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## City Branding and City Identity Research: A Bibliometric Review

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### Abstrak

*This study aims to map the intellectual structure and scholarly development of city branding and city identity research through a bibliometric approach. The review draws on a dataset of 100 articles published between 2015 and 2025, accumulating 4,887 citations, indicating strong academic visibility and impact within this domain. Bibliometric mapping was conducted using keyword co-occurrence and citation analysis through VOSviewer, enabling the visualization of thematic networks across the literature. The results highlight city branding as the most central and dominant keyword, functioning as a conceptual hub that links major research themes such as city image, identity, tourist, and perception. The network structure reveals strong associations between city branding and city image, suggesting that image formation constitutes one of the most frequently examined outcomes in city branding research. Furthermore, the linkage between city image and city identity confirms a recurring conceptual pathway in which city image operates as a mediating construct in the process of identity construction. Additional findings indicate an emerging emphasis on implementation-related dimensions, reflected by nodes such as role, process, practice, and challenge, which highlight practical obstacles including message consistency, visual identity integration, and stakeholder engagement. Overall, the study demonstrates that city branding extends beyond promotional activities and operates as a multidimensional strategic system connecting identity articulation, symbolic communication, governance mechanisms, stakeholder experiences, and the consolidation of city identity and reputation.*

**Keywords:** City Branding; City Identity; Bibliometric

### Introduction

This paper presents a comprehensive bibliometric review of the extant literature concerning city branding and city identity, aiming to discern evolutionary trends, key thematic areas, and influential scholarly contributions within this interdisciplinary field. The analysis systematically evaluates publication trends, author productivity, prominent sources, and keyword frequencies to map the intellectual landscape of city branding research over the past two decades (Bahçeci & Pekmez, 2025). Specifically, this study employs robust bibliometric techniques to analyze a substantial dataset of academic publications, allowing for an objective and quantitative assessment of research trajectories and emerging areas of inquiry (Oliva et al., 2022). This approach facilitates the identification of core research clusters, under-researched domains, and potential avenues for future investigation, thereby providing a structured overview of the field's development and its current intellectual frontiers (Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024). The subsequent sections of this review delineate the methodological framework employed for data collection and analysis, followed by an in-depth discussion of the bibliometric findings and their implications for understanding the intricate relationship between city branding and identity (Siahaan et al., 2025). This systematic approach provides a robust foundation for identifying prominent research themes, such as place marketing and multilayer brand strategies, and for examining the interconnections between these concepts in diverse urban contexts (Gu & Wang, 2023).

The exploration of these dynamics is crucial for understanding how cities cultivate distinct identities to attract investment, tourism, and talent, ultimately influencing their global positioning (Andrade et al., 2021; Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024). While the concept of city branding has roots in the nineteenth century for commercializing urban spaces, its modern iteration involves a more complex interplay of marketing, architecture, urban planning, and tourism (Oliva et al., 2022). This interdisciplinary nature necessitates a thorough examination of scholarly outputs to identify pivotal contributions and intellectual gaps (Ghafar et al., 2022). Despite its growing prominence as a strategic approach to urban development, a comprehensive bibliometric analysis systematically evaluating the academic literature on city branding remains limited (Bahçeci & Pekmez, 2025). Several analytical and bibliometric studies have reviewed city branding and place branding literature, but most are predominantly

discussed from the academic viewpoint of city brand management and communication aspects ([Ghafar et al., 2022](#)).

### **Background of City Branding**

This paper aims to bridge this gap by offering a detailed bibliometric review, encompassing a wide array of academic publications to provide a holistic understanding of the field's evolution and current state. This review will also illuminate emerging trends, such as the increasing focus on digital branding and sustainable urban strategies, highlighting the dynamic evolution of the field ([Bahçeci & Pekmez, 2025](#)). Furthermore, the present study addresses the recognized disconnect between city brand research and practical application, emphasizing the necessity for critical and alternative approaches to fully comprehend the city brand phenomenon itself ([Oliva et al., 2022](#)). This includes examining how cities leverage their unique characteristics to enhance identity, competitiveness, and attractiveness, often by strategically engaging diverse stakeholders to foster a distinct sense of place ([PILCH, 2025](#)). Given the complex and multifaceted nature of city branding, it is imperative to move beyond traditional marketing paradigms and integrate insights from urban studies, sociology, and cultural geography to capture the full spectrum of its influence ([Ghafar et al., 2022](#)). This interdisciplinary perspective is critical given the complexity of involving local stakeholders in the branding process, as no single entity fully controls a city's identity ([Morrison & Coca-Stefaniak, 2024](#)).

