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Strategic Cultural Hedging and The Louvre Abu Dhabi: UAE's Soft Power and SDG 17

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Abstract
This study explored how the United Arab Emirates (UAE) uses Louvre Abu Dhabi (LAD) for strategic hedging, enhancing its soft power, and advancing Sustainable Development Goal 17 (SDG 17). Limited studies examined LAD's political character; thus, the study presents information about LAD's diplomatic role. Using quantitative methodology, the study analyzed official reports (2018-2025) using R. The study found a significant global engagement and a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.990$, $p = 0.010$, excluding the COVID-19 period) between the museum's international visitor numbers and the UAE's progress in the Global Soft Power Index (GSPI). The findings suggest evidence of strategic hedging due to the diversification of international visitors. Further, results indicated an alignment with SDG 17 as shown through educational partnerships and diplomatic engagement. The study concluded that LAD maintained diplomatic relations in balance.

Keywords
Louvre Abu Dhabi; Soft Power; Strategic Hedging; Cultural Diplomacy; Global Soft Power Index; SDG 17; United Arab Emirates

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, the way states project their power has become different from past eras (McClory 2015, 6; Isar and Triandafyllidou 2020, 393). For instance, cultural diplomacy (CD) directly impacts foreign policy (Grincheva 2024, 173; De Corte 2019, 5), and the UAE uses its cultural capital to strengthen its global relations (Gulf Magazine 2025) and achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). LAD opened its doors in November 2017 due to an agreement with France signed in 2007 (Louvre Abu Dhabi n.d.). The museum was the first in the world to be built through a diplomatic agreement (UNESCO 2023), and, therefore, LAD can be seen as an instrument of soft power and cooperation (De Corte 2019, 4).

The opening of LAD happened at a time when two important issues rose in world politics: the rise of CD and the adoption of the SDGs. Cummings (2009, 1) argued that CD is the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other cultural aspects between states and people in order to help them understand each other in a better way. Mori (2018, 1) argued that CD is a form of soft power that aims to foster international goodwill. The SDG 17 partnerships indicate that cultural institutions can support global collaboration.

Although research about museum diplomacy exists, the whole approach to exploring cultural institutions in enhancing the national goals is still rare (Cerquetti and Montella 2021, 125, 139). Studies examining how museums can be aligned with sustainability remain rare in regard to modern art museums (Fehér et al. 2023, 683). Additionally, studies on the way cultural institutions can function in strategic hedging are still unexamined, particularly in non-Western

countries. On this point, strategic hedging means the way nations mitigate risks by adopting policy alternatives (Kuik 2008, 163). These studies offer invaluable insights but still lack a quantitative measurement to examine the way one cultural institution uses strategic hedging and advancing SDGs. To date, almost no study has quantified a museum's impact through a hedging framework.

Accordingly, this study aimed to fill the gap in research by identifying LAD's measurable contributions to SDG 17 (targets 17.16 and 17.17) and examining LAD's role in the UAE's strategic balancing between global powers. Also, it aimed to calculate the correlations between museum activities and the UAE's soft power score. The study further aimed to develop a theoretical framework to link CD, strategic hedging, and SDG 17.

To achieve these objectives, the current study deals with these research questions:

1. To what extent does LAD contribute to the CD and the soft power of the UAE?
2. How can we explain the activities of a cultural institution from the perspective of strategic hedging in international relations?
3. How does LAD support SDG 17 through international cooperation and educational participation?

By answering the above questions, the study aims to examine the diplomatic role of a global cultural institution. It also suggests the concept of Strategic Cultural Hedging as a framework that links the CD with geopolitical balancing strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Soft Power

According to Nye (2004, x), soft power can be seen as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion." Lock (2010, 32-33) argued that Nye's concept lacks strategic instructions about how states can plan and use their soft power. Mattern (2005, 583) pointed to the line between attraction and coercion. She stated that representational force creates attraction, even via coercive language. Accordingly, strategic communication is a key part of public and cultural diplomacy. Al Breiki (2024, 1, 331) noted that public diplomacy accounts for approximately 46.7% of the UAE's soft power. That means states outside the West can create their own model of CD, and LAD is an example of that.

