

## Article

# Sustainable Urban Branding: Insights from Rasnov's Case Study

Vasile Gherheș <sup>1,\*</sup> , Claudiu Coman <sup>2</sup> , Anna Bucs <sup>3</sup> , Nicu Gavriluță <sup>4</sup>, Marian Dalban <sup>5</sup>  and Mihail Anton <sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Communication and Foreign Languages, Politehnica University of Timisoara, 300006 Timisoara, Romania

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Sociology and Communication, Transilvania University of Brasov, 500036 Brașov, Romania; claudiu.coman@unitbv.ro

<sup>3</sup> Doctoral School of Social Sciences and Humanities, The University of Craiova, 200585 Craiova, Romania; anna.bucs@gmail.com

<sup>4</sup> Department of Sociology and Social Work, "Al. I. Cuza" University of Iași, 700506 Iasi, Romania; nicolas@uaic.ro

<sup>5</sup> Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, "Al. I. Cuza" University of Iași, 700506 Iasi, Romania; marian.dalban@gmail.com

<sup>6</sup> Department of Sociology, "Carol I" National Defense University, 050662 Bucharest, Romania; mihailanton@yahoo.com

\* Correspondence: vasile.gherhes@upt.ro

**Abstract:** This study investigates the determinants of urban brand perception, with a focus on the city of Rasnov. The research aims to identify elements of local identity, assess residents' satisfaction with urban infrastructure and quality of life, and explore attitudes towards sustainable tourism and the city's public image. Methodologically, the study employs a quantitative approach through an online survey administered to active social media users, particularly members of local Facebook groups. A total of 627 respondents were selected using probabilistic cluster sampling. The findings reveal a significant correlation between emotional attachment to the city and favorable perceptions of urban life, underpinned by factors such as personal memories, a sense of belonging, and perceived urban tranquility. While residents report moderate satisfaction with urban infrastructure, notable concerns persist regarding the maintenance of public spaces, availability of employment opportunities, and the efficiency of public transportation. Furthermore, the level of awareness concerning the city's branding strategy is relatively low. Key assets identified as essential for urban promotion include the Râșnoavei Keys, the Valea Cărbunării Sports Complex, local mountain trails, and the Rasnov Citadel. Respondents advocate for enhanced public communication regarding the urban branding strategy and emphasize the importance of community engagement in shaping and promoting the city's image in alignment with residents' aspirations.

**Keywords:** urban branding; sustainable tourism; perceptions; Rasnov; urban satisfaction; promotion strategy; local identity; infrastructure



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

Discussions about urban development have exponentially grown around the concepts of sustainable management and city branding [1]. The studies we consulted for this study highlight the need to introduce sustainability into the city branding strategy and agenda [2]. Marketing management based on collaborative efforts with stakeholders influences the creation of sustainable city branding by aligning with the characteristics of a specific region [3]. Understanding the locals' and visitors' perspectives on tourism and

sustainable city development is important to making the most appropriate decisions about branding strategy [4].

Moreover, ecotourism and the development of sustainable consciousness are essential in promoting sustainable tourism practices [5]. Some suggest that the impact of city events, such as festivals, on sustainable tourism is emerging as an area of interest [6]. Sustainable tourism has recently gained popularity, originating from discussions in reports such as *Our Common Future* written by Brundtland [7].

Fernandez et al. [8] conducted a bibliometric review of sustainable tourism's effects on the city brand. They argue that sustainable and green city branding, including promoting sustainable tourism, can positively impact a city's image, competitiveness, and attractiveness to residents, businesses, and visitors. However, it also cautions that such branding efforts must be grounded in genuine sustainable development practices to be effective and credible.

Verances et al. [1] support this argument by stating that while the destinations have made progress in integrating sustainability into their tourism and branding efforts, substantial hurdles remain in striking the right balance between economic development and safeguarding cultural authenticity.

Cultural tourism in the context of place branding can also contribute to sustainable tourism by engaging with local stakeholders and communities. The integration of cultural assets and environmental awareness can improve visitor satisfaction [9]. Moreira et al. [10] support this argument by conducting an exploratory review of sustainable branding. They analyzed 32 articles on this topic and found that the involvement of locals in the process of creating a city image is essential to achieving sustainable development goals that respond to the challenges and needs of the local population.

The involvement of local communities is important because it ensures that the destination's identity aligns with both local and visitor values. This approach helps create a trustworthy and attractive city image that supports sustainable development [11,12].

## 1.2. Literature Review

Aidoo et al. [9] suggest that even though environmental responsibility has proven to be an important dimension of sustainable tourism, "its moderating role in the relationship between cultural tourism and sustainable development has not been thoroughly investigated p.1967" [9]. There has been a constant lack of connecting it to the wider sustainable development theory [13]. The World Tourism Organization defined sustainable tourism as a form of tourism that manages all resources to meet economic, social, and esthetic needs. At the same time, it maintains cultural integrity and ecological processes [14].

The aim and objective of sustainable tourism are to create a symmetry between environmental protection and cultural integrity by advocating for social justice and cultivating economic prosperity. This highlights the need to align the demands of the host population, thus enhancing standards of living in the long term [15,16]. Consequently, sustainable tourism can drive economic growth while promoting a specific place's cultural heritage and social unity [17]. After COVID-19, the field of tourism has been altered and demands a more eco-friendly and socially responsible approach to tourism [18].

The Brundtland Report first defined the significance of collaborations and partnerships with stakeholders, such as locals, in sustainable development goals in 1987 [19]. In addition, local communities' implications and involvement can improve their quality of life and advocate for sustainable tourism strategies [20].

Some argue that such strategies should be based on community-focused development, including support for local businesses and encouraging the involvement of locals in the decision-making process. This approach not only helps the economy but also secures

social equity [21]. Kusumastuti et al. [22] state that while smart tourism development focuses on technology adoption, balancing this with local wisdom and inclusivity is crucial. Post-smart tourism concepts emphasize the importance of integrating local values and resources into tourism development to ensure sustainability [23].

