

# CITY BRANDING AND UNIVERSITIES: THE CHALLENGE OF A JOINT COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

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*City branding is a hot topic in both tourism and marketing, and its impact may be seen in both. While tourism is concerned with city branding because it can help locations attract more tourists and generate more revenue, marketers are looking for innovative strategies to promote, position, and differentiate city brands in order to obtain a competitive advantage in this saturated market. On the other side, city brands might bring benefits in terms of customer consumption behavior, as customers are more aware than ever before and have a plethora of options to choose from, but they have less time at their disposal, and these selections are often fraught with risk. Although city brand strategy can take many different directions (culture, entertainment, seasonal tourism, etc.), cities with a strong academic center can benefit from a partnership between the city's communication strategy and the local university's communication strategy, leveraging co-branding to gain an advantage and attract more people to the city. We chose the city of Brasov, Romania, for this topic since it is home to a renowned university.*

*The aim of this study is to find out more about students' perceptions of Brasov's city brand in order to see whether we could employ them as brand ambassadors in a future city branding plan, as well as if the university could be used as a co-brand in this campaign.*

**Keywords:** city branding, university branding, co-branding, city ambassadors, communication strategy

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that we live in a linked world that is undergoing a rapid process of globalization, we are witnesses to a very close relationship between fields that may appear to be very remote at first glance. The goal of this paper is to look at the relationship between tourism and the importance of city or destination branding, as well as more current marketing concepts like harnessing the community to establish a powerful and long-lasting brand. Tourism is complex, yet it cannot thrive on its own; this can only be accomplished by employing the appropriate marketing and communication techniques for each site. The tourism business has suffered a historically large loss as a result of the coronavirus epidemic that began in 2020, but experts are optimistic about the future: they estimate that the industry will begin to thrive again in August 2020.

. In this context, destination companies should reconsider their branding tactics in order to not only attract more tourists, but also to enhance their market position and connect themselves with the demands of their customers.

There are a variety of elements that can impact your decision to visit your next tourist location, and customers are increasingly under pressure to choose from a variety of possibilities without knowing which is ideal for them. One factor to consider when developing a city brand strategy is that the pressures of a growing economy have caused people to spend more and more time at work. This is why city breaks have grown more popular among travelers; they may take a short break from their everyday routine without disrupting their work.

Multiple factors influence a customer's decision to spend his vacation in a specific location; these factors range from the general, such as politics, economics, technology, the impact of mass media on society, and marketing activities, to the more personal, such as recommendations from family and friends.

In order to establish an effective branding strategy that will attract more tourists, it is critical to understand how clients choose their tourist locations. In this field, the process of making a decision has certain unique peculiarities. (Cohen, S. A., Prayag, G., & Moital, M 2014, p. 72):

The customer is highly involved in taking this type of decision;

Touristic services are intangible and because of this are considered to be of high risk;

The customer is emotionally involved in the decision process;

The customer is very influenced by other relevant people recommendations and opinions;

Most decisions are taken after a long consideration process;

The customer usually makes a intensive research on the matter.

A city or destination brand must have certain essential characteristics (Anholt 2008): it must have a clear communication strategy with the outside world, it must have a clear image in order to position itself, it must use management to maintain its reputation, it must have a strategic purpose, and it must use innovation to influence public opinion. These are the most important factors to consider when building a good destination brand. Using the local university as an asset is one of the ways a community may improve its branding strategy. Not all cities will be able to implement this method, but some will be able to benefit from academic life. Universities, like many other institutions, are required to select a representative name that serves to position or distinguish the institution, and is usually tied, at the very least, to the city name or region.

According to a 2013 assessment of premier institutions throughout the world, eight out of ten have a name that includes the city in which they are located (Rekettye & Gyongyi 2014). Even though it may be difficult to say which of the two – the city or the university – has the most influence, it has been proven that they both influence each other, and we can discuss co-branding or cross-marketing in this case, which are concepts that mean two companies or institutions agree to promote their images together. (Ferrell & Hartline 2005). Because of the increasing rivalry for human, financial, and organizational resources, even non-profit public institutions have been pushed to incorporate marketing efforts into their strategy. To attain their aims and target audiences, city and university branding might collaborate.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a survey with 47 questions divided into seven analysis dimensions, with the goal of determining how students in Brasov perceive the city brand. The survey was open from June 7 to June 23, 2021, and it was conducted online. We received 305 responses, of which 5 were eliminated because they did not match the main eligibility condition - being a Braşov student.