### **Significance of City Identity Research**

The significance of city identity research lies in its capacity to illuminate the unique characteristics, historical narratives, and cultural assets that define an urban area, thereby providing a foundational understanding for effective city branding initiatives ([Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024](#)). This understanding is crucial for developing authentic and resonant branding strategies that can attract investment, foster tourism, and enhance civic pride ([Wan & Li, 2024](#)). Moreover, a robust city identity serves as a cornerstone for sustainable urban development, allowing cities to articulate their distinct value propositions in an increasingly competitive global landscape ([Bahçeci & Pekmez, 2025](#)). This perspective highlights how a well-defined identity can differentiate a city, attracting talent and businesses, and influencing its perceived value among residents and external audiences ([Morrison & Coca-Stefaniak, 2024](#)). Conversely, a weak or undifferentiated city identity can hinder urban development efforts, leading to a lack of recognition and competitive disadvantage in the global arena ([Mansour et al., 2023](#)).

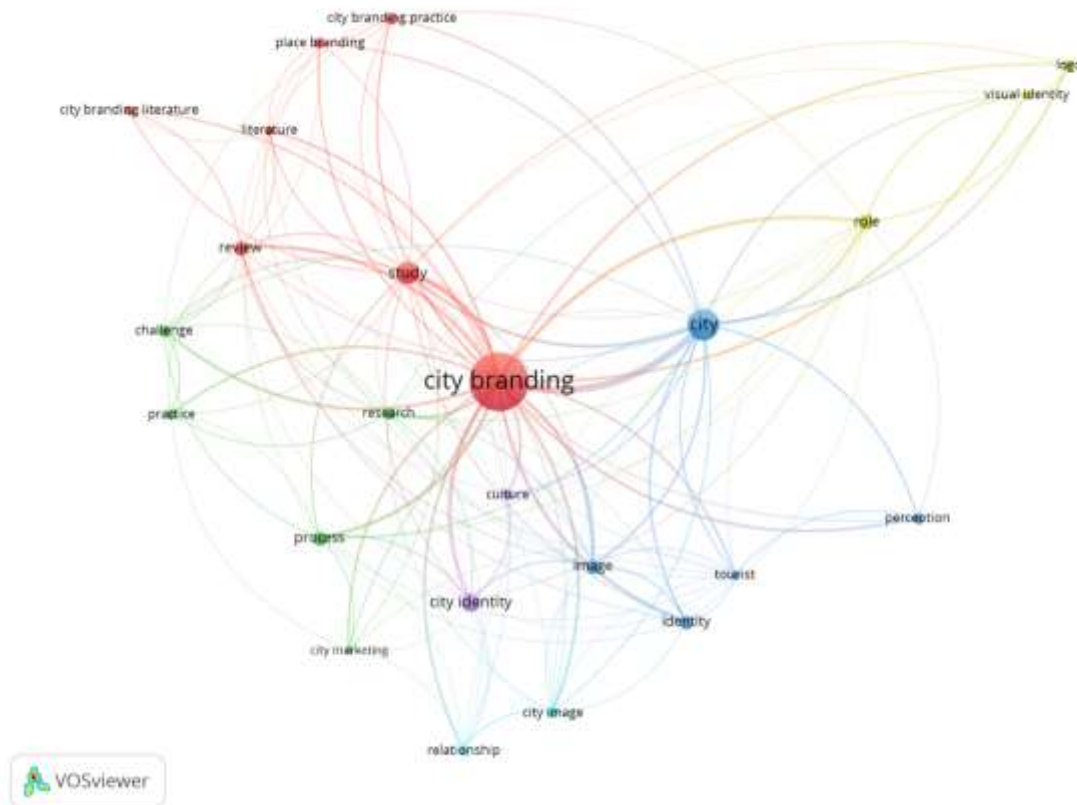
### **Purpose of the Bibliometric Review**