Butler [24] argues that tourism development must be environmentally and culturally sympathetic to host areas. This requires responsible planning and management, as well as coordination of policies and proactive planning to maintain a symbiotic relationship between tourism and sustainable development. Studies we consulted from the existing literature have also underscored the significance of the place regarding the concept of destination branding in the domain of tourism [25].

In the context of sustainable tourism, place branding means developing a destination image that cultivates sustainability initiatives involving economic, social, and environmental aspects. This approach aims to attract tourists who promote responsible travel values, maintain competitiveness, and ensure visitors have a great experience. Community engagement and the use of experiential events are effective strategies for transmitting place branding values and promoting sustainable tourism. Sustainable place branding is necessary for improving a destination's image, trust, value, and loyalty among visitors. It can potentially create unique tourism experiences that align with visitors' self-perceptions and expectations, leading to positive outcomes such as increased intention to revisit and positive word of mouth [26].

It is important to incorporate sustainability into place branding strategies. This approach is becoming increasingly recognized as a necessity for combating global challenges regarding tourism while maintaining the viability of destinations [27]. The integration of cultural assets and environmental awareness can improve visitor satisfaction [9]. In addition, researchers also argue that specific destinations face challenges regarding sustainable branding, such as environmental concerns, technological advancements, and geopolitical uncertainties. In contrast, they have identified opportunities like promoting responsible tourism, leveraging digital landscapes, and emphasizing wellness and cultural events [27].

Casakin et al. [28] argue that place attachment represents individuals' emotional bonds with a place or location. Place identity refers to the meanings or characteristics people associate with these locations. Place identity is a key factor in city branding because it can help form a singular and authentic image, distinguishing one city from another. Locals can cultivate a feeling of pride through the involvement of culture in the city branding strategy [29,30]. Furthermore, residents' attachment can help create protective attitudes regarding the challenges a city faces. This underscores the importance of brand strategies that reinforce and promote local identities [31]. A strong sense of belonging among residents mediates the relationship between satisfaction and a positive brand image, highlighting the importance of inclusive branding strategies [32]. Moreover, residents' active participation in urban branding initiatives strengthens their emotional ties with the city, positively impacting the brand's perception [33].

Some studies support our previous arguments on the benefits of including local communities in the sustainable development strategy [34,35], the importance of event management [6], stakeholder engagement [36], and the promotion of environmental well-being [4]. Some argue that sustainability-oriented decisions impact a destination's tourism strategy [37]. Gonulluoglu and Selcuk [38] believe that city branding has emerged as a comprehensive framework that considers various factors that influence visitors and residents. Results show that city branding is strong and emergent, mainly in marketing and place branding. Al-Hinkawi and Zedan [39] focused on the question regarding the component of city branding and the best sustainable city branding strategies for branding a contemporary city.

They stated that a city must focus on enhancing and developing the brand and all its elements based on history and culture. Ruiz et al. [40] reinforce this point in a study conducted in Malaga, Spain. They found that the Malaga city brand is built around the concept of culture. Furthermore, Jojic [41] showcased that sustainable tourism and branding hold symbolic value since they provide cultural meanings and images. Principles of sustainable tourism should be aligned with certain conventions, new strategy development, engaging different stakeholders, and understanding World Heritage.

In addition, quality of life is a significant factor in determining a city's competitiveness. It influences urban growth and development, often being used as a tool for place promotion and city marketing [42,43]. Creating a green infrastructure and sustainable initiatives can improve sustainable tourism and the quality of life for locals [44]. Research has shown that infrastructure elements, like quality, including urban design and services, play a key role in defining the city's identity and attractiveness to residents and tourists [45].

Regarding new trends and technologies, Ahn and Bessiere [46] highlight how tourism was affected by COVID-19. This nurtured the development of a few emerging topics, such as brand equity, smart tourism and technology, big data and social network platforms, urban and rural tourism, and stakeholders such as residents, tourists, and service providers. In the authors' acknowledgment, a key element for sustainable destination management is collaboration with stakeholders.

Verances et al. [1] explore the intersection of sustainable tourism and city branding, focusing on exactly how destinations can balance economic growth with the preservation of authenticity. Key recommendations from the authors include enhancing policy frameworks, increasing stakeholder collaboration for a better and more productive enhancement of sustainable tourism and city branding, and fostering greater awareness among tourists about sustainable practices for a better awareness and understanding of this key concept.

On a national level, Romania's sustainable tourism is gaining popularity, intending to balance economic development and cultural promotion. Mateoc-Sîrb et al. [47] state that Maramureş is an area where sustainable tourism can prosper. They also found that this region supports various forms of tourism that contribute to job creation and sustainable development. Gogonea [48] found that in the "Central development region, which includes counties from the heart of Transylvania (Alba, Brasov, Covasna, Harghita, Mures, and Sibiu), tourist flows are significantly higher than in the other development regions" [48]. Scutariu, Năstase and Popescu [49] talk about Romania's North-East region and compare it with similar parts in Poland and Slovakia. They advocate for implementing sustainable initiatives that maintain this area's singularity. Tourism specialists in the Carpathian Mountains are engaging in more and more sustainable practices [50]. These vary according to the comfort level of accommodations. The authors argue that "at the government level, the application of specific incentives could help increase the number of sustainable tourism companies". On an urban level, cities such as Bucharest and Craiova are exploring sustainable tourism and are now integrating it into the broader urban development strategy [51,52]. The authors of 51 adopted a mixed-methods approach in their study. They conducted interviews with experts and developed a survey based on consulting relevant literature to identify the appropriate indicators with the aim of facilitating a sustainable tourism model for Craiova (n = 289). Their model can be applied to similar middle-sized cities in Romania. They found that the city focuses on innovation tourism to build resilience and satisfaction among the local population [51].

They adopted a quantitative approach and created a survey based on a five-level Likert scale to identify the local's opinions on sustainable tourism in Bucharest (n = 236). They found that locals care about this topic and want the city's cultural heritage to be promoted more through different communication strategies.

Researchers are more interested in discovering the perspectives of the locals, as they are considered important stakeholders in city brand management. Savants are adopting different approaches to determine their perceptions of the brand image.