Strategic Hedging

Strategic hedging points to the way small and mid-size powers can act safely in a multipolar world (Telci and Rakipoglu 2021, 217). This strategic approach helps in avoiding a full alignment with any great power (Bakir and Al-Shamari 2025, 781). Thus, hedging is vital for keeping states stable and safe because it connects both hard and soft power (Geeraerts and Salman 2016, 62).

Kuik (2008, 165) put three major conditions in regard to hedging behavior: the absence of direct threats, the absence of ideological fracture, and the absence of extreme great power competition. The UAE's cultural policy explains the way of using nonmilitary instruments, such as

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cultural initiatives, in order to avoid confrontation with great powers (Salman et al. 2015, 577-578).

Therefore, the concept of "strategic cultural hedging" is introduced as a framework. The concept refers to the use of cultural institutions and diplomatic initiatives as instruments that states can use to maintain a balanced relationship with multiple global partners, while at the same time, states avoid any overdependence on a single power.

While the traditional soft power strategies concentrate on building the country's image and attracting audiences (Nye 2004), the strategic cultural hedging ensures diversity of cultural participation through geopolitical regions. This means cultural institutions such as museums and global educational programs can work as neutral diplomatic platforms to enable cooperation between actors from competing geopolitical areas.

Thus, strategic cultural hedging can expand the current frames of public diplomacy by focusing on the dimensions of risk management in CD since states can use cultural engagement to maintain their diplomatic flexibility in a multipolar world.

Museum and Cultural Diplomacy, and Sustainable Development

Museum diplomacy can be seen as a new form of CD. It directly employs museums in soft power in order to promote international cooperation and understanding (Grincheva 2020, 90; USC Center on Public Diplomacy 2024). In line with this, Papaioannou (2017, 943) argued that CD can be easily accepted all over the world to deal with states even if there are no diplomatic relations. The flexibility that CD offers can help states protect their national interests. In this context, scholars considered LAD as a good example of "glocal" museum diplomacy that aims to achieve local and national goals of the UAE (Grincheva 2020, 89). According to De Corte (2019, 5), culture is a needed part of modern international relations, and so, CD is one of the most essential tools in modern diplomatic strategies.

LAD directly aligns with SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Particularly, Target 17.16 points to the enhancement of the global partnership, and Target 17.17 points to the encouragement of the multi-stakeholder partnerships (The United Nations 2015, 30). These types of cultural initiatives show city diplomacy, which aims to use cities to enhance global governance to achieve SDGs (Ayasreh 2024, 2). In this regard, education is valuable since it helps in informing the world about the SDGs and getting people to work together to reach the SDGs (Abazov 2021, 1). This is shown in practice by LAD's educational programs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework that connects CD, strategic hedging, and sustainable development partnerships. The framework shows how cultural institutions -like LAD- operate as platforms that transform strategic hedging and soft power to global cultural engagement. Through exhibitions, educational programs, and participants, the museum engages key actors from the West and the Global South. This kind of engagement supports SDG 17 and also achieves strategic results such as soft power gains, geopolitical balance, and SDG contributions.