This review, therefore, aims to systematically map the intellectual structure of city branding and city identity research, identifying key themes, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks that have shaped the discourse ([Ghafar et al., 2022](#); [Wan & Li, 2024](#)). This comprehensive approach allows for the identification of influential authors, journals, and research clusters, providing a nuanced understanding of the field's evolution and its current intellectual frontiers. By analyzing the co-occurrence of keywords and citations, this bibliometric analysis can reveal underlying relationships between distinct research areas and highlight the interdisciplinary nature of urban identity studies ([Ghafar et al., 2022](#)). This analytical approach thereby offers a conceptual map that not only delineates the current state of knowledge but also uncovers conceptual gaps and under-explored dimensions within the urban identity discourse, particularly concerning the integration of cultural identity, city planning, and governance within branding strategies ([Bahçeci & Pekmez, 2025](#)). It also underscores the dynamic interplay between tangible urban characteristics and intangible cultural elements, which collectively contribute to a city's unique brand identity ([SZEKOWSKI et al., 2025](#)). Furthermore, this bibliometric review will identify the most prominent journals and prolific contributors in city branding research, such as "Place Branding and Public Diplomacy," "Cities," and "Journal of Place Management and Development," highlighting their significant impact on the field ([Bahçeci & Pekmez, 2025](#)).

### **Methodology**

This section outlines the systematic approach used to conduct the bibliometric analysis, ensuring a rigorous and reproducible examination of the existing literature. The methodology details the search strategy, data collection, and analytical techniques employed to comprehensively map the intellectual landscape of city branding and city identity research. This rigorous approach is essential for identifying trends, gaps, and influential works, thereby providing a foundational understanding for future research directions. Specifically, this study employs a quantitative descriptive approach, leveraging systematic literature review methods and bibliometric analysis to examine city branding literature from various databases ([Ainur, 2024](#); [Bahçeci & Pekmez, 2025](#)). This comprehensive methodology facilitates a robust exploration of the field, enabling the identification of key thematic clusters, influential authors, and prevalent research trends ([Marvi et al., 2024](#)).

The rigorous analysis of the extracted data was performed using specialized bibliometric software, such as VOSviewer, which enabled the visualization of complex relationships between publications, authors, and keywords through network analysis and co-citation mapping (Bahçeci & Pekmez, 2025). Additionally, Biblioshiny was utilized to process and analyze the dataset, providing insights into publication trends, author networks, and keyword co-occurrences that are crucial for understanding the intellectual structure of the field (Lessa & Ocke, 2023; Suardi et al., 2023). These tools collectively facilitated a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the existing literature, enabling the identification of research gaps and promising avenues for future inquiry within city branding and city identity studies (Siahaan et al., 2025). This methodological approach aligns with previous bibliometric studies in related fields, which have successfully employed similar tools to map academic landscapes and identify emerging research frontiers (COLAKOĞLU, 2024).



