place branding as a soft power tool research

Industry	Application	Sources
Tourism and Hospitality	Used for destination branding, cultural tourism, infrastructure development	Rodrigo et al., 2023; Saberi et al., 2018
Media and Entertainment	Film industry, pop culture, and broadcasting as soft power tools	Iwabuchi, 2015; Lee, 2022
Sports and Mega-events	Olympics, World Cup, and regional games for national branding	Richelieu et al., 2024a; 2024b; Rookwood 2019
Technology and Innovation	Digital diplomacy, tech infrastructure, innovation branding	Mashiah, 2024; Zheng et al., (2020)
Cultural Institutions	Museums, heritage sites, education exchanges	Iwabuchi, 2015; Nakano and Zhu, 2020
Public Diplomacy	Government communications, international relations	Pamment, 2014a; 2014b; Van Ham, 2008
Healthcare	Vaccine diplomacy, medical tourism	Lee, 2023b; Li et al., 2021
Creative Industries	Design, fashion, and arts for national branding	Dubinsky, 2022; Tamaki, 2019

Table 8: Key region in place branding as a soft power tool research

Region	Key countries	Key focus areas	Sources
Asia	China, Japan, South Korea	Cultural diplomacy, digital media, entertainment industry	Barr, 2012; Iwabuchi, 2015; Lee, 2023b
Middle East	UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia	Mega-events, tourism, infrastructure development	Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi, 2022; Saberi et al., 2018
Europe	UK, Nordic countries, Russia	Public diplomacy, cultural institutions, nation rebranding	Pamment, 2014a; 2014b; Simons, 2011; Van Ham, 2008
Americas	USA, Brazil	Cultural heritage, public diplomacy, soft power strategies	Gienow-Hecht, 2019
Emerging Markets	India, Turkey, South Africa	Sports diplomacy, cultural exports, digital innovation	Cogan, 2024; Das et al., 2024
Global/Cross-Regional	Multiple regions	Digital diplomacy, tech innovation, non-state actors	Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea, 2024; Mashiah, 2024

the connection between cultural assets, economic development, and diplomatic goals in nation branding while recognizing the significance of regional contexts. Table 8 summarizes the key regions in place branding research.

3.3.3. Characteristics (C)

Our analysis of 70 academic articles reveals that place branding is a complex soft power tool influenced by various factors that impact its effectiveness. Independent variables show how governments use resources and strategies to build soft power. For example, Abdi et al. (2022) emphasized sports diplomacy and cultural initiatives, while Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi (2022) highlighted digital capabilities and education investments. At the same time, Nakano and Zhu (2020) focused on heritage policies as the core components of soft power projection.

Outcomes or dependent variables reflect the success of these efforts. Durrani (2023) identified international reputation and legitimacy as key indicators, while Lee (2023b) examined how vaccine diplomacy affected national branding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Das et al. (2024) discussed how cricket diplomacy influences trade and tourism, while Dun et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of public perception.

Mediating variables illustrated how independent factors impacted outcomes. For instance, Simons (2011) highlighted media framing, and Wüst and Nicolai (2023) demonstrated the role of cultural exchange programs. Rius Ulldemolins and Zamorano (2015) noted that institutional coordination was crucial for translating initiatives into results. Furthermore, Mazumdar (2020) underscored the role of public diplomacy in place branding.

Moderating variables affect the strength of these relationships. Tran (2024) explored how the geopolitical context influences digital diplomacy, while Van Ham (2008) discussed the impact of economic conditions. Clarke et al. (2017) emphasized the moderation of soft power by historical relationships, and Iwabuchi (2015) highlighted the role of cultural proximity.

Recent literature (2023-2024) increasingly focuses on the digital dimensions of place branding. For example, Vasist and Krishnan (2024) investigated disinformation's effects, Chen and Wang (2024) analyzed the contribution of cultural industries to urban soft power, and Boughton (2024) stressed the importance of authenticity in national branding. Figure 9 presents a conceptual framework for understanding place branding as a soft power tool.

The literature identifies key patterns in place branding, which depends on aligning projected images and actual policies (Durrani, 2023; Pamment, 2014a). Media representation and public discourse significantly shape soft power outcomes (Bolin and Kunelius, 2023; Simons, 2011). Additionally, contextual factors, such as geopolitical dynamics and cultural differences, can significantly impact branding effectiveness (Iwabuchi, 2015; Tran, 2024).