A study [53] conducted in Bratislava Slovakia aimed to determine how cognitive city brand image impacts emotional attachment to the city and how the residential status moderates this relationship [53]. They created a questionnaire based on previous research and found that the influence of affective city brand image on emotional attachment is stronger for residents than visitors.

Furthermore, Ahn et al. [54] examined city residents' perceptions of city brands and their influence on their citizenship behavior, focusing on the case of Busan, Republic of Korea. They had a sample of 501 respondents and built their questionnaire based on previous studies.

### *1.3. Research Purpose and Innovation*

Based on the studies we consulted, we argue that there is limited research on city branding in the emerging tourism market of Central and Eastern Europe. Notably, previous studies have focused extensively on the antecedents of place attachment and its downstream effects on outcomes like place satisfaction and place loyalty. However, the relationship between place branding and place attachment remains underexplored in the existing literature. This paper aims to contribute to filling this gap in the research landscape. It determines how residents perceive the city brand by analyzing elements such as place attachment, quality of life, and local infrastructure.

Given the national trends and the growing academic interest in sustainable tourism, particularly in the central regions of Romania, it becomes relevant to explore how such dynamics are perceived and internalized at the local level. While several Romanian cities have integrated sustainability and branding into their urban development agendas, there is still limited empirical research investigating how residents relate to these transformations. In this context, the city of Rasnov emerges as an appropriate case study for examining the interaction between urban branding, quality of life, and community engagement. The following research addresses this gap by focusing on residents' perceptions of the city brand and their emotional, functional, and cognitive associations with the urban environment.

The present research aims to identify the factors that influence the perception of the city brand. The objectives involve describing how the residents of Rasnov represent their city and assessing their degree of satisfaction with the different components of the urban brand. We will adopt three research directions: local identity and level of attachment, quality of life and infrastructure (as part of the city brand architecture), and the link between the city brand and tourism. Starting from these general goals, the present work proposes a series of specific objectives that clarify our scientific approach:

- O<sub>1</sub>. Identifying the residents' perceptions of the identity and values of the city of Rasnov.
- O<sub>2</sub>. An assessment of satisfaction with urban infrastructure and quality of life.
- O<sub>3</sub>. An analysis of the level of knowledge of the city's promotion strategy.
- O<sub>4</sub>. Determining the elements considered essential for the urban brand.

Regarding the research questions, we wanted to know whether the residents of Rasnov develop a strong emotional attachment to the local community. Various scientific research has shown that residents' connection to their cultural heritage reinforces the city's unique identity by generating a sense of pride and attachment [55].

The quality of life in the city significantly influences residents' perception of the city's brand. Higher satisfaction correlates with a more favorable city image [33]. Thus, one of our research questions aimed to identify the main elements of residents' satisfaction/dissatisfaction regarding quality of life and infrastructure.

Furthermore, we were interested in the level of awareness of respondents regarding the city's promotion strategy. In addition, we aimed to identify the most relevant local resources for the image of Rasnov. Some studies affirm that effective branding strategies highlighting local attractions can encourage tourism and strengthen the city's brand [56]. Moreover, there is a complex interplay between internal and external factors regarding city branding efforts. Internal factors mean the satisfaction and engagement of crucial residents, and external factors mean external perceptions, such as those of tourists, can significantly influence the overall image of the city brand.

The selection of Rasnov as a case study was based on its distinctive urban profile, combining a strong historical identity with a growing emphasis on tourism development. As a mid-sized city (approximately 22 thousand residents) in central Romania, Rasnov represents a compelling example of a locality navigating the intersection between community life and external branding efforts. The city holds cultural and architectural heritage assets—such as the Rasnov Fortress, mountain landscapes, and local traditions—that have been increasingly promoted to attract visitors. However, it also retains a stable residential population that plays a crucial role in shaping the lived experience of the city. This dual character makes Rasnov particularly suitable for exploring the relationship between local identity, urban satisfaction, and branding awareness. Moreover, the city's active digital civic space—reflected in the high engagement in Facebook community groups—facilitated access to a wide demographic, enabling the research to capture diverse perspectives from the population's economically active and culturally invested segments. From a methodological perspective, Rasnov offers both accessibility and analytical relevance, serving as a model for other small or medium-sized cities in Eastern Europe that seek to develop sustainable tourism and inclusive branding strategies while maintaining the quality of urban life.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Demographic Data

The target population of this study consisted of residents of the city of Râșnov, with a population of 15,920 inhabitants and with approximately 22,400 inhabitants at the time of data collection, who are active on Facebook and members of local groups such as 'RÂȘNOVUL DESCHIS', 'Râșnovul Civic', 'Râșnoveni pentru Râșnoveni', among others. We gathered a total of 627 valid responses, representing a convenience sample of Facebook users. This selection was based on the premise that social media platforms offer a rapid method of accessing the community. However, we acknowledge the possibility of bias, as individuals who do not use Facebook or are less active online may be underrepresented, which could affect the generalizability of our findings.

The statistical analysis of the demographic variables R1–R4 (length of residence in the city of Rasnov, time spent in the city, age, and occupation) provides a detailed picture of the respondents' profile and their relationship with the city of Rasnov. The data indicate that 45.1% of the respondents have lived in Rasnov since birth, while 22.3% have been living in the city for 1–10 years. Only 5.6% of respondents have moved recently (less than a year ago), suggesting a low level of recent migration and a relatively stable community (Table 1). The mean for this variable is 2.41, and the standard deviation is 1.443, which shows a moderate trend towards the high age of habitation but with a relatively dispersed distribution.

Regarding the time spent in the city, 61% of respondents said they spend a lot of time in Rasnov, which reflects an active presence in the urban space. The average of the answers is 2.31, with a standard deviation of 1.155, which indicates a concentration of answers towards the higher options ("a lot" and "a lot more") and high involvement of the

population in the life of the community. The analysis of the age category shows that the most numerous segment is that of people aged 31–40 years (30.5%), followed by those aged 41–50 years (23.8%) (Table 2). Only 1% of respondents are under 18 years old, and 8.8% are between 18 and 24 years old, which signals a possible underrepresentation of young people. The mean for this variable is 4.41, with a standard deviation of 1.390, which reflects the dominance of the sample by the active adult population (25–60 years old—81.7%), which is essential for interpreting perceptions of the urban brand and local development.