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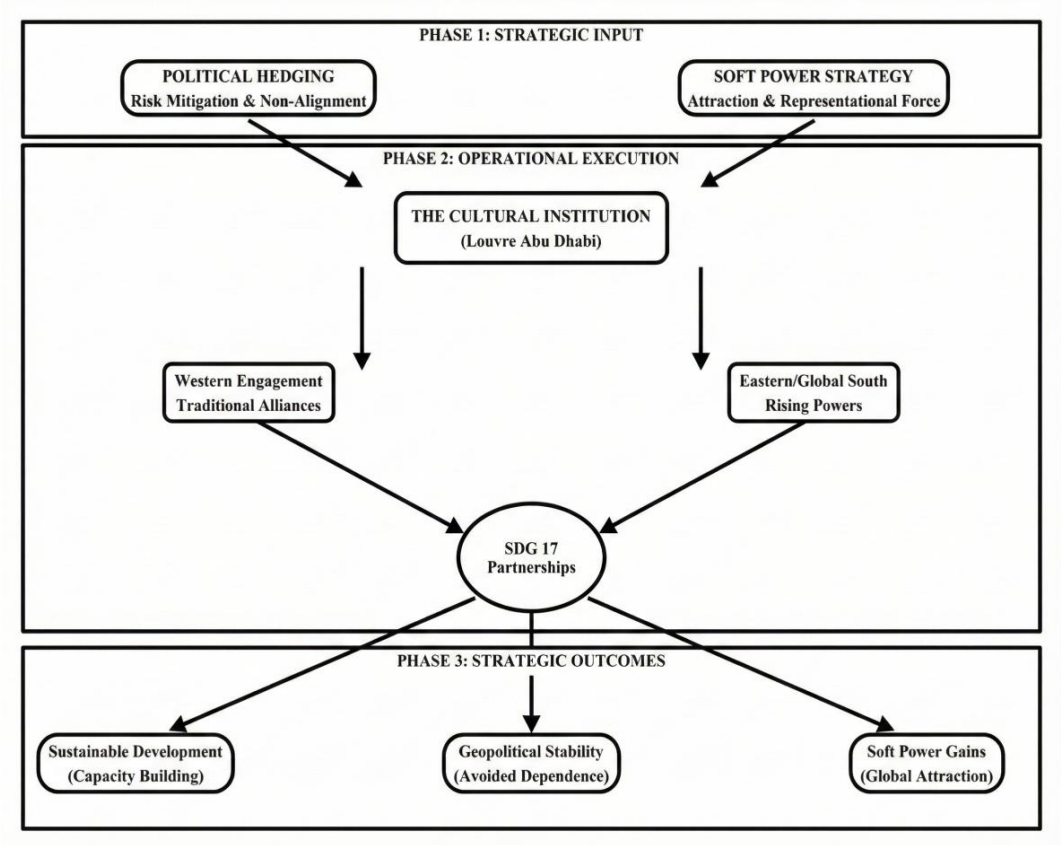


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework for Strategic Cultural Hedging (Source: Author's compilation)

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative methodology (Creswell and Creswell 2018) was used for the analysis of LAD statistics and the exploration of the diplomatic effects. The analysis examined LAD's official reports and official media releases from 2018 to 2025. The start in 2018 reflected LAD having opened by the end of 2017. The research also analyzed GSPI reports from their first publication in 2020 until 2025 in order to track the soft power scores of the UAE. The study also obtained and analyzed data from academic peer-reviewed journals.

Partnership analysis was performed to address SDG 17 progress. A correlation analysis was conducted to study the relationship between the total of yearly LAD's international visitors and the UAE's soft power scores. The strategic hedging analysis explored the geopolitical balance through international visitors and the diversity of partnerships.

All statistical analysis and figures used in the present research were generated using R program (version 4.5.2) and RStudio. The ggplot2 package (Wickham 2016) was also used for the visualization of data.

The analysis of the study has a limited scope due to the timing of when the data became available. LAD opened in 2017, and the GSPI started in 2020. Thus, the study utilized four years of data (n=4: 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024) for the correlation analysis. The analysis did not include the year 2020 because there were pandemic-related closings and, therefore, full data could not

be collected. Additionally, the data collected during the pandemic was irregular. Any data that was unavailable through annual reports was either estimated using similar data (~in the tables) or excluded from the entire study. Due to the limitations of the sample size, the study used the Pearson Correlation Coefficient exclusively for exploratory purposes only.

KeyEquations

Equation 1: Partnership Index

$$\mathrm{PI}_t = \left[\frac{\frac{L_t}{L_{2018}} + \frac{V_t}{V_{2018}} + \frac{E_t}{E_{2018}}}{3} \right] \times 100$$

The Partnership Index measures the global participation of LAD through three indicators: international art loans (L), diplomatic or VIP visits (V), and educational participants (E). The index uses the year 2018 as a baseline (index=100) with subsequent years showing relative changes in comparison with the year 2018. The Index is intended to illustrate and describe trends in partner activity on an aggregate level relative to each other and is not meant to provide a predictive model or be an exact measure of change.

The three dimensions (L, V, E) were given equal weight since there has been no prior empirical evidence developed to favorably treat any of these dimensions above others. Additional research may develop different weighted options. The base year used in the Index is 2018, which is the first complete year of museum operations and therefore represents a consistent methodologically stable point of comparison.

Equation 2: Pearson Correlation

$$r = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n}(x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^{n}(x_i - \bar{x})^2 \sum_{i=1}^{n}(y_i - \bar{y})^2}}$$

x = Total annual international visitor numbers
y = UAE GSPI scores
$\bar{x}$ = Mean of total international visitors
$\bar{y}$ = Mean of soft power scores

Equation 3: Growth Rate

$$\text{Growth Rate } (\%) = \frac{V_{\text{final}} - V_{\text{initial}}}{V_{\text{initial}}} \times 100$$

V_{final} = final value,
V_{initial} = initial value.