Recent studies highlight the challenges in measuring and evaluating soft power. For example, Zheng et al. (2020) offered frameworks for quantifying influence, while Abdi et al. (2022) noted difficulties in isolating branding effects due to various interacting variables. Effective place branding requires adeptly managing traditional and digital channels while remaining authentic to diverse stakeholders.

Future research should focus on how social media influences nation branding, the role of non-state actors in developing soft power, and how global crises affect branding strategies. These approaches underscore the evolving nature of international communication and the complexities of maintaining soft power. Table 9 summarizes the characteristics of place branding as a soft power tool.

Figure 9: Comprehensive conceptual framework of the research on place branding as a soft power tool

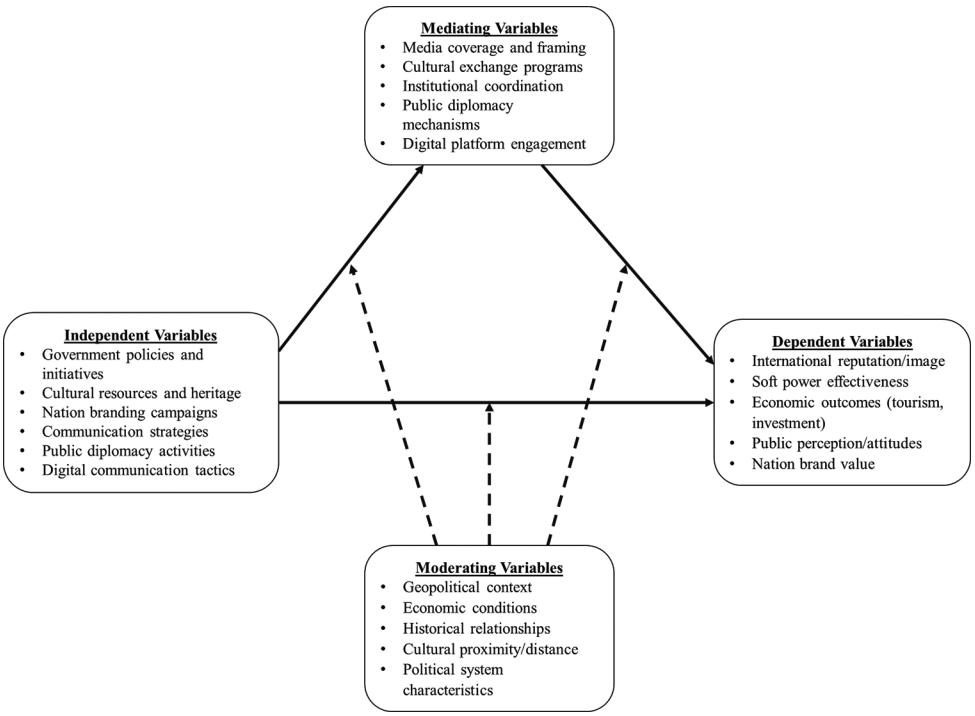


Table 9: Key characteristics in place branding as a soft power tool research

Category	Variables	Sources
Independent variables	Government policies and initiatives Cultural resources and heritage Nation branding campaigns Communication strategies Public diplomacy activities Digital communication tactics	Abdi et al. (2022); Bolin and Kunelius (2023); Nakano and Zhu (2020); Mazumdar (2020); Pamment (2014a); Tran (2024)
Dependent variables	International reputation/ image Soft power effectiveness Economic outcomes (tourism, investment) Public perception/ attitudes Nation brand value	Chen and Wang (2024); Das et al. (2024); Dun et al. (2022); Durrani (2023); Lee (2023b)
Mediating variables	Media coverage and framing Cultural exchange programs Institutional coordination Public diplomacy mechanisms Digital platform engagement	Mazumdar (2020); Rius Ulldemolins and Zamorano (2015); Simons (2011); Vasist and Krishnan (2024); Wüst and Nicolai (2023)
Moderating variables	Geopolitical context Economic conditions Historical relationships Cultural proximity/ distance Political system characteristics	Boughton (2024); Clarke et al. (2017); Iwabuchi (2015); Tran (2024); Van Ham (2008)

3.3.4. Methods (M)

Regarding place branding as a form of soft power, research primarily utilizes qualitative methodologies, with some studies employing mixed methods.