**Table 1.** R1—Living time in Rasnov.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Since I was born	283	45.1	45.1	45.1
	For less than 1 year	35	5.6	5.6	50.7
	For 1–10 years	140	22.3	22.3	73.0
	For 10–20 years	107	17.1	17.1	90.1
	For over 20 years	62	9.9	9.9	100.0
	Total	627	100.0	100.0	

Source: Own processing.

**Table 2.** R3—Age category.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Under 18	6	1.0	1.0	1.0
	18–24	55	8.8	8.8	9.7
	25–30	89	14.2	14.2	23.9
	31–40	191	30.5	30.5	54.4
	41–50	149	23.8	23.8	78.1
	51–60	86	13.7	13.7	91.9
	Over 60	51	8.1	8.1	100.0
	Total	627	100.0	100.0	

Source: Own processing.

As for employment, most respondents are employees (69.5%), and 15.6% declare themselves unemployed. Pupils and students represent only 14.9% of the sample, which indicates that the mature population is predominant in the research. The mean for this variable is 2.98, and the standard deviation is low (0.618), which indicates a concentrated distribution around code 3—employees. This validates that the research reflects the perceptions of an economically active population, which provides a solid basis for the analysis of civic satisfaction and engagement.

Based on these data, a series of hypotheses were defined:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** *People who were born or have lived for a long time in Rasnov will show a higher degree of emotional attachment to the city (feeling of “home”, appreciation of tranquility, and positive childhood memories).*

**H<sub>2</sub>:** *A quality infrastructure and well-maintained urban services will be positively correlated with the general satisfaction with the city.*

**H<sub>3</sub>:** *Most residents only partially—or even few residents—know about the city’s promotion strategy, and this low level of information can influence the perception and support of tourism development.*

Taking into account the motivation behind analyzing this city, Râșnov represents a relevant case study for sustainable urban branding due to its unique combination of cultural–historical heritage, natural resources, and recent development strategies. Nevertheless, it is a medium-sized town located in Brașov County, near major tourist destinations. This

positioning places it within a competitive tourist ecosystem and provides the potential for developing as a complementary destination alongside nearby attractions. Furthermore, being situated in an area with well-established tourist cities (Braşov, Poiana Braşov, and Bran), Râşnov faces the challenge of building a competitive identity. Examining this struggle for differentiation can offer valuable insights into how medium-sized cities can carve out a distinct place in the tourism market, emphasizing sustainability and local specificity. Based on these ideas, they form the motivation for analyzing how local stakeholders engaged in developing the urban brand and promoting sustainability, which may highlight key success factors or challenges encountered in implementing a participatory branding strategy.

## 2.2. The Research Instrument

The questionnaire was structured into four thematic sections: perception of the city, satisfaction with urban life, promotion, and external image of the city, respectively, and socio-demographic data. Most of the items were formulated as statements rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The instrument was tested on a sample of 10 people to validate the clarity of the items. To meet the research objectives and test the hypotheses, the data were analyzed by SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 25. The significance level used for the statistical tests was  $p < 0.05$ , taking into account the variables below (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Structure of variables—directions of analysis.

Perception of the City—Local Identity and Attachment	Satisfaction with City Life—Quality of Life and Infrastructure	Promotion of the City and External Image—Brand and Tourism	Socio-Demographic Profile
Q1—Cognitive and affective associations	Q8—Local zones for tourists	Q17—Awareness of the local promotion strategy	R1—Living time in Rasnov
Q3—Personal memories	Q9—Entertainment for locals	Q17_1_1—Elements to promote—The Fortress	R2—Time spent in Rasnov
Q4—Discovering passions	Q10—I have got everything I need	Q17_1_2—Elements to promote—Valea Cărbunarii Sports Complex	R3—Age category
Q5—The feeling of home	Q11—Starting a family	Q17_1_3—Elements to promote—Râsnoavei Gorges	R4—Occupation
Q6—Quiet city	Q12—Cultural city	Q17_1_4—Elements to promote—Promenade	
Q7—Childhood places	Q13—Nature promotion	Q17_1_5—Elements to promote—Valea Cetăţii Cave	
	Q14—Jobs	Q17_1_6—Elements to promote—The Pagan Church	
	Q15—City safety	Q17_1_7—Elements to promote—Local values	
	Q16—High-performance education	Q17_1_8—Elements to promote—The historic center	
	Q19.1—Cleaning	Q17_1_9—Elements to promote—Events in the city	
	Q19.2—Green spaces	Q17_1_10—Elements to promote—Mountain trails in the area	
	Q19.3—Public buildings	Q17_1_11—Elements to promote—Amza Pellea Cinema	

Table 3. Cont.

Perception of the City—Local Identity and Attachment	Satisfaction with City Life—Quality of Life and Infrastructure	Promotion of the City and External Image—Brand and Tourism	Socio-Demographic Profile
	Q19.4—Tourist attractions	Q17_1_12—Elements to promote—The Evangelical Church	
	Q19.5—Public transport	Q17_1_13—Elements to promote—Dino Park	
	Q19.6—Parking spaces	Q17_1_14—Elements to promote—Old Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas	
	Q19.7—Traffic	Q17_1_15—Elements to promote—Other	
	Q19.8—Air quality	Q18.1—Foreign visitor—Sights (Tourist attractions)	
	Q19.9—Apartment blocks	Q18.2—Foreign visitor—Sights (Recreational/entertainment center)	
		Q18.3—Foreign visitor—Sights (Mountain trails)	
		Q18.4—Foreign visitor—Sights (To meet members of the community)	
		Q18.5—Foreign visitor—Sights (Restaurants/bars/cafes)	
		Q18.6—Foreign visitor—Sights (In less touristy places)	

The method chosen for exploring the factors that shape the brand of the city of Rasnov is quantitative. Through this approach, it is possible to analyze large populations and explore the conclusions of the entire population. In addition, the quantitative method ensures the confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents while allowing the geographical expansion of the research, with simultaneous coverage in several areas.