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RESULTS

International Visitors and Global Reach

Like any country, COVID-19 caused obstacles for LAD. However, data showed a stable growth in international visitor numbers. For example, the international visitors' percentage of all visitors grew by 42.37% from 2018 to 2024. In 2018, LAD welcomed 1,000,733 visitors (59% were international). In 2024, the number rose to 1,442,803 (84% were international). The yearly average, without the years 2020 and 2021, was 70.6%. This suggested that LAD could advance its global reach (see Table 1, Figure 2).

Table 1: Visitor Statistics and International Reach (Source: Author's compilation)

Year	Total Visitors	International Visitors	International %	Top Visitor Sources	Source Citation
2018	1,000,733	590,432	59%	India (10.2%), France (7.4%), China (6.9%)	(Louvre Abu Dhabi 2018, 12, 31)
2019	975,483	682,838	70%	China (9.4%), France (8.5%), India (7.8%)	(Louvre Abu Dhabi 2019, 14, 17)
2020	348,000	~70,000-105,000	Pre-COVID-19 (1 JAN – 14 MAR): 86%	France (10.5%), Russia (9.5%), Germany (7.2%)	(Louvre Abu Dhabi 2020, 124-128)
2021	270,404	91,937	34%	France (13%), USA(11.7%), Russia(7.8%)	(Louvre Abu Dhabi 2021, 75-76)
2022	622,399	423,231	68%	Europe (37%), Asia (20%), Americas (17%)	(Louvre Abu Dhabi 2022, 75-76)
2023	1,247,076	897,895	72%	Russia (12.2%), China (8.3%), India (8.3%)	(Louvre Abu Dhabi 2023, 13-14)
2024	1,442,803	1,211,954	84%	China (12.2%), Russia (11.8%), India (6.5%) France (6.3%), UK (6.2%)	(Louvre Abu Dhabi 2024a, 16-17) (Louvre Abu Dhabi 2024b)

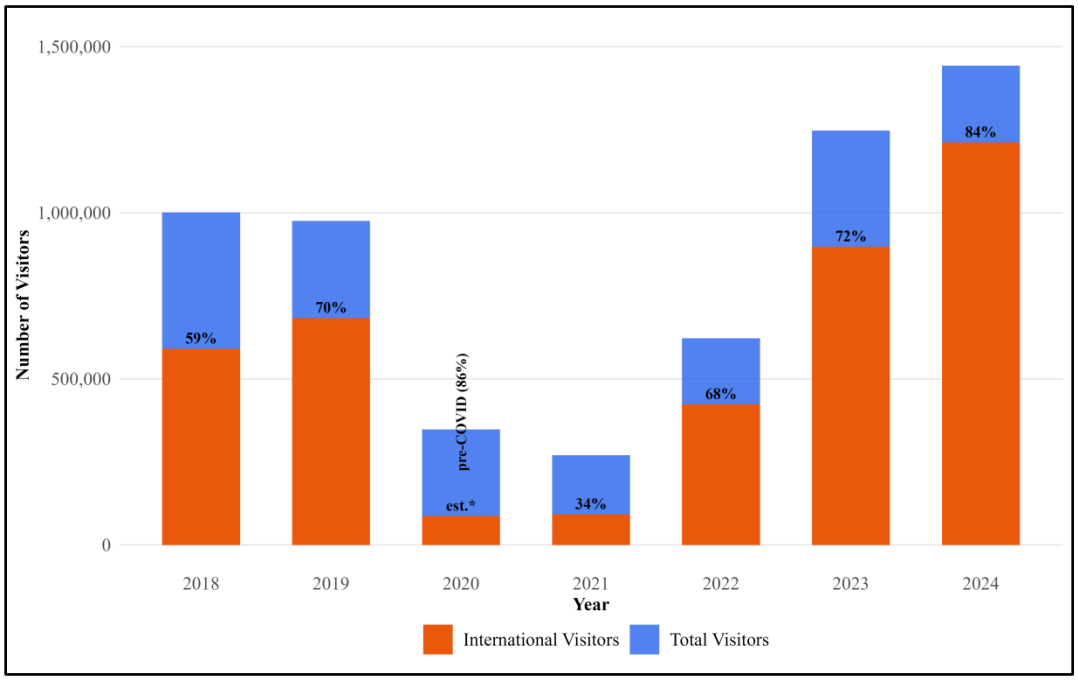


Figure 2: Visitor Statistics and International Reach (2018-2024) (Source: Author's analysis)