1) Research design: Case studies dominate the field, with scholars like Durrani (2023) and Tamaki (2019) examining national branding initiatives. Comparative case studies are also common, such as the work by Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea (2024) on protests in Brazil, Romania, and Chile. Durrani's (2022) 30-year analysis of gender representation is a notable longitudinal study.
2) Data collection methods: Document analysis is the primary methodology, with researchers examining government policies and media. For example, Iwabuchi (2015) explored Japan's pop culture diplomacy through policy documents. Semi-structured interviews are also significant, including Boughton's (2024) study of Irish artists and the work of Wüst and Nicolai (2023) with Moroccan cultural experts. Digital data collection is also rising, with studies like He et al. (2019) analyzing Quora posts on China's branding effectiveness and Tran (2024) examining tweets from Chinese diplomats. Visual data collection, particularly around mega-events, is also important, as Arning (2013) showed in their analysis of Olympic ceremonies.
3) Data analysis methods: Thematic and critical discourse analyses are common. For example, Lee (2022) used sentiment analysis on South Korean films, and Zheng et al. (2020) employed computational methods for soft power analysis. As demonstrated by Svensson's (2013) study of Swedish media during the Shanghai Expo, content analysis is also prevalent.
4) Innovative frameworks are emerging, like Durrani's (2023) "negative watch" concept and Vasist and Krishnan's (2024) fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) in the post-truth context. Influential scholars, such as Van Ham (2008), established foundational approaches that contemporary researchers have adapted.

The field is progressing toward greater methodological sophistication, incorporating mixed methods and digital tools while maintaining a qualitative basis, allowing researchers to capture the complexities of place branding as a soft power tool. Table 10 summarizes the key research approach of place branding as a soft power tool research.

3.4. Future Research Directions can be Taken by Examining the Theory, Context, Characteristics, and Method that can Advance Place Branding as a Soft Power Mechanism (RQ4)

3.4.1. Theory

Several key gaps in place branding research emerge based on the content analysis of the TCCM framework and network visualizations.

- Digital transformation: Research should investigate how digital transformation theories reshape traditional soft power concepts. Furthermore, AI and big data analytics should be integrated into existing frameworks (Tran, 2024; Vasist and Krishnan, 2024; Zheng et al., 2020). Figure 6 highlights the complex connections between digital and traditional nation branding, indicating the need for integrated theoretical approaches.
- Measurement: New frameworks are needed to measure the impact of digital branding (Durrani, 2023). This approach includes developing models for integrated physical-digital strategies (Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea, 2024; Lee, 2023b), as indicated by the multifaceted nature of modern place branding.
- Stakeholder dynamics: Research must explore the translation of cultural identities in digital environments (Boughton, 2024) and develop theories on government-citizen interactions in digital place branding (Pamment, 2014a). The role of non-state actors in shaping national identity should also be examined (Wüst and Nicolai, 2023).
- Crisis management: Theories must adapt to explain place branding during crises (Cogan, 2024) and develop frameworks to support resilience strategies in digital contexts (Das et al., 2024; Lee, 2023a). Figure 7 suggests dynamic approaches are required to understand how place brands adapt during crises.

These considerations highlight the need for sophisticated frameworks to consider the interplay between digital transformation, stakeholder dynamics, and crisis management in place branding while remaining suitable for practitioners. Table 11 highlights the

future research directions and questions to advance place branding as a soft power mechanism.

3.4.2. Context

Future research directions for advancing place branding should address several key gaps.

- Digital integration: Future studies should investigate how emerging technologies enhance cross-industry integration in place branding (Chen and Wang, 2024). Research should explore how traditional industries incorporate digital strategies (Mashiah, 2024) and analyze the intersection of digital platforms and conventional branding (Lee, 2023a; Tran, 2024). Figure 6 shows that digital integration influences various aspects of nation branding and soft power.
- Cultural dynamics: Future research should examine the role of local cultural institutions in digital place branding (Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi, 2022) and how cross-cultural collaboration influences branding effectiveness (Iwabuchi, 2015). Network visualizations highlight connections that require further exploration, including those among cultural diplomacy, soft power, and nation branding.
- Regional development: Future studies should explore how emerging economies adapt to Western place branding frameworks (Das et al., 2024; Durrani, 2023) and identify the unique characteristics of branding approaches in developing versus developed nations (Pamment, 2014a; Van Ham, 2008). Figure 8 illustrates the need to analyze variations in regional branding strategies.