We didn't choose students from a single faculty or specialization because the response pool was fairly wide, therefore we circulated the survey to organizations dedicated to Transilvania University students from all faculties.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections: the first, which measured the demographic characteristics of the respondents and contained seven questions, and the second, which measured students' perceptions of the Braşov city brand and contained forty questions based on Merrilees, Miller, and Herington's (2009) and Cop and Akpınar's (2014) studies on the perception of the city brand. We used a 5-point Likert scale to assess the responses. Furthermore, the scale utilized in this questionnaire has a Cronbach-Alpha score of 0.934, indicating that it is very reliable.

The questions about students' perceptions of Braşov's city brand were separated into seven analysis categories, each with one core subject, as follows:

- Plans, Recommendations and Awareness about the City
- Expectations from the Local Government
- Event Organizations and Shopping Options in the City
- Support in City Branding
- Locals
- Natural Characteristic and Culture of the City
- City Planning

We analyzed the 300 legitimate responses we received after collecting and filtering all of the responses to ensure they were valid. We began with the demographic information:

**Gender:** the distribution between genders was 40.5% women and 49.5% male respondents;

**Age:** regarding age, we had respondents from 4 age groups, most of them though being in the first two age groups – 18-25 years (70.2%), 26-35 years (17.4%), 36-45 years (12%) and over 45 years (12%); this distribution was quite logically given the fact that most of the students are young people;

**Study cycle:** when it came to the distribution for study cycles, most of the respondents were enrolled in the Bachelor's degree (67.8%), followed by the ones enrolled in the Master's degree (18%) and only a small part of them doing their PhD or post-doctoral studies (4.20%);

**Monthly income:** 27.6% percent of the respondents are earning under 1500 RON, 38.7% of them are earning between 1500 and 2500 RON, 21% are earning between 2500 and 4000 RON and only 2.7% of them are earning more than 4000 RON;

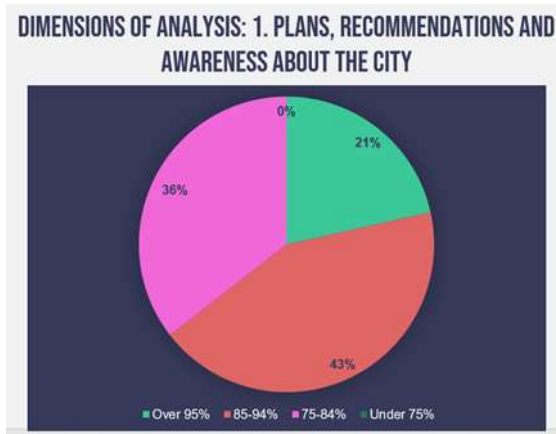
**Residence environment:** we were interested in finding out the distribution between rural and urban environments of the respondents and we found that 66.9% of them came from the urban areas and only 23.1% from the rural areas;

**Time of stay (in Braşov):** 27.6% of the participants were living in Braşov for less than a year, 23.7% of them were living in Braşov for 1-3 years, 15.6% of them for 3-5 years, 5.7% for 5-10 years, 3.3% for more than 10 years and 14.1% of the respondents were born and raised in Braşov.

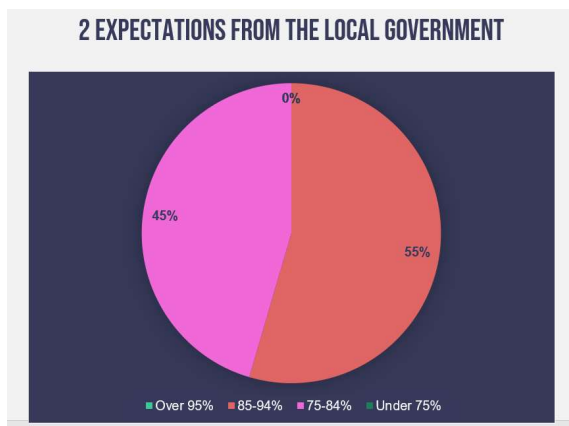
### 3 RESULTS

We went on to the data interpretation of each dimension of analysis about the perception of the city brand after examining the demographics. We divided the 5-point Likert scale responses into two categories for easy interpretation and visualization: positive (completely agree, agree, somewhat agree) and negative (disagree and totally disagree).