The method chosen to explore the factors shaping the brand of the city of Râșnov is a quantitative, cross-sectional survey approach. The collected data were initially analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions) to outline the sample's profile. Subsequently, various statistical tests were employed, such as the Chi-square test, Cramer's V, and correlation analyses, depending on the nature of the variables and the research hypotheses. This quantitative approach provided an overall view of a large number of respondents' perceptions, while maintaining their confidentiality and anonymity.

### 2.3. Sampling Method

This research used cluster probability sampling. The respondents were randomly selected from well-defined groups, specifically from local Facebook groups. In social research, target populations that are difficult to list, such as city dwellers, require more complex sampling methods. In this regard, cluster sampling is appropriate, as it allows research even when a complete list of the target population cannot be made [57].

#### 2.4. Data Collection

The research tool—a questionnaire made through Google Forms—was administered in virtual format, being distributed in the Facebook groups frequented by the residents of the city of Rasnov. The data collection period started on the 1st of March and ended on the 15th of May. Our study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Sociology and Communication in Braşov (approval number: 29, date: 17 February 2023). Our study respected GDPR measures regarding the confidentiality of respondents. No data have been collected that could identify respondents in any way (email, name, phone number, etc.). Additionally, all respondents participated voluntarily, with the possibility to quit at any moment. No form of financial or non-financial remuneration has been offered to participants.

### 3. Results

The analysis was conducted through three approaches to residents' attitudes toward tourism and the role of responsible tourism practices in Rasnov. First of all, we aimed to determine if there is a local identity or a social attachment of individuals, which can modify certain perceptions. This direction targets the symbolic and emotional representations of the city among the inhabitants and the sense of belonging. The way in which respondents relate to the city as a personal, affective, and social space is analyzed. Secondly, we were interested in satisfaction with life in the city through what we call quality of life and infrastructure. This direction analyzes respondents' satisfaction levels regarding various functional aspects of the city, including infrastructure, public services, safety, and environment. The third direction is the promotion of the city and the external image. This aimed at the perception of the city brand, both from the perspective of promotion awareness strategy and the elements that define the city for tourists and visitors.

#### 3.1. Local Identity and Attachment

In order to highlight the internal coherence and the relationships between the items reflecting the attachment to the city of Rasnov, an analysis of the Pearson correlations between items Q3 and Q7 was performed (Table 4). These items refer to affective and symbolic dimensions of the respondent's relationship with the city, such as personal memories, the feeling of "home", or the tranquility associated with the place. The results show strong and statistically significant correlations between all the items analyzed. The correlation coefficients vary between  $r = 0.800$  and  $r = 0.815$ ; all values are significant at the  $p$  level  $< 0.01$  (2-tailed). The highest coefficient was recorded between Q4 (discovering passions in Rasnov) and Q6 (perception of Rasnov as a quiet city), respectively, with  $r = 0.815$ .

Also, equally solid relationships appear between Q4 and Q7 (childhood memories— $r = 0.815$ ), as well as between Q5 (Rasnov as a home) and Q7 ( $r = 0.812$ ). These correlations indicate that respondents who agree with an item regarding attachment or personal connection to the city tend to show a high level of agreement with the other items in the same category as well. Thus, a clear latent construct of urban attachment is outlined, in which affective perceptions, personal memories, and the comfort associated with the city are closely intercorrelated.

Starting from the above results, the analysis continued with a series of tests exploring the link between respondents' age category (R3) and affective perceptions of Rasnov, using the Chi-square test ( $\chi^2$ ) (Table 5). Three essential aspects are analyzed: the perception of Rasnov as 'home' (Q5), as a quiet city (Q6), and the association of childhood with the city (Q7).

**Table 4.** Pearson correlations of Q3–Q7.

		Correlations				
		Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7
Q3	Pearson Correlation	1	0.809 **	0.812 **	0.806 **	0.800 **
	Mr. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	627	627	627	627	627
Q4	Pearson Correlation	0.809 **	1	0.810 **	0.815 **	0.815 **
	Mr. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	627	627	627	627	627
Q5	Pearson Correlation	0.812 **	0.810 **	1	0.808 **	0.812 **
	Mr. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000
	N	627	627	627	627	627
Q6	Pearson Correlation	0.806 **	0.815 **	0.808 **	1	0.815 **
	Mr. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000
	N	627	627	627	627	627
Q7	Pearson Correlation	0.800 **	0.815 **	0.812 **	0.815 **	1
	Mr. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	
	N	627	627	627	627	627

Source: SPSS, V.25 database processing. \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 5.** Statistical tests about age and perceptions of Rasnov.

TEST	Pearson Chi <sup>2</sup> (P)	Cramér’s V	PHI
R3 × Q5	38.25 ( <i>p</i> = 0.033)	0.124	0.247
R3 × Q6	52.61 ( <i>p</i> = 0.001)	0.145	0.290
R3 × Q7	45.70 ( <i>p</i> = 0.005)	0.135	0.270

Source: SPSS, V. 25 Database processing.

Table 2 also reveals that the largest age groups in the sample are 31–40 (30.5%) and 41–50 (23.8%). These respondents answered in high proportions “Agree” and “Strongly agree” to the statements regarding the tranquility of the city (Q6) and the feeling of belonging (Q5). The results obtained from the Chi-square (Chi<sup>2</sup>) analysis revealed significant associations between the age category of the respondents and essential affective dimensions of the perception of the city. The three statistically tested relationships are detailed below: The Chi<sup>2</sup> test indicated a statistically significant association between age and the sense of belonging to the city ( $\chi^2 = 38.25, df = 24, p = 0.033$ ). Cramér’s V = 0.124 signals a weak to moderate association but is acceptable in social research. Respondents aged 31–50 reported a high proportion of options such as “agree” and “strongly agree” regarding the statement that Rasnov means “home”. This trend reflects an intense emotional identification with the urban space, possibly influenced by the stage of active living and community involvement.

The second relationship showed the strongest association of all those tested ( $\chi^2 = 52.61, df = 24, p = 0.001$ ), accompanied by a Cramér’s V = 0.145, which indicates a moderate association. Respondents over the age of 50, specifically those born in Rasnov (according to R1), significantly perceive the city as quiet. This fact can be explained by a stable urban experience associated with the longevity of living and a constant relationship with the local environment, which generates positive perceptions of the city’s atmosphere.