Table 10: Key research approach in place branding as a soft power tool research

Category	Approach	Examples	Sources
Research Design	Case studies	Single country analysis, Comparative studies	Durrani, 2023; Lee, 2023b)
	Longitudinal studies	Historical analysis, Time-series	Durrani, 2022; Gienow-Hecht, 2019
	Mixed methods	Combining qualitative and quantitative	Tran, 2024; Zheng et al., 2020
Data Collection	Document analysis	Government policies, Media coverage	Iwabuchi, 2015; Pamment, 2014a; 2014b)
	Interviews	Semi-structured, Expert interviews	Boughton, 2024; Wüst and Nicolai, 2023
	Social media data	Twitter, Quora analysis	He et al., 2019; Tran, 2024
	Visual analysis	Events, Ceremonies, Branding materials	Arning, 2013); Wallis and Balsamo, 2016)
Data analysis	Thematic analysis	Content patterns, Narrative analysis	Lee, 2022; Tamaki, 2019
	Discourse analysis	Critical analysis of texts/media	Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea, 2024
	Computational methods	Word embeddings, Semantic mining	Zheng et al., 2020; Vasist and Krishnan, 2024
	Content analysis	Media coverage, Documents	Svensson, 2013; Zhai, 2024
	Sentiment analysis	Public opinion, Media tone	Durrani, 2023; Lee, 2023b
	Network analysis	Stakeholder mapping, Policy networks	Pamment, 2014a; 2014b; Saberi et al., 2018

Table 11: Future research directions and research questions to advance place branding as a soft power mechanism

Thematic area	Research focus	Research questions	Sources
Digital Transformation	Integration of digital and traditional theories	How do digital transformation theories reshape soft power concepts? How can AI and big data analytics enhance frameworks?	Tran, 2024; Vasist and Krishnan, 2024; Zheng et al., 2020
Measurement	Evaluation frameworks and metrics	What models can measure digital branding impact? How to evaluate integrated physical-digital strategies?	Durrani, 2023; Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea, 2024; Lee, 2023b
Stakeholder dynamics	Non-state actors and cultural identity	How do cultural identities translate digitally? What theories explain government-citizen interactions?	Boughton, 2024; Pamment, 2014a; 2014b; Wüst and Nicolai, 2023
Crisis Management	Resilience and adaptation	How can theories adapt to crisis contexts? What frameworks support resilience strategies?	Cogan, 2024; Das et al., 2024; Lee, 2023a

Table 12: Future research directions and questions related to context that can advance place branding as a soft power mechanism

Thematic area	Research focus	Research questions	Sources
Digital Integration	Cross-industry convergence and technology adoption	How do technologies facilitate cross-industry integration? How can traditional industries integrate with digital strategies?	Chen and Wang, 2024; Lee, 2023a; Mashiah, 2024; Tran, 2024
Cultural Dynamics	Local institutions and cross-cultural collaboration	What role do cultural institutions play in digital branding? What is the impact of cross-cultural collaboration?	Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi, 2022; Iwabuchi, 2015
Regional Development	Emerging economies and adaptation	How do emerging economies adapt Western frameworks? What are unique characteristics of developing vs developed nations?	Das et al., 2024; Durrani, 2023; Pamment, 2014a; Van Ham, 2008
Framework Adaptation	Context-specific implementation	How to modify frameworks for different contexts? How do economic development levels influence approaches?	Das et al., 2024; Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea, 2024

- Framework adaptation: Research should focus on adapting place branding frameworks for different contexts (Das et al., 2024) and determine how economic development levels influence branding strategies (Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea, 2024).

These considerations highlight the need to understand place branding across digital, cultural, and economic environments. Future studies should develop integrated frameworks that recognize these variations while maintaining effectiveness in soft power projection. The interconnectedness of these elements emphasizes the importance of holistic approaches. Table 12 represents future research directions and questions that can advance place branding as a soft power mechanism.

3.4.3. Characteristics

The content analysis of the TCCM framework and network visualizations reveal several gaps that must be addressed in advanced place branding research.