PARTNERSHIPS WITH MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS AND SDG 17

The museum had a wide involvement in several interactions with different groups connected to SDG 17 (targets 17.16 and 17.17). In 2019, the number of international art loans was the highest (745). The total number of international art loans since the opening of the museum ranged from 240 to 745 per year.

Diplomatic and VIP visits increased from 173 in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic to 500 in 2023. Further, there was a large increase in the number of participants in educational programs, from 24,000 in 2018 to 64,223 in 2024, representing a 168% increase. The data showed that the museum could build capacity and share more knowledge (see Table 2, Figure 3).

Table 2: Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships and SDG 17 Indicators (Source: Author's compilation)

Year	International Art Loans	Diplomatic/VIP Visits	Educational Participants	Partnership Index*
2018	403	400	24,000	100
2019	745	507	45,000	166
2020	408	173	24,379	82
2021	650	Reduced (COVID-19)	11,036	N/A
2022	Data not published	Data not published	29,683	N/A
2023	240	500	45,346	124.5
2024	240	General engagements**	64,223	N/A

**2018 baseline = 100*
***General engagements are not comparable to previous years.*

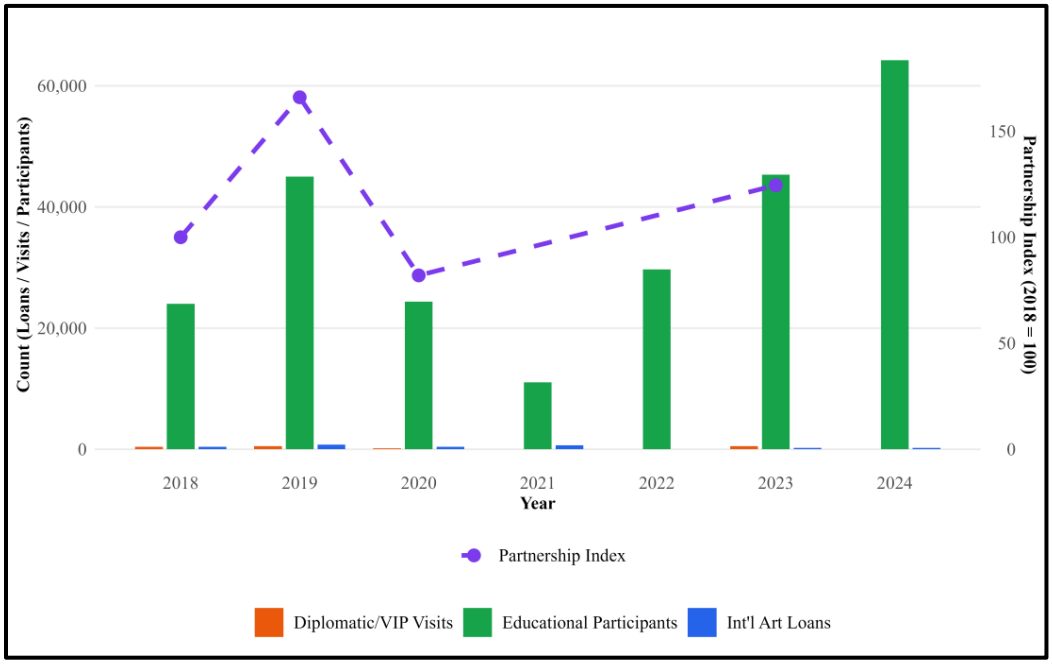


Figure 3: Multi-Stakeholder Partnership and SDG 17 Indicators (Source: Author's analysis)

Soft Power and Global Rankings

The GSPI scores continued on an upward trend, which aligns with the recovery of the UAE and its growth after the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in 2020, the rank of the UAE was 18th in the world with a score of 45.9/100. By 2023, the UAE had improved to 10th place globally and maintained that position through to 2025 when the UAE scored 60.4/100. This implies that the total score improved by 31.6%, and the ranking increased by eight places over the five years (see Table 3, Figure 4).

