

Do City Diplomacy and City Marketing Converge? Drivers, Conceptual Pathways and Outcomes: a PRISMA review.

Corresponding Author :

Emanuele Sala *^{1,2}

¹ UCLouvain FUCAM Mons - Université Catholique de Louvain – Belgique

² Université de Rouen - Normandie – France

E-mail emanuele.sala@uclouvain.be

Introduction

Cities have become increasingly prominent actors on the international stage, engaging in forms of external action that combine political, economic, and symbolic dimensions. Over the past two decades, two fields have crystallized around these practices: city diplomacy, defined as the institutions and processes through which cities engage internationally to represent their interests, and city marketing, encompassing the set of activities aimed at enhancing a city's competitiveness by shaping perceptions among internal and external audiences. While both fields have expanded significantly, their conceptual and practical interrelationship remains insufficiently theorized, despite frequent empirical overlaps. This review addresses that gap by offering the first systematic, PRISMA-based literature review of the relationship between city diplomacy and city marketing in city diplomacy literature.

Drawing on 31 peer-reviewed articles published between January 2007 and March 2025, the study systematically codes definitions, drivers, levels of integration, and reported outcomes of city diplomacy, with particular attention to how marketing and branding practices are conceptualized within this literature. The PRISMA protocol is used to ensure transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor, following established guidelines for systematic reviews in the social sciences. PRISMA provides eligibility criteria, sources of information and search strategy, the selection and data collection process, the list of extracted variables and the analysis strategy, as well as a clear assessment of quality. The exclusive use of the SCOPUS database ensures disciplinary breadth and bibliometric consistency, though the review acknowledges the limitations of relying on a single index.

Results

The review finds that city diplomacy lacks a unified definition, with 24 of the 31 articles offering explicit but heterogeneous conceptualizations. Three definitions dominate the field: van der Pluijm and Melissen's foundational definition of city diplomacy as "*the institutions and processes by which cities engage in relations with actors on an international political stage with the aim of representing themselves and their interests to one another*" (2007) ; Kosovac et al.'s emphasis on the conduct of external relations by official representatives (2021) ; and Curtis and Acuto's framing of city diplomacy as a city's foreign policy (2018). Four definitional approaches emerge: institutional, functional, strategic, and taxonomic alongside hybrid definitions that combine multiple dimensions.

The literature identifies four main drivers of city diplomacy, organized along a push–pull axis. Push factors include (1) glocalization, whereby global problems manifest locally and require municipal action, and (2) state rescaling, referring to the political or economic retreat of the nation-state. Pull factors include (3) economic and financial opportunities, such as attracting investment, talent, and resources, and (4) the pursuit of a global political role, whereby cities seek recognition as governance actors. These drivers often interact, as cities are simultaneously compelled to act due to global pressures and motivated by opportunities for economic development or political influence. Cities receive global flows and become the locus where global issues materialize, while they also increasingly act proactively on the international stage.

A central contribution of the review is the identification of five levels of integration between city diplomacy and city marketing: Level 1 indicating no relation, L2 with City marketing as part of city diplomacy, L3 with City diplomacy as part of city marketing, L4 signalling a Partial intersection, and L5 with a Significant or complete overlap.

These categories adapt Szondi's (2008) framework on public diplomacy and nation branding to the urban scale. The review finds empirical evidence for four of the five levels (no article adopts Level 3). Nearly one-third of the corpus treats city diplomacy without reference to marketing (L1), typically emphasizing normative, governance-oriented logics. Another group (L2) sees marketing as an instrument of city diplomacy, used to communicate reputation, attract investment, or support twinning and network participation. A substantial portion of the literature (L4) identifies partial intersections, highlighting synergies between branding and diplomacy while maintaining conceptual distinctions. Finally, eight articles (L5) describe a significant overlap, arguing that contemporary city diplomacy is increasingly entrepreneurial, economically driven, and intertwined with branding and promotion. A structural overlap rather than a convergence emerges, in light of the theoretical plasticity of the two concepts.

The research finally identifies four categories of outcomes, organized along internal/external and desirable/undesirable axes. First, desirable internal outcomes as an enhanced international role, increased soft power, strengthened legitimacy, and expanded network influence. Second, undesirable internal outcomes leading to fragility of city diplomacy due to limited resources, lack of authority, dependence on political will, and coordination challenges. Third, desirable external outcomes driving improved public management, increased access to funding, strengthened global governance, and more effective cooperation. Fourth, undesirable external outcomes risking commodification of the city, uneven development, and the reproduction of global urban hierarchies.

Discussion

These outcomes reflect the dual nature of city diplomacy as both a governance tool and a competitive strategy. Nonetheless, city diplomacy's outcomes remain deeply contingent, shaped by resources, political commitment, and the way local strategies are defined and implemented by the multitude of city actors.

The review explores whether specific drivers lead to particular styles of city diplomacy and whether these, in turn, produce predictable outcomes. A Sankey diagram maps the relationships

among drivers, integration levels, and outcomes. The analysis finds no single conceptual pathway. While economically oriented drivers often correlate with higher levels of integration between city diplomacy and city marketing, and governance-oriented drivers correlate with lower levels, the relationships are neither linear nor exclusive. Notably, Level 5 (significant overlap) is associated with the highest incidence of undesirable outcomes, including commodification and uneven development, whereas Level 4 (partial intersection) tends to produce more favorable outcomes. This suggests that moderate integration between diplomacy and marketing may be more beneficial than full convergence.

Conclusions and Avenues for Future Research

Three major analytical cleavages emerge: firstly, city diplomacy oscillates between development-oriented, competitive logics and normative commitments to cooperation. Secondly, legitimacy and the relationship with state diplomacy raise questions about authority, representation, and the boundaries of diplomatic practice. Thirdly, cities simultaneously compete for resources and collaborate on global challenges, creating tensions in both vertical (state–city) and horizontal (city–city) relations.

These cleavages point to several avenues for future research, including the role of city marketing in shaping diplomatic legitimacy, the impact of political cycles on the marketing–diplomacy nexus, and the consequences of uneven capacity across cities.

As a conclusion, the PRISMA-based review provides the first systematic synthesis of how city diplomacy literature conceptualizes its relationship with city marketing. It demonstrates that the two fields are structurally intertwined but not convergent, shaped by diverse actors, motivations, and contexts. The relationship is best described as porous, characterized by partial overlaps and variable geometries rather than unified theoretical pathways. Internationalization strategies tend to combine cooperative and competitive rationales as different styles of city diplomacy, and partial overlaps rather than full convergence between city marketing and city diplomacy appear structurally likely.

References

- Curtis, S., & Acuto, M. (2018). The Foreign Policy of Cities. *The RUSI Journal*, 163(6), 8-17.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2018.1562014>
- Kosovac, A., Hartley, Kris, Acuto, Michele, & Gunning, D. (2021). City Leaders Go Abroad: A Survey of City Diplomacy in 47 Cities. *Urban Policy and Research*, 39(2), 127–142.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08111146.2021.1886071>
- Szondi, G. (2008). *Public diplomacy and nation branding: Conceptual similarities and differences*. Clingendael Institute.
- van der Pluijm, R., & Melissen, J. (2007). *City diplomacy: The expanding role of cities in international politics*. Clingendael Institute.