- Independent variables: Studies should investigate how digital capabilities interact with traditional cultural resources in national branding (Chen and Wang, 2024). The complex relationships shown in the network maps suggest exploring how emerging technologies enhance government branding capabilities (Tran, 2024).
- Dependent variables: Sophisticated measurement frameworks are needed to assess brand equity in digital environments (Durrani, 2023). Figure 6 highlights the interconnection between place branding and soft power, indicating that metrics must capture the multidimensional nature of soft power outcomes (Lee, 2023a). Research should focus on developing indicators to assess tangible and intangible branding impacts.
- Mediating variables: Network visualizations indicate that cultural diplomacy programs mediate branding and soft power outcomes (Wüst and Nicolai, 2023); however, the role of digital platforms as mediators in nation branding requires further investigation (Vasist and Krishnan, 2024).
- Moderating variables: Geopolitical dynamics greatly influence branding effectiveness in the digital age (Das et al., 2024). Changing contextual factors affect national branding strategies, highlighting the importance of cultural proximity and economic conditions in branding success (Iwabuchi, 2015; Tran, 2024).

Future research should use advanced methodologies to explore these variables, capturing the complex interactions between digital capabilities, cultural resources, and contextual factors. Comprehending how emerging technologies and digital platforms mediate and moderate national branding efforts is essential. Furthermore, nuanced frameworks should be developed for measuring their effects in various contexts. Table 13 demonstrates the future research directions and questions that can advance place branding as a soft power mechanism.

3.4.4. Methods

The content analysis of the TCCM framework and network visualization maps reveals several methodological gaps and future research directions for advancing place branding as a soft power mechanism.

- Research design: Cross-cultural frameworks are crucial for evaluating effectiveness across contexts, and longitudinal designs are needed to systematically track digital brand evolution (Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea, 2024). Mixed-method designs can capture quantitative and qualitative effects; therefore, research should shift from descriptive case studies to experimental approaches that establish causal links between place branding initiatives and soft power outcomes (Durrani, 2023).
- Data collection: Advanced social media analytics and digital ethnography are needed to track real-time brand dynamics (Chen and Wang, 2024). Figure 6 illustrates the connections between digital platforms and national branding, emphasizing the prominence of automated data collection tools. Integration frameworks should merge traditional methods with digital approaches (Tran, 2024), and standardized protocols are vital for comparative data collection across national contexts.
- Data analysis: Machine learning and sentiment analysis are crucial for large-scale place branding data (Vasist and Krishnan, 2024). Figures 7 and 8 show that network analysis methods should be developed to reveal international influence patterns. Computational methods are necessary to capture brand sentiment over time (Zheng et al., 2020), and sophisticated tools are needed to evaluate soft power outcomes.
- Method integration: The network visualizations highlight the need for frameworks that triangulate digital and traditional methods (Durrani, 2023). Qualitative and computational methods must be integrated to analyze social media data alongside traditional communications (Lee, 2023a), and standardized approaches are required for combining multiple data sources while ensuring analytical rigor.

Table 13: Future research directions and questions related to characteristics that can advance place branding as a soft power mechanism

Variable type	Research focus	Research questions	Sources
Independent	Digital capabilities and traditional resources	How do digital competencies enhance cultural resources? What role do emerging technologies play in government branding?	Chen and Wang, 2024; Tran, 2024
Dependent	Measurement frameworks and outcomes	How to measure brand equity in digital environments? What metrics capture soft power's multidimensional nature?	Durrani, 2023; Lee, 2023a
Mediating	Digital platforms and intermediary mechanisms	How do digital platforms mediate branding initiatives? What role do cultural exchange programs play?	Vasist and Krishnan, 2024; Wüst and Nicolai, 2023
Moderating	Contextual factors in the digital age	How do geopolitical dynamics affect branding effectiveness? What role does cultural proximity play? How do economic conditions influence strategies?	Das et al., 2024; Iwabuchi, 2015; Tran, 2024

Table 14: Future research directions and questions related to methods that can advance place branding as a soft power mechanism

Methodological Area	Research directions	Research questions	Authors
Research design	Experimental approaches Mixed-method designs Cross-cultural comparative studies	How can experimental designs capture causal relationships? What comparative frameworks best evaluate effectiveness across cultures? How can longitudinal designs track digital brand evolution?	Durrani (2023); Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea (2024)
Data collection	Social media analytics Digital ethnography Automated data collection	How can digital methods enhance understanding of branding dynamics? What role can automated tools play in tracking evolution? How to integrate traditional and digital collection methods?	Chen and Wang (2024); Tran (2024)
Data analysis	Machine learning techniques Advanced sentiment analysis Network analysis	How can AI enhance place branding analysis? What computational methods best capture brand sentiment? How can network analysis reveal influence patterns?	Vasist and Krishnan (2024); Zheng et al. (2020)
Method integration	Mixed methods triangulation Qualitative-computational synthesis Longitudinal-cross-sectional combination	How to effectively combine digital and traditional approaches? What frameworks best integrate multiple methods? How to balance depth and breadth in analysis?	Durrani (2023); Lee (2023a)