The Chi<sup>2</sup> test showed a statistically significant relationship between age and the tendency to associate the city with childhood memories ( $\chi^2 = 45.70, df = 24, p = 0.005$ ),

accompanied by a Cramér's  $V = 0.135$ —weak to moderate level of association. The age categories 41–50 years and over 60 years were the most frequent in expressing agreement with this statement, which highlights the crucial role of affective and collective memory in shaping individuals' relationship with their hometown. Thus, Rasnov becomes, for these respondents, an identity and emotional landmark deeply rooted in the formative experiences of childhood.

### 3.2. Quality of Life and Infrastructure, Part of the Local Brand Architecture

To assess residents' satisfaction level with the city's functional aspects, respondents were surveyed about the maintenance of local areas, access to entertainment, resources, safety, job opportunities, and the education system (Table 6). Responses were measured on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The results obtained highlight a diversity of perceptions, with clear tendencies of satisfaction in some areas and dissatisfaction in others. Thus, regarding caring for the areas frequented by locals (Q8), the average of 3.30 indicates a critical perception, with respondents suggesting that these areas are treated with less attention than tourist areas. This dissatisfaction is homogeneous at the sample level ( $SD = 0.681$ ), which may reflect a perceived urban injustice in the allocation of maintenance resources. In contrast, the item referring to access to forms of entertainment for locals (Q9) obtained an average of 2.44, with a median of 2.00, which denotes a predominantly positive evaluation. This suggests that, despite the city's modest size, the entertainment offer is considered sufficient by a significant part of the respondents.

**Table 6.** Table of frequencies from Q8 to Q16.

		Statistics								
		Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16
N	Valid	627	627	627	627	627	627	627	627	627
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Mean	3.30	2.44	3.31	2.30	2.33	2.55	3.06	2.23	2.53
	Median	3.00	2.00	3.00	2.00	2.00	3.00	3.00	2.00	2.00
	Std. Deviation	0.681	1.153	0.677	1.166	1.108	1.100	1.211	1.109	1.109
	Minimum	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Maximum	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

Source: SPSS, Version 25, own processing.

Regarding the overall satisfaction with the resources available in the city (Q10—"I have everything I need"), the average of 3.31 signals a slightly negative trend, and perceptions converge towards a reserved attitude, reflecting unmet needs (Table 6). Similarly, the perception of job sufficiency (Q14) is moderately critical (mean = 3.06), which reinforces the hypothesis that the economic dimension is a vulnerable point in respondents' urban experience. On the other hand, the safety and family life dimensions were positively appreciated. Item Q11 ("suitable for starting a family") recorded an average of 2.30, while Q15 ("safe city") obtained an even lower average—2.23, indicating a favorable and constant perception. These results reflect urban stability and potential for residential attractiveness.

The cultural dimension (Q12) was also positive (mean = 2.33), which validates the existence of a cultural capital perceived by the residents as relevant to urban branding strategies. Regarding the promotion of local nature (Q13), respondents were in the neutral zone towards agreement (mean = 2.55), suggesting that the area's natural potential is known but insufficiently capitalized.

Finally, the perception of the education system's performance (Q16) was relatively positive (mean = 2.53), with a moderate dispersion of responses. This assessment may reflect confidence in local educational services and expectations for improvement.

The Pearson correlation analysis was used to explore the relationship between the locals’ perception of caring for the areas frequented (Q8) and the general satisfaction expressed by the statement, “In Rasnov, I have everything I need” (Q10). The aim was to identify a potentially significant association between these two dimensions of urban quality of life.

The results showed a strong positive correlation between Q8 and Q10, with a Pearson coefficient  $r = 0.785$ , at a significance level of  $p < 0.001$  (Table 7). This means that as respondents perceive local areas as better cared for (lower values on the Likert scale), they are also more likely to think they have everything they need in the city. In other words, taking care of urban space contributes significantly to overall satisfaction. Moreover, the results highlight a high level of internal coherence between the Q10 and Q19 indicators, with all Pearson correlations being positive and significant at a 99% confidence level ( $p < 0.001$ ). The correlation coefficients vary between  $r = 0.708$  and  $r = 0.753$ , indicating moderate to strong associations between overall satisfaction (Q10) and each evaluative dimension of the urban environment (Table 8). The strongest association was identified between Q10 and Q19.9 (condition of apartment blocks), with  $r = 0.753$ , suggesting that the quality of residential space is a major predictor of the overall perception of the city.

**Table 7.** Pearson correlation of Q8 and Q10.

		Correlations		
			Q8	Q10
Q8	Pearson Correlation		1	0.785 **
	Mr. (2-tailed)			0.000
	N		627	627
Q10	Pearson Correlation		0.785 **	1
	Mr. (2-tailed)		0.000	
	N		627	627

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Source: SPSS, Version 25, own processing.

**Table 8.** Pearson correlation of Q10.

		Correlations									
		Q10	Q19_1	Q19_2	Q19_3	Q19_4	Q19_5	Q19_6	Q19_7	Q19_8	Q19_9
Q10	Pearson Correlation	1	0.750 **	0.713 **	0.728 **	0.719 **	0.717 **	0.730 **	0.723 **	0.708 **	0.753 **
	Mr. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	627	627	627	627	627	627	627	627	627	627

Source: SPSS, Version 25, own processing, \*\* = significant correlation.

Significant correlations were also recorded between Q10 and Q19.1 (cleanliness,  $r = 0.750$ ) and Q19.6 (parking spaces,  $r = 0.730$ ), respectively, which points to the importance of urban infrastructure and public hygiene in shaping individual satisfaction. The high and homogeneous level of correlations supports the hypothesis that all dimensions of satisfaction (Q19.1–Q19.9) are relevant components of a common latent structure, possibly defined as “quality of life in the city”.