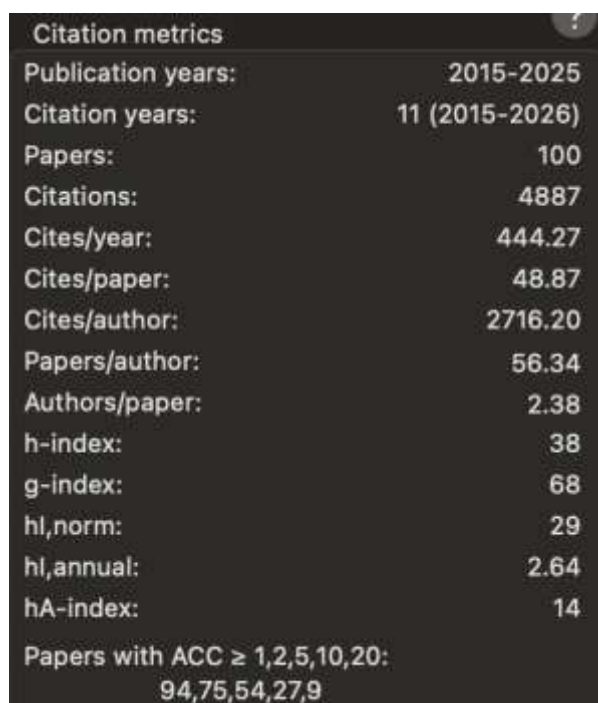
Gambar 1. Network Visualization

Based on the VOSviewer network visualization, “city branding” emerges as the most central and dominant keyword, as indicated by its largest node size and its core position within the network. This suggests that city branding serves as a key conceptual hub linking multiple themes across the literature. The network shows strong connections between city branding and the node “city”, which further relates to major topics such as perception, tourist, image, and identity, indicating that city branding research frequently emphasizes its influence on tourists’ perceptions, image formation, and the construction of city identity. Moreover, the presence of a cluster centered on visual identity and logo highlights the significance of symbolic and visual elements as essential components of city branding strategies. In addition, keywords such as review, literature, study, place branding, practice, process, and challenge reflect two dominant research streams: conceptual discussions and literature-based studies, as well as practical implementation issues and challenges in city branding processes. Overall, the network structure confirms that city branding is framed as a multidimensional strategy that extends beyond urban marketing, playing a critical role in shaping city image and strengthening city identity through public and tourist perceptions and experiences.

Furthermore, the network visualization indicates that the connections between city branding and the keywords image and city image are relatively strong, suggesting that city image formation represents one of the most frequently examined outcomes in city branding research. The linkage between city image and identity/city

identity also reveals a recurring conceptual pathway in which city image functions as a mediating construct in the process of shaping city identity. This supports the notion that city branding is not merely associated with the creation of slogans or symbolic representations, but rather operates as a strategic mechanism that shapes both cognitive and affective perceptions of a city, which subsequently influences how residents and visitors recognize and internalize city identity. In addition, the presence of tourist and perception within tightly connected clusters implies that many studies emphasize the responses of external stakeholders, particularly tourists, as key contributors to image and identity formation through their experiences and interactions with the city.

Moreover, nodes such as role, process, and practice highlight the growing emphasis on the implementation dimension of city branding, focusing on stakeholder roles and strategic processes in executing branding initiatives. The emergence of the keyword challenge further indicates that the literature frequently addresses practical obstacles, such as message consistency, the integration of visual identity, stakeholder engagement, and potential mismatches between planned branding strategies and public perceptions or lived experiences. The inclusion of place branding also suggests that city branding is often framed within the broader umbrella of place branding, encompassing wider territorial marketing strategies related to tourism, investment attraction, and socio-cultural identity development. Therefore, this network mapping demonstrates that city branding research is inherently multidisciplinary and has evolved through multiple approaches, yet consistently converges on the interconnected relationship between branding strategies, city image formation, and the strengthening of city identity as closely related constructs.



Citation metrics	
Publication years:	2015-2025
Citation years:	11 (2015-2026)
Papers:	100
Citations:	4887
Cites/year:	444.27
Cites/paper:	48.87
Cites/author:	2716.20
Papers/author:	56.34
Authors/paper:	2.38
h-index:	38
g-index:	68
hl,norm:	29
hl,annual:	2.64
hA-index:	14
Papers with ACC ≥ 1,2,5,10,20:	94,75,54,27,9

Gambar 3. Citation Metrics

Based on the citation metrics for the publication period 2015–2025, the bibliometric dataset consists of 100 papers with a total of 4,887 citations, indicating a strong level of academic visibility and scholarly impact within this research domain. The average number of citations per year reaches 444.27, suggesting sustained and growing scientific attention toward topics related to city branding and its associated constructs. Furthermore, the average citations per paper (48.87) demonstrate that publications within the dataset are widely referenced, contributing substantially to the theoretical and empirical development of the field. The h-index of 38 indicates that at least 38 papers have each received a minimum of 38 citations, reflecting the presence of a core body of highly influential literature. Meanwhile, the g-index of 68 suggests that citation distribution is relatively concentrated, with the most impactful articles accounting for a considerable share of the total citations across the dataset.