These methodological advances can help create robust frameworks for analyzing online and offline brand manifestations, establish standardized metrics across cultural contexts, and accommodate structured and unstructured data. The concepts in the network maps stress the need for systematic, comparative approaches to identify patterns while considering unique contextual factors. Table 14 presents future research directions and questions to advance place branding as a soft power mechanism.

4. DISCUSSION

The bibliometric analysis (RQ1) revealed a significant evolution in place branding research from 2008 to 2024; publication frequency showed a clear upward trajectory and peak output in 2023 (18 articles). While Western institutions maintain dominance, emerging economies show increasing participation. Citation patterns demonstrate the enduring influence of foundational works like Van Ham (2008) (229 citations). At the same time, recent publications on vaccine diplomacy (Lee, 2023b) and sportscasting (Skey, 2023) reflect adaptation to contemporary challenges. This growth pattern aligns with Chen and Wang (2024), who revealed increasing scholarly interest in digital place branding strategies. Our analysis shows greater geographic diversity in research contributions than earlier bibliometric studies; however, citation impact remains concentrated in Western institutions.

We identified six distinct knowledge clusters (RQ2)—nation image and communication, international relations, cultural elements, foreign policy, public diplomacy, and cultural identity. These findings incorporate digital dimensions and crisis management perspectives, expanding Durrani's (2023) framework. The emergence of digital-focused clusters supports Tran (2024), who emphasized technological integration in nation branding. Recent studies by Mashiah (2024) and Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea (2024) demonstrate increasing attention to digital transformation in place branding, particularly during crises—a trend not captured in previous knowledge mapping exercises.

Regarding theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches (RQ3), the analysis reveals the continued influence of classical frameworks like Nye's (2004) soft power theory and Anholt's (2004) nation brand framework, while newer approaches incorporate digital elements. This evolution supports Vasist and Krishna (2024) regarding theoretical adaptation in the post-truth era. Methodologically, qualitative approaches dominate; however, the growing adoption of computational methods and mixed-method designs reflects increased sophistication. This outcome aligns with Zheng et al. (2020), who called for more rigorous measurement frameworks.

Future research directions (RQ4) emphasize digital transformation integration, measurement framework development, stakeholder dynamics understanding, and crisis management approaches. These four key areas align with Das et al. (2024), who recommended developing more sophisticated evaluation models while extending to include digital resilience strategies. The identified research trajectories address Boughton's (2024) concerns about authenticity in digital environments while incorporating Wüst and Nicolai's (2023) emphasis on cultural adaptation.

Our findings contribute several novel insights. First, identifying distinct digital-focused clusters provides a more nuanced understanding of technology's role than previous studies. Second, the analysis reveals a stronger integration between traditional diplomatic approaches and digital strategies than previously documented. Third, our findings suggest more emphasis on crisis management capabilities in place branding than earlier reviews indicated.

These results align with recent studies, such as Lee (2023b) on vaccine diplomacy and Cogan (2024) on emerging power strategies. The findings also offer new perspectives on digital integration and measurement frameworks; however, they contrast with earlier assumptions about geographic diversity in research contributions, suggesting a more persistent Western dominance than previously recognized.

The results have significant implications for theory and practice. Theoretically, they suggest more integrated frameworks incorporating digital dimensions alongside traditional soft power

concepts. They indicate the importance of developing sophisticated measurement systems combining conventional and digital metrics. This outcome supports Mashiah's (2024) recommendations for tech-driven storytelling approaches.

Some findings diverge from the existing literature. For example, while Durrani (2023) emphasizes adverse branding risks, our analysis suggests a greater focus on digital resilience strategies. Similarly, Tran (2024) focuses on a platform-specific strategy; however, our findings indicate the need for cross-platform integration frameworks.