### 3.3. The Brand of the Hour and Tourism

As for the perception of the city brand, we asked if the strategy for promoting the city of Rasnov is known. The data presented in the frequency table reflect the level of knowledge of the promotion strategy of the city of Rasnov among the respondents, measured on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). The data analysis highlights the studied population’s low familiarity with this strategy. Specifically, 28.7% of respondents indicated that they do not know the promotion strategy at all, and 33.5% gave a score of 2, which means that over

62% of respondents are at the bottom of the scale, expressing low or very low knowledge (Table 9). About 23.9% rated knowledge with a score of 3, which denotes a medium level of information, while only 9.6% and 4.3%, respectively, indicated scores of 4 and 5, signaling a high level of familiarity. This distribution leads to an average of 2.3 and a median of 2, confirming a generally negative perception of access or exposure to information about the city's urban branding and promotion strategy. The minimum and maximum values are 1 and 5, and the standard deviation of about 1.1 suggests a relatively low variability of responses, concentrated around the low values.

**Table 9.** Table of frequencies for Q17.

Q17	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1—not at all	180	28.7%	28.7%	28.7%
2	210	33.5%	33.5%	62.2%
3	150	23.9%	23.9%	86.1%
4	60	9.6%	9.6%	95.7%
5—a lot	27	4.3%	4.3%	100.0%
Total	627	100.0%	100.0%	

Source: SPSS, Version 25, own processing.

This situation can be interpreted as a signal to local authorities about the need to improve the public communication process. The lack of clear knowledge of the promotion strategy can reduce citizen involvement and community support and negatively influence the overall perception of the city's tourism and cultural initiatives. Therefore, it is advisable to increase transparency, use accessible and efficient information channels, and actively involve residents in shaping and disseminating the objectives of promoting the city's image. Further, the analysis continued with the perception of respondents about what elements they consider necessary to be introduced in such a strategy to promote the city. Basically, there were a number of variables to choose from to define the city's identity more clearly. The responses reflect collective opinions about what should be included in the urban branding strategy, allowing for an implicit ranking of tourism and cultural resources.

Percentagewise, the most selected items were as follows:

- The “Other” category (Q17\_1\_15) was ticked by 23.3% of the participants, which indicates that an important part of the respondents perceive shortcomings in the proposed list. This suggests openness to new forms of promotion or emerging elements in the community.
- Râşnoavei Gorges (Q17\_1\_3)—22.8% of respondents considered them essential for promotion.
- The Valea Cărbunarii Sports Complex (Q17\_1\_2)—22.5% of respondents considered the complex, along with the mountain trails (Q17\_1\_10)—22.2% and the Valea Cetății Cave (Q17\_1\_12)—21.2%, occupies the next places in terms of perceived importance.

Other elements of interest, such as the Rasnov Fortress (20.1%), Dino Park (20.3%), and local values (15.8%), although expected to be at the top of the preferences, were selected by less than a quarter of respondents. This fact could indicate either a saturation of the promotion of these objectives or a need to renew the narrative around them.

On the other hand, the Evangelical Church (17.9%) and the Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas (17.1%) recorded lower values, signaling the moderate importance given to religious heritage, at least in the sphere of tourism promotion. The Pagan Church (18.7%) and city events (18.7%) received similar scores, indicating a modest appreciation of intangible heritage and socio-cultural activities as branding vectors.

In a hypothetical scenario in which a foreigner comes and visits the city of Rasnov, among the main areas represented by the data collected, 29.2% of respondents would choose to show tourists the city's tourist attractions.

This choice confirms the central role of cultural and historical heritage in defining the identity of Rasnov and in the way it is perceived as attractive from a tourist's point of view. In second place, 26.6% of the participants would introduce visitors to the life of the local community, which underlines a deep dimension of experiential tourism and suggests the desire to convey an authentic and vivid image of the city beyond the classic landmarks. In the same register, 26.2% of respondents indicated that they would take guests to leisure or entertainment centers, demonstrating their openness to modern forms of recreation and the desire to diversify the tourist offer.

About 24.4% of respondents opted for restaurants, bars, or cafes, highlighting the importance of the gastronomic dimension and socialization in shaping a pleasant tourist experience. Interestingly, 23.6% of the participants would choose to present to visitors places which are lesser-known but representative of the city, thus signaling an appreciation for authenticity and less commercial tourism. On the other hand, mountain trails were preferred by only 22.3% of respondents, thus ranking last in the options expressed. This may reflect either a narrower perception of the accessibility of these trails or a general preference for more comfortable and manageable experiences for tourists.

#### 4. Discussions

The case study we conducted on Râșnov generated several key takeaways on the perceptions and attitudes of residents towards city branding and sustainable tourism. Our research results showed that Râșnov's residents have a strong sense of emotional attachment and personal connection to their city, particularly among respondents who have lived there for a long time, aged 31–50 and over 50. The findings from a Maramureș, Romania study also highlighted the importance of authenticity and community engagement in sustainable tourism development [47]. A case study on Craiova, Romania, also emphasizes the need to foster a sense of pride and belonging among residents as part of the city's post-COVID-19 tourism recovery strategy [51].

Our results showed that local identity and place attachment were connected to residents' satisfaction with the city's urban infrastructure and overall quality of life. This aligns with the findings from a study in Bucharest, Romania, which underscored the importance of urban design, green spaces, and social infrastructure in promoting sustainable tourism [52]. Soesanta et al. also emphasized the role of community-focused development and inclusive planning in enhancing the quality of life for local residents [36].

When it comes to awareness and engagement with city branding, the Rasnov study found a relatively low level of awareness among residents regarding the city's branding and promotion strategy. Many cities, such as Bogotá, reported that a substantial percentage of residents (74%) do not recognize their city's branding efforts, indicating a disconnect between promotional activities and public perception [58]. In Pinrang, Indonesia, local government officials presented insufficient knowledge about the city's branding strategies, suggesting the need for better education and training on the topic [59].

Regarding sustainable tourism development, the Rasnov study touched on the importance of diversifying the tourism offer and aligning it with local values and resources. This can be compared to the Gangwon-do, South Korea study, which examined the relationships between destination competitiveness, community empowerment, and supportive actions for sustainable tourism [54]. The Malaga, Spain study also explored the alignment between residents' perceptions and the city's sustainable tourism brand [40].