A strong positive correlation was shown by the statistical analysis regarding the UAE's soft power score and LAD's total yearly international visitor numbers. The Pearson correlation coefficient was r = 0.990 (p = 0.010, excluding the COVID-19 period in 2020). This indicates that there is a strong statistical association between the two variables in the available data. However, the results do not indicate that there is a causal relation because the national soft power ranking is impacted by several factors, such as economic performance, tourism and cultural policies. Spearman's ρ correlation suggested a relation (ρ = 1.000, p < 0.083), which is consistent with the Pearson results. However, this result should be interpreted carefully because of the small size of the sample (n=4).

However, more research may be needed to determine how other cultural institutions or events can affect the soft power score (e.g., Expo 2020 Dubai). Still, the analysis of the present study could suggest that LAD's global engagement is a sign of the UAE's overall success in CD.

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Table 3: UAE GSPI Performance(Source: Author's compilation)

Year	Score (/100)	Global Rank	Year-on-Year Change	Cumulative Improvement	Source Citation
2020	45.9	18th	Baseline	Baseline	(Brand Finance 2021, 112)
2021	48.4	17th	+2.5 (5.4%)	+2.5 (5.4%)	(Brand Finance 2021, 88)
2022	52.0	15th	+3.6 (7.4%)	+6.1 (13.3%)	(Brand Finance 2022, 31)
2023	55.2	10th	+3.2 (6.2%)	+9.3 (20.3%)	(Brand Finance 2023, 7)
2024	59.7	10th	+4.5 (8.2%)	+13.8 (30.1%)	(Brand Finance2024, 6)
2025	60.4	10th	+0.7 (1.2%)	+14.5 (31.6%)	(Brand Finance 2025, 112)

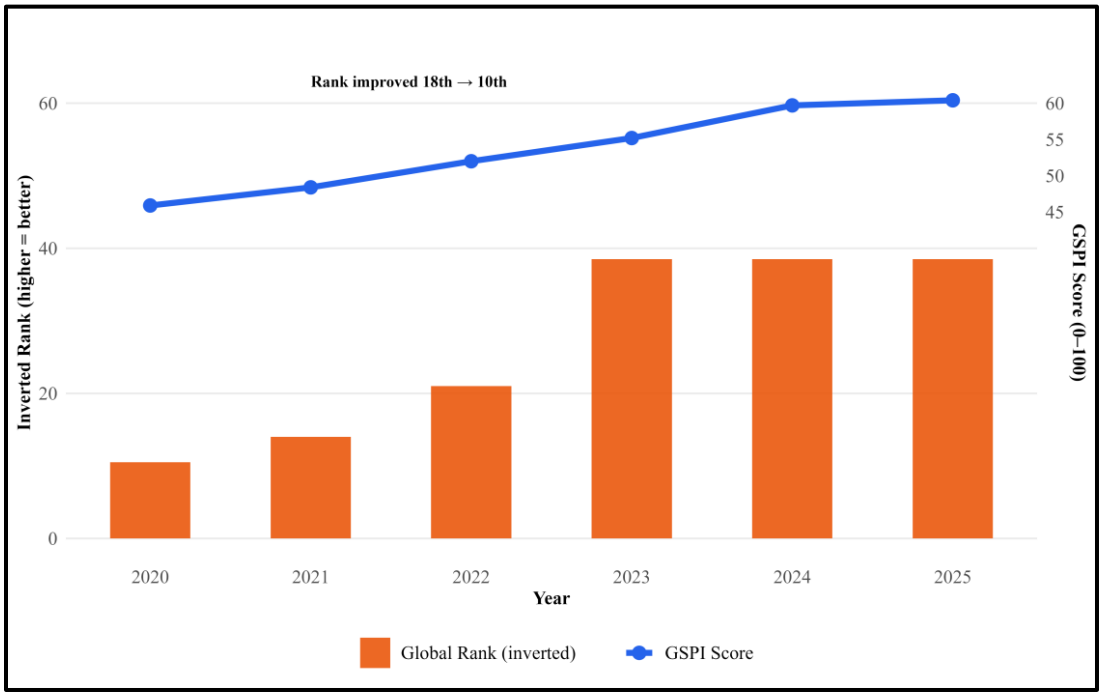


Figure 4: UAE Global Soft Power Rank (2020-2025) (Source: Author's analysis)

Strategic Hedging and Cultural Balance

Analysis of diversity (see Table 1 and Table 4) showed that the museum could effectively balance the UAE's relationship with different global powers. LAD could keep a balanced visitor combination from the East and West regions. The most prominent regions for international visitors included: Western countries (e.g., USA, UK, France, Germany); Eastern Countries (e.g., Russia); and Asian Countries (e.g., China, India). In 2024, the international visitors by country were as follows; 12.2% of visitors to LAD originated from China; 11.8% from Russia; 6.5% from India; 6.3% from France; 6.2% from the UK; 4.6% from the US; and 4.2% from Germany. This diversification connects with the strategic hedging theory and also suggests that the museum can help in maintaining balanced relationships with all different powers.

Table 4: Strategic Hedging Analysis Through Visitor Origin (2024) (Source: Analysis based on LAD 2024 data)

Geopolitical Domain	Key Regions	2024 Share (%)	Strategic Significance
Western Alliance	France, UK, USA, Germany, Italy, Spain, Australia	27.5%	Traditional diplomatic and cultural relations
Asian Powers	China, India, the Philippines, South Korea	24.9%	Growing economy and cultural relations
Strategic Partners from the East	Russia, Kazakhstan, Armenia	15.6%	Energy cooperation and regional stability
Global South/Others	Brazil, and Others	32%	South-South cooperation and diversification

DISCUSSION

The results of the above analysis suggested that public diplomacy can drive soft power. These results were in line with Al Breiki's (2024, 1, 331) findings. The connection between LAD's global reach and the increase in soft power rank was consistent. In this case, it can be argued that cultural museums served as a strategic resource as well as a symbolic investment that helped in enhancing the reputation of the UAE all over the world. Recuero Virto et al. (2024, 2) provide further support. They show that LAD can be considered as a successful brand extension for the Louvre Paris, which shapes visitors' attitudes and intentions. This confirms the strategic value of connecting new cultural institutions with old prestigious ones.

The findings also suggested that the hedging strategy can be highly effective in CD. The analysis of LAD reports suggested that it attracted many international audiences from different power regions. For example, the international visitors consisted of people from China and Russia, while at the same time, the museum maintained the country's traditional relations with Western countries. This is in contrast with Lock's (2010, 32, 33) criticism of soft power, which lacks strategic directions for states. On the other hand, it is in line with De Corte (2019, 9), who stated that soft power is a tool in international relations.

However, we should examine these findings through a critical lens, particularly regarding the actual institutional role for LAD. For instance, Radeljić (2024, 235) argues that LAD serves the state's interest, which may limit the museum's participation in the broader museums' mission, which is to address political, economic, and social issues. For instance, it has been said that the primary visitors to the museum were people with high income and middle-class instead of serving all sectors of society (Radeljić 2024, 241). It is also argued that Louvre branding will be removed in 2037, which raises questions about the continuity of LAD as a cultural institution (Radeljić 2024, 238–239). These considerations raise a scholarly question about whether institutions that serve the geopolitical state's interests can, at the same time, fulfill the broader visions and missions of museums? The quantitative approach used in this study cannot answer this question, and this points to the need for qualitative research regarding actual programs.

As stated earlier in the present study, modern museum diplomacy differs from traditional approaches. Cummings (2009, 1) described traditional diplomacy as a one-way approach, whereas LAD engaged in multiple dimensions such as art loans, educational programs, and diplomatic visits. This is, hence, in line with Grincheva's (2020, 89) term of "glocal" diplomacy,

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where a cultural institution such as LAD can help in achieving local, national, and global goals all at once.

Regarding LAD's contribution to achieving SDG 17, the museum showed indicators consistent with measurable contributions. To achieve SDG 17's targets 17.16 and 17.17, LAD had a 168% growth rate in educational participants and could welcome, in non-pandemic years, with available data, 400 to 507 diplomatic and VIP visits annually and could also facilitate hundreds of art loans.

By adopting the theoretical framework, the findings could also address the concern raised by Cerquetti and Montella (2021, 125, 139) that studies often lack thorough methods for the study of cultural institutions.

The UAE's approach—previously termed in this study as "strategic cultural hedging"—can offer beneficial lessons for other nations. As Gołębiowski (2020, 170) argued, the government could effectively use tools like CD to achieve foreign policy goals, and that helped the UAE to rise in soft power ranking from 18th place to 10th place.

The current focus on statistical indicators may limit the consideration of a qualitative method in regard to cultural impact, such as artistic innovation. Therefore, future studies may need to investigate other museums in other countries with a qualitative approach.

It should be noted that the study faced some limitations; first, the statistical analysis depended on a small data size, which limits the strength of the results. Second, the soft power rankings can be influenced by several national factors that go beyond the museum activities, such as the economic performance, tourism policies, and some big exhibitions, such as Expo 2020 Dubai. Third, not all data was published every year. Future research can expand the data range. Fourth, the GSPI can be considered as a commercially produced ranking tool which may not completely cover the complex qualitative dimensions of cultural influences, including the issue of "interests." Radeljić (2024, 241) notes that LAD attracted wealthy and middle-class people but not all segments of society, and this cannot be found in the soft power ranking. Fifth, the governance context that LAD operates in may include some constraints that the current quantitative design cannot consider. Also, Radeljić (2024, 247) notes that LAD runs as a temporary franchise because the Louvre branding will be removed in 2037, raising concerns about the long-term continuity of the museum.

CONCLUSION

The study offered empirical indicators that LAD successfully accomplished strategic cultural hedging while making major contributions to SDG 17 (Targets 17.16, 17.17). In 2024, international visitors reached 84% of all visitors. The average proportion of international visitors was 70.6% in non-pandemic years (2018 to 2019 and 2022 to 2024).

LAD can be considered as a global institution that engages with people from all around the world. Further, the museum welcomed approximately 400 to 507 diplomatic and VIP visits in non-pandemic years, with available data, as well as hosting many educational programs that are in line with SDG 17 targets 17.16 and 17.17. The annual international visitor numbers of the museum and the UAE's soft power scores were correlated ($r = 0.990$, $p = 0.010$), with $r^2 = 0.980$ indicating a high degree of variation shared between the two measures. The multiple correlation analysis, including a perfect rank correlation, Spearman's $\rho=1.000$, indicated a strong association

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between the museum's global reach and the UAE's soft power growth. The diversification of visitors indicated hedging. However, more research is needed to determine whether this occurred due to a planned policy or if visitor diversification is a clear sign of the strategic policy.

Furthermore, visitor data is consistent with the application of soft power theory and can be applied to cultural institutions. The analysis in this research also suggested that museums can perform hedging outside the traditional diplomatic channels while advancing SDGs. The Partnership Index and global engagement metrics tracked the progress toward national and global goals. Krzymowski (2020, 5) argued that the country's brand is at the heart of our understanding of soft power. LAD was an important component of soft power and played an important role in building a brand. Recuero Virto et al. (2024, 8) give empirical support for this. Their study of 934 participants found that LAD's positive brand extension encouraged the intention of visiting the museum. This suggests that LAD is not only a diplomatic tool, but also a cultural brand that can be measured.

In the new multipolar world, cultural institutions such as LAD can effectively help states to maintain balanced relations, especially since cultural diplomacy has become a central issue for statecraft (De Corte 2019, 5). In today's world, museums are vital for national interests.

The findings bring wide implications for global cultural policies and museum studies. The concept of strategic cultural hedging introduces a theoretical framework to understand how non-Western countries can use cultural museums in multipolar diplomacy. However, as Radeljić (2024) cautions, institutions that operate within a tension between serving the state's interest and fulfilling the broader global vision highlight the need to balance between the role of the museum as a geopolitical tool and as a cultural tool.

At the same time, the correlation between the number of visitors and GSPI relied on a small sample size and therefore cannot be considered causal. Additionally, the commercial nature of GSPI reflects specific assumptions about the nature of soft power and therefore may not be able to cover issues like social inclusion.

Future research should address these study gaps through several avenues: obtaining more years of data about the museum; comparative studies between museums in different countries; and qualitative studies regarding actual programming. Having interviews with museum managers, staff and employees and also with diplomatic visitors, would give insights into whether the diversification of visitors reflects an intentional hedging strategy or just a natural result. Comparative studies will also allow researchers to test whether the strategic cultural hedging framework can be used in the future beyond this single case study of the UAE.

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CONTRIBUTOR

The author contributed solely to the intellectual discourse that forms the foundation of this article, as well as its writing and editing, and assumes full responsibility for its content and interpretation.

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