In addition, productivity and collaboration indicators reveal an average of 2.38 authors per paper, implying that research in this domain is commonly conducted through small-team collaborations. The values for papers per author (56.34) and citations per author (2716.20) further highlight the presence of highly productive

scholars who contribute significantly to publication output and citation accumulation. Moreover, the distribution of papers with ACC  $\geq 1,2,5,10,20$  (i.e., 94, 75, 54, 27, and 9) indicates that most papers have been cited at least once, while only a smaller subset of publications achieves very high citation levels ( $\geq 20$ ). This pattern reflects a concentrated citation structure, where a limited number of core studies serve as primary references, while other publications contribute to expanding thematic diversity and conceptual discussions within city branding research.

### **Conceptual Foundation Of City Branding**

The conceptual foundation of city branding is deeply rooted in the broader field of place branding, which extends traditional marketing principles to geographic entities such as cities, regions, and nations. This conceptual framework views cities as complex products or services that can be strategically marketed to various stakeholders, including tourists, investors, and residents, to enhance their competitiveness and attractiveness. This approach necessitates a thorough understanding of a city's unique attributes, cultural heritage, and socio-economic dynamics, which collectively contribute to its distinct identity and marketability (Andrade et al., 2021). This strategic application of marketing theories to urban development began to gain prominence with the introduction of business concepts into city management practices, as exemplified by early work focusing on competitive regional advantages (Lessa & Ocke, 2023). Over time, this evolved to incorporate elements of urban planning, cultural studies, and political science, reflecting the multifaceted nature of urban identity (Siahaan et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the concept draws heavily from seminal works like Kevin Lynch's "The Image of the City," which emphasized the subjective mental maps individuals form of their urban environments, influencing their perceptions and interactions with the city (Mansour et al., 2023). These formative ideas laid the groundwork for understanding how urban imagery contributes to a city's brand, influencing both internal perceptions and external appeal. This holistic perspective highlights the critical role of sensory and experiential elements in shaping a city's brand, moving beyond purely economic considerations to embrace socio-cultural and psychological dimensions (Siahaan et al., 2025). The conceptualization of city branding further integrates notions of urban identity and city image, recognizing that a city's brand is not merely a promotional facade but a reflection of its inherent characteristics and how these are perceived by diverse stakeholders (Mansour et al., 2023). This involves a complex interplay between tangible assets, such as infrastructure and historical sites, and intangible elements like culture, values, and community spirit (Chan et al., 2022).

### **An Integrative Framework: Conceptual Building Blocks of City Branding (Derived from the Evidence)**

An integrative conceptual framework derived from the evidence suggests that city branding can be theorized through five interdependent building blocks: (1) city identity, (2) city image, (3) symbolic and communication instruments, (4) stakeholder participation, and (5) governance and brand management infrastructure. First, city identity provides the normative foundation of branding, reflecting the values, culture, and strategic direction a city seeks to project (Kavaratzis, 2004). Second, city image represents the perceptual outcome of branding, shaped by communication channels and personal experiences; it is often treated as the immediate consequence of city branding initiatives (Govers & Go, 2009). Third, symbolic instruments—such as visual identity systems, logos, taglines, and narratives—serve as tangible anchors that translate identity into recognizable meaning and positioning, supporting memorability and differentiation (Kavaratzis, 2004). Fourth, city branding is increasingly recognized as a social process requiring stakeholder engagement, because identity and legitimacy cannot be imposed solely through top-down communication but emerge through interaction and acceptance across groups. Fifth, city branding requires a managerial and institutional dimension: since cities are not single organizations, their branding must be coordinated through governance structures and long-term brand management mechanisms. This managerial need is explicitly captured in Zenker and Braun's conceptualization of a Place Brand Centre, emphasizing the coordination of sub-brands across target groups while maintaining strategic coherence (Zenker & Braun, 2010).

### **City Branding Domains (Conceptual) and Evidence Linkages**

Evidence across foundational and conceptual studies indicates that city branding research clusters around four major conceptual domains. The first domain is competitive identity and strategic reputation governance, where city branding is framed as a tool of competitiveness and long-term reputational management (Anholt, 2007). This domain emphasizes that a city's brand emerges from what it does as much as what it says, positioning branding as intertwined with policy, diplomacy, and development agendas. The second domain is symbolic communication and visual identity, which focuses on brand elements such as logos, design systems, slogans, and narrative storytelling. The literature shows that symbolic assets help translate abstract identity into recognizable meaning, but their credibility depends on being supported by consistent experiences and policies (Kavaratzis, 2004; Govers & Go, 2009). The third domain concerns identity–image alignment, emphasizing the relationship

between internal identity articulation and external image formation. In this stream, city branding acts as a bridge connecting identity (self-definition) and image (external perception), with experience functioning as the key validation mechanism (Govers & Go, 2009). The fourth domain is place brand management and brand architecture, which recognizes that cities must manage heterogeneous audiences through structured brand governance and coordinated sub-branding strategies; Zenker and Braun's approach highlights the necessity of such coordination through an institutional core (Zenker & Braun, 2010).

These domains form a conceptual chain that can be synthesized as:

city identity articulation → symbolic/communication strategies + governance actions → city image formation → city identity consolidation and reputational strengthening (Anholt, 2007; Govers & Go, 2009; Kavatzis, 2004). This indicates that city branding is consistently positioned not as a linear communication process, but as a multi-level system connecting strategic intention, symbolic representation, stakeholder experience, and perceptual outcomes.

### **Implications for Future City Branding Theorizing (Bounded by the Evidence)**

Based on the evidence base, future theorizing in city branding should move toward models that better capture the systemic and relational nature of branding processes. First, the literature supports strengthening theory around the identity–image–experience triad, as branding success depends on whether symbolic positioning is validated through real urban experiences, not merely communication (Govers & Go, 2009; Kavatzis, 2004). Second, there is a strong conceptual basis for positioning governance and institutional capacity as core theoretical variables in city branding, since competitive identity is constructed through sustained policy, coordination, and implementation rather than promotional intensity (Anholt, 2007). Third, future theoretical development should further incorporate brand architecture and target-group differentiation, as cities are multi-audience entities and require structured systems for managing sub-brands and stakeholder-specific value propositions (Zenker & Braun, 2010). Finally, the evidence underscores the need to theorize stakeholder engagement and co-creation more explicitly, because cities do not “own” identity in the way corporations own brands; instead, legitimacy and identity emerge through residents' acceptance, participation, and collective meaning-making processes (Kavatzis, 2004). These implications remain bounded by the dominant conceptual evidence and should therefore guide theory-building efforts toward integrative, governance-aware, and stakeholder-sensitive frameworks.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the bibliometric findings, this review concludes that city branding and city identity research has developed into a highly visible and influential multidisciplinary domain, as reflected by 4,887 citations across 100 publications and an h-index of 38. The dominance of city branding in the network visualization confirms its role as a central conceptual anchor connecting key themes such as city image formation, tourist perception, stakeholder experience, and identity strengthening. The thematic relationships further reveal a recurring pathway in which city branding shapes city image, and city image subsequently contributes to the consolidation and internalization of city identity. Therefore, city branding should not be understood merely as symbolic promotion through logos or slogans, but rather as a strategic mechanism dependent on lived urban experiences, policy consistency, governance capacity, and stakeholder participation. Moreover, the evidence supports a synthesized conceptual chain: identity articulation → symbolic/communication strategies and governance actions → city image formation → identity consolidation and reputational strengthening. This reinforces the need for future theorizing to move toward more systemic and relational models of city branding, particularly those emphasizing the identity–image–experience triad, integrating institutional and governance variables, and incorporating brand architecture strategies to manage heterogeneous audiences. Overall, this review provides both conceptual clarity and bibliometric mapping that can guide future research agendas toward more integrative, governance-aware, and co-creation-centered approaches to city branding and city identity scholarship.

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