This study addresses several research gaps in the recent literature, responding to calls from Chen and Wang (2024) to provide the first systematic analysis of digital transformation's impact on place branding effectiveness. This study also addresses the measurement challenges that Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea (2024) noted, offering a comprehensive framework for evaluating integrated physical-digital strategies, addressing.

These findings suggest that place branding research has evolved from traditional diplomatic approaches toward more integrated digital strategies; however, implementation challenges remain. The identified trends indicate growing sophistication in theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches, highlighting the need for continued development in measurement systems and crisis management strategies.

The current study extends present knowledge while identifying areas for further investigation. Place branding research has significantly progressed in incorporating digital dimensions and crisis management perspectives; however, more sophisticated measurement frameworks and implementation strategies are needed, particularly for emerging economies adapting to the rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Comparing our bibliometric findings with those of other studies reveals several key insights regarding the evolution of place branding and soft power research. Previous bibliometric analyses, like Swain et al. (2023), focused on broader national branding literature. In contrast, our study examines explicitly place branding's intersection with soft power, revealing unique patterns and trends.

The growth trajectory (2008-2024) is more rapid than general place branding bibliometric studies. For instance, Aguilera-Cora et al.'s (2021) analysis showed steady growth in place branding research; however, our findings demonstrate sharper increases post-2020, particularly in digital diplomacy and crisis management.

Geographic distribution patterns differ from broader nation branding studies. Liu et al. (2015) found balanced global contributions; however, our analysis shows persistent Western institutional dominance despite increasing participation from emerging economies. This disparity suggests that the soft power aspects of place branding remain concentrated in traditional academic centers.

Knowledge cluster composition reveals distinct characteristics compared to general place branding bibliometrics. Unlike previous studies that identified tourism and economic development as primary clusters, our analysis shows a more significant emphasis on diplomatic relations and cultural identity. This outcome aligns with Lee's (2023a) findings concerning increasing the cultural and diplomatic dimension of integration in place branding.

Citation patterns show interesting divergence from broader field trends. For instance, Van Ham's (2008) work maintains a higher citation impact in a soft power context than the general place branding literature; this difference suggests the theoretical foundations' particular relevance to soft power applications. Recent high-impact publications focus on crisis response and digital transformation more than on broader place branding research.

Methodological trends also differ. General place branding bibliometrics show balanced quantitative-qualitative approaches; however, our analysis reveals a stronger preference for qualitative and mixed methods in soft power applications. This disparity supports Zheng et al.'s (2020) observations regarding the measurement challenges in soft power evaluation.

These comparisons highlight the distinct characteristics of place branding as a soft power tool (a strong emphasis on diplomatic relations, a focus on digital transformation, and concentrated institutional participation), suggesting unique theoretical and practical considerations when examining place branding through a soft power lens.

These findings deepen our understanding of the field's evolution while highlighting areas for further development, particularly in measurement frameworks and cross-cultural applications. Translational perspectives in soft power research provide valuable insights for strategic implementation (Ye, 2023). The analysis reveals broader patterns consistent with the place branding literature and uncovers unique characteristics specific to soft power applications.

4.1. Implications

4.1.2. Theoretical implications

The bibliometric analysis provides several critical theoretical advancements for understanding place branding as a soft power tool. First, integrating digital transformation theories with traditional soft power concepts creates new frameworks for understanding modern nation branding. This approach advances beyond Nye's (2004) classical theory by incorporating technological dimensions that shape contemporary international relationships. This research demonstrates how theoretical frameworks must evolve to accommodate diverse cultural contexts and varying levels of technological advancement across regions.

The emergence of crisis-specific theoretical models (particularly evident in research on vaccine diplomacy and pandemic response) extends existing frameworks to account for global disruptions. This study addresses a significant gap in theoretical understanding,

primarily focused on stable environmental conditions. Developing measurement frameworks that combine quantitative and qualitative metrics can address the critical gap in evaluating place branding effectiveness, moving beyond traditional reputation metrics to incorporate digital engagement indicators.

These theoretical developments particularly benefit from cross-regional knowledge exchange. While Western institutions dominate theoretical contributions, they increasingly incorporate insights from Asian place branding practices, especially regarding digital diplomacy and cultural promotion strategies.

4.1.2. Practical implications

This study's practical implications reveal significant opportunities for knowledge transfer and strategic development in place branding.

Drawing from the research analyzed in this systematic review, place branding initiatives have demonstrated effectiveness across various sectors when supported by clear measurement frameworks and digital integration strategies (Chen and Wang, 2024; Tran, 2024). Cultural institutions can adopt the Japan Foundation's "cool Japan" model and the British Council's digital exchange programs. Sports organizations can gain from UEFA's digital fan engagement strategies and Formula 1's market expansion approaches. Healthcare institutions can implement Israel's vaccination campaign communication model and Thailand's medical tourism strategies. Finally, Australian universities' recruitment strategies and German academic exchange programs can benefit educational institutions.

Implementation requires careful attention to regional contexts and sector-specific needs. For example, tourism organizations should focus on monitoring real-time digital experiences and integrated destination marketing, while cultural institutions need digital exchange platforms and virtual exhibition capabilities. Sports organizations must implement digital fan engagement systems and legacy impact measurement, healthcare institutions should develop medical tourism platforms and crisis communication systems, and educational institutions require virtual mobility programs and international recruitment platforms.

Success factors include understanding regional variations while maintaining consistent global standards, balancing traditional and digital approaches, and developing robust measurement systems. Organizations must invest in digital capabilities, create integrated measurement systems, establish crisis management protocols, and implement cultural adaptation frameworks.

These implications provide conduits for advancing both theoretical understanding and practical applications. The research demonstrates that successful place branding requires strategic insight and tactical expertise across various sectors and contexts, particularly in digital transformation, crisis management, and cultural adaptation.

The findings contribute to academic knowledge and offer clear implementation pathways while maintaining theoretical rigor. This integrated approach ensures that theoretical advancements can translate into actionable strategies for place branding practitioners across different regions and sectors.

4.2. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Studies

This study acknowledges several methodological limitations. For example, reliance on the Scopus database may exclude relevant publications from other sources. Moreover, focusing on English-language publications could potentially overlook valuable contributions from emerging economies. Moreover, this study's period (2008-2024) may not fully capture historical developments. Furthermore, the bibliometric analysis methodology has inherent limitations in capturing qualitative nuances, while database coverage constraints and citation metric biases affect the comprehensiveness of the results. Finally, this study's focus on academic publications underrepresents practitioner perspectives, and the rapid evolution of digital technologies requires regular research updates. Future research can address these limitations by focusing on four key areas. First, researchers can explore methodological development through multi-country comparative studies using mixed methods, particularly across ASEAN nations. Second, future studies can consider digital integration, emphasizing AI-powered sentiment analysis tools and integrated digital dashboards. Third, research can investigate the regional adaptation of Western metrics for emerging markets through successful cases like India's medical tourism and China's cultural diplomacy initiatives. Fourth, crisis management frameworks can build on examples like Israel's vaccination campaign communication strategy and Australia's education sector approach. These focus areas establish systematic approaches for advancing theoretical understanding and practical applications in place branding, specifically addressing identified research gaps and emerging challenges in digital transformation and cross-cultural adaptation.

5. CONCLUSION

This systematic review reveals the evolution of place branding as a soft power tool. We analyze 70 publications from 2008 to 2024, showing significant growth in scholarly output, peaking in 2023, and identify six knowledge clusters: nation image and communication, international relations, cultural elements, foreign policy, public diplomacy, and cultural identity. Western institutions dominate; however, contributions from emerging economies are increasing, reflecting a broader global engagement. The study links classical frameworks like Nye's (2004) soft power theory and Anholt's (2004) nation brand framework with modern digital transformation and crisis management. Methodologically, the field is advancing with more sophisticated approaches, although qualitative methods remain prevalent. Key contributions include an integrated framework for evaluating place branding effectiveness, a systematic analysis that connects theory to practice, identifying research gaps, and providing practical guidelines for digital implementation. Future research should focus on integrating digital transformation, developing measurement frameworks, understanding stakeholder dynamics, and improving crisis management approaches. Organizations must invest in digital capabilities and adapt to regional contexts while maintaining

global standards. This study recognizes limitations, such as a focus on English-language publications, suggesting that future work should include multi-country comparative studies, especially in emerging economies. The next vital steps include implementing AI tools, creating standardized measurements, and developing cross-cultural adaptation protocols. Overall, this analysis offers a foundation for understanding contemporary place branding dynamics, providing practical guidelines for various sectors and emphasizing the balance between traditional diplomatic methods and digital innovation.

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