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Building a City Brand Through Cultural Marketing Strategies

SUMMARY

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THE DOCTORAL THESIS TOPIC AND ITS ACADEMIC FIELD

The doctoral dissertation topic, titled "Developing the City Brand Through Cultural Marketing Strategies," falls within the field of Marketing and addresses a highly contemporary subject positioned at the intersection of city branding, cultural marketing, and cultural participation studies.

In an interconnected global landscape shaped by digital nomadism, exponential technological growth, and constant innovation, city administrations increasingly resort to branding techniques in order to construct a distinctive urban image. These marketing efforts typically target groups such as investors, tourists, professionals, and residents (Kusumawati, 2020). Scholars argue that we are currently experiencing a progressive stage in city branding, initiated around 2010, characterized by the involvement of multiple stakeholders who continuously co-create urban identities, identities that are increasingly complex and difficult to control (Green et al., 2016). Viewed as snapshots of the symbolic battlegrounds in which cities compete (Anttiroiko, 2015), efforts to shape urban image thus become strategic instruments for differentiation and for attracting resources. The literature highlights several advantages associated with city branding, including its potential to shape local identities, enhance residents' satisfaction (Joo and Seo, 2018), stimulate economic growth (Riza, 2015), and improve quality of life (Andrews, 2001).

Within this context, cultural city branding emerges as a natural extension of urban promotion strategies, possessing the capacity to create emotional connections with a destination. Initially, culture-led urban development was employed to regenerate and revitalize post-industrial cities (Um et al., 2021). Over time, the role of culture has expanded, becoming a key factor in enhancing the overall urban experience and strengthening urban identity. By capitalizing on their cultural and heritage assets, cities can construct authentic and enduring brand images that resonate deeply with audiences and generate long-term value for their communities. A vibrant cultural environment is more likely to foster a favorable perception (Ozer, 2016), one that can "linger in the minds" of visitors and cultivate long-term attachment (Pai et al., 2023).

This study aims to examine how culture, events, and urban spaces contribute to the construction of a city's image and the consolidation of its cultural identity. To this end, the research combines document analysis with qualitative and quantitative methods, in order to align theoretical models with the actual perceptions of both the public and cultural operators.

At the same time, the thesis proposes a re-evaluation of the potential of culture in a society where civic engagement is in decline, often replaced by individualistic entrepreneurial initiatives lacking community cohesion. In many urban communities in Romania, including the case of Braşov analyzed in this work, culture occupies a secondary position within development strategies, while cultural actors frequently face underfunding, institutional fragmentation, and limited visibility. In parallel, there is a noticeable decline in interest in traditional cultural forms—such as reading or participation in cultural events, particularly among younger generations, which underscores the need for cultural strategies adapted to new audiences. These trends contribute to the erosion of social capital, thereby undermining the fundamental conditions necessary for a robust cultural brand.

In this context, the contribution of the thesis also lies in repositioning cultural branding beyond a strictly instrumental logic, by proposing the development of participatory artistic formats, the integration of educational institutions into the cultural ecosystem, the cultivation of cultural awareness among younger generations, and the encouragement of public engagement in both the production and consumption of artistic content. Furthermore, the study addresses a gap in the existing literature through a comparative analysis of European Capital of Culture bid books, viewed as strategic instruments of urban branding.

OBJECTIVES OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Despite the extensive body of research in the field of city branding, the author has identified significant limitations in the literature regarding the construction of a city's image through arts and culture. To date, four general approaches have been outlined (Richards and Wilson, 2006; Ashworth, 2009) as potential cultural branding strategies for cities: iconic structures or landmark buildings (e.g., Paris and the Eiffel Tower), association with a prominent personality (e.g., Barcelona and Antoni Gaudí), and association with mega-events (such as the European Capital of Culture designation). While these approaches are valuable, a gap persists in understanding the concrete ways in which culture can be strategically integrated into urban identity.

In light of these limitations, the primary aim of the present study is to address the question: *“How can cities build their brand through art and culture?”*

To achieve this overarching goal, the thesis sets out a series of specific objectives structured across multiple levels of analysis. First, the study seeks to investigate relevant theoretical concepts from the fields of culture, creative industries, and city branding, in order to establish the conceptual framework of the research. Second, it aims to identify and analyze cultural marketing strategies employed in the process of urban brand construction, through the examination of relevant European case studies, particularly European Capital of Culture bid books.

Furthermore, the research explores the perceptions and attitudes of key local actors within the cultural ecosystem of Braşov, namely Generation Z youth (as future cultural consumers), decision-makers, digital amplifiers of the city's brand via social media, and cultural operators, regarding the city's current image and the role of culture in its development. It also seeks to assess the potential of these groups to engage in the development of an urban cultural brand, as well as to identify the main barriers and opportunities present at the local level. Finally, based on the findings, the thesis aims to formulate strategic directions and practical recommendations for the development and consolidation of Braşov's cultural brand.

In order to accomplish these objectives, the research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining document analysis, qualitative methods