Effective city branding requires a strategic approach that aligns with the city's unique characteristics and potential. For example, the strategic branding process in Damavand involved identifying a clear vision and developing custom branding plans [60]. The lack of a cohesive urban marketing strategy in cities such as Bucharest further underlines the need for public authorities to take the initiative in effectively promoting cities [61].

While the data reflect a worrying trend in audience knowledge, it also highlights the potential for improvement through targeted education and strategic branding initiatives. Involving residents in the branding process could foster a stronger connection with their city's identity and promote a more favorable perception.

Based on our findings, we elaborated on the following recommendations with the city's leadership/managers:

- The city could benefit from creating programs and initiatives to cultivate a stronger sense of community and belonging, specifically targeting long-term residents and older adults.
- Organizing cultural events such as festivals and gatherings celebrating the city's history, traditions, and local identity.
- Resident participation in urban planning should be encouraged by involving them in decision-making.
- The city should prioritize maintaining and enhancing public green spaces, parks, and recreational areas to improve residents' overall quality of life.
- Râșnov should invest in upgrading road infrastructure, sidewalks, and lighting to enhance the city's esthetics and promote a sense of safety and comfort.
- They should ensure the efficient delivery of essential urban services, such as waste management, public transportation, and utilities, to meet the needs of the local population.
- It is advised to implement a comprehensive communication plan to educate residents about the city's branding initiatives, development goals, and tourism promotion efforts.
- It is necessary to encourage resident participation in the branding process, such as through surveys, focus groups, or community workshops, to foster a stronger sense of ownership and alignment with the city's identity.
- It would be beneficial to use digital and social media platforms to actively engage with residents and provide regular updates on the city's progress and future plans.
- Aligning the city's branding strategy with sustainable tourism principles, emphasizing the preservation of cultural heritage, environmental protection, and responsible visitor behavior.

The results of this study would be particularly applicable to other small- to mid-sized cities in Romania and Eastern Europe that share characteristics similar to Rasnov. Rasnov has a population of around 20,000 residents and is located near the larger city of Brasov, a major tourist destination in the Carpathian Mountains. Like Rasnov, these types of cities often have a strong historical and cultural identity, a growing emphasis on tourism development, and a need to balance the local community's interests with external branding efforts.

The framework developed in this study could be valuable for cities in mountain or rural regions that are seeking to promote sustainable tourism while maintaining the quality of life for their residents. Additionally, the insights gained from Rasnov's case could inform the strategies of other small- to medium-sized cities within Romania and internationally that are navigating the intersection of local identity, urban satisfaction, and city branding.

## 5. Conclusions

Overall, the results indicate that the city brand is strongly influenced by the locals' attachment, the quality of the infrastructure, and the degree of knowledge of the develop-

ment strategies, which can represent important elements and vectors in the sustainability of a city's tourism.

The results of the study indicate a strong sense of attachment to the city, evidenced by the significant correlations between the variables that measure personal memories, the feeling of "home", and the perception of the tranquility of the city (Q3–Q7). In addition, the Chi-square ( $\text{Chi}^2$ ) tests show that respondents aged 31 to 50 and those over 50 (especially those born in Rasnov) more frequently report strong agreement on elements related to the tranquility of the city and childhood memories. These data support the H1 hypothesis, suggesting that the duration of residence and advanced age are associated with increased emotional attachment. Basically, the local roots and the long period of residence seem to strengthen the sense of belonging and the affective connection with the city. Older adults often prefer to settle in one place because this maintains their independence.

The analysis of links and correlations between items related to the infrastructure (care of local areas, urban services, cleanliness, parking spaces, apartment blocks, etc.) and overall satisfaction (Q10: "I have everything I need") are associated with high Pearson coefficients ( $r = 0.708$  to  $r = 0.753$ ). This suggests a powerful connection between the quality of infrastructure and the overall satisfaction with the city. We would like to especially highlight that the perception of care for local areas (Q8) was linked significantly to the level of "having everything I need" (Q10). These findings confirm our second hypothesis ( $H_2$ ), confirming that well-maintained urban infrastructure contributes crucially to residents' overall satisfaction.

Moreover, data on knowledge of the promotion strategy (Q17) show that over 60% of respondents know it to a low or non-existent extent. The frequency distribution (28.7% "1" score and 33.5% "2" score) confirms low information. Consequently, this situation can influence community involvement in brand initiatives and diminish support for tourism development projects. Thus, hypothesis  $H_3$  is confirmed, given the low level of knowledge and the potential negative impact on the perception and support of urban development.

Based on the conclusions highlighted by the study, several directions and public policies are outlined that can be implemented by local authorities and other actors involved to strengthen the urban brand and improve residents' satisfaction. In order to strengthen the urban brand and increase the satisfaction of residents, the city hall representatives can adopt measures focusing on improving infrastructure and public services so that the areas frequented by locals benefit from adequate resources regarding repairs, cleaning, and arrangement of public spaces. In addition to infrastructure aspects, the visibility of the branding strategy and public information can be improved through accessible communication campaigns and collaborations with associations, civic groups, and the private sector. At the same time, promoting cultural and social events, such as festivals or grassroots initiatives, strengthens residents' emotional connection with the city, adding value to the local identity. Expanding the offer is essential for diverse and sustainable tourism, emphasizing established objectives and natural attractions or authentic community experiences. In this sense, residents' involvement in decisions regarding tourism development ensures a balance between economic benefits and maintaining the quality of life.

#### *Limitations and Future Research Directions*

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The use of voluntary sampling through Facebook groups may have led to selection bias, favoring digitally active and civically engaged residents while underrepresenting other groups. Additionally, self-reported data collected through standardized questionnaires may lack nuance and be influenced by social desirability. The focus on a single locality—Rasnov—limits the generalizability of the results to other urban contexts. Moreover, the

cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow for tracking changes in perception over time.

Future research could address these limitations by conducting comparative studies across multiple cities and using mixed methods, including qualitative approaches such as interviews or focus groups. Longitudinal designs would help capture how perceptions evolve in response to urban and branding developments. Finally, further exploration of the role of digital platforms in civic participation and brand co-creation could offer valuable insights into community engagement strategies.

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