We began with the first dimension, Plans, Recommendations, and City Awareness, which included 13 questions. In this dimension, we had a very high positive perception, indicating that the city has a good awareness among students, with the majority of the responses indicating that students had a favourable perception of the city:



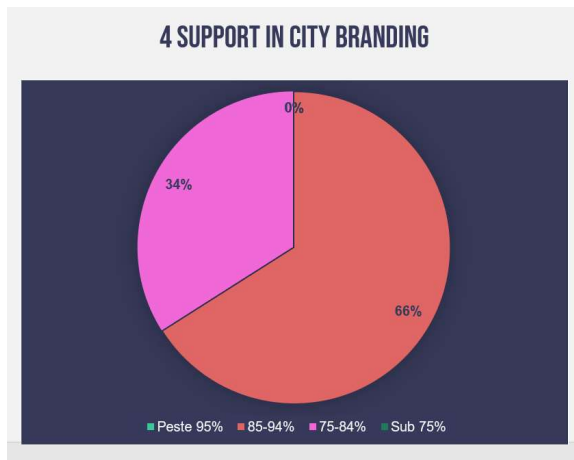
The second level of examination concerned the Local Government's expectations. In this dimension, we also noticed a lot of responses in the initial half of the Likert scale, indicating that people expect local governments to do more to improve the city and its brand:



The third component of analysis concerned Event Organizations and Retail Options in the City, and it measured students' perceptions of the city's events, cultural life, entertainment, and shopping locations, as well as how effectively they are positioned for students:

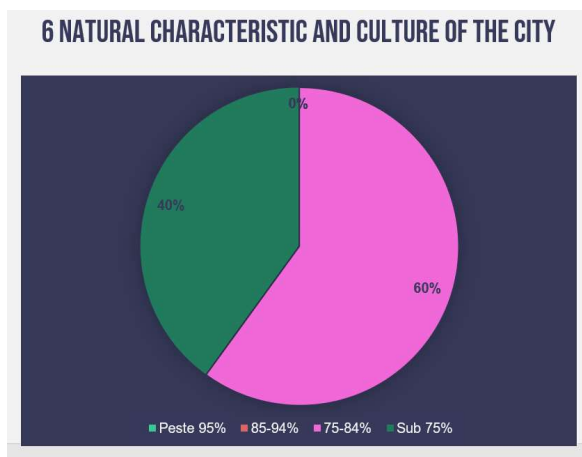


The fourth factor of analysis was designed to assess the students' willingness to provide Support in City Branding if the city branding plan might utilise the students throughout the implementation phase:



The fifth factor concerned students' perceptions of local people and communities, how they see them in relation to tourists, and how much they believe residents can benefit a city branding strategy:

The sixth component was Natural Characteristics and Culture of the City, which included questions about the perception of Braşov's natural environment and cultural heritage:



The seventh and final facet of analysis examined City Planning and students' perceptions of how well local governments care for the city:



#### 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

City and destination branding are difficult ideas, yet they are necessary for tourism to acquire a competitive advantage. Given that the market is becoming increasingly congested and individuals have so many options for their vacations or city breaks, the city brand is critical for success in the tourism industry. A strong city branding plan can help a city position itself as well as differentiate itself from other similar cities or tourist destinations. Typically, aspects such as virtual tourism, offers and bundles, or cultural positioning are considered when developing a city brand strategy; however, some cities with a strong university center and vibrant academic life can incorporate this aspect into their strategy and convert students into city brand ambassadors. The universities are well-known for representing the cities in which they are located, and this can be an excellent opportunity for both of them to promote one another and develop a successful co-branding plan.

After studying the survey data, we concluded that students in Braşov have the potential to become brand ambassadors for the city brand, but the actual issue is that they believe there is no clear branding strategy in place. Transilvania University might collaborate with local authorities and the local community to develop a strategy that would benefit everyone and take advantage of students and local residents as a strategic advantage. Perhaps the most important finding from this research is that students communicate about the city and what they enjoy about it with their friends, which can persuade them to visit Braşov, move to Braşov, or study at the local university. These findings should help us think of methods to incorporate students' positive perceptions of the city into a long-term branding strategy that will attract more visitors, tourists, and residents. While the city's administration can yet improve several issues, students in Braşov have a positive perception of the city, which can serve as an excellent focus group for future talks. In Romania, city branding is not well established or implemented, but the city of Braşov may profit greatly from a good city branding strategy that includes students in order to promote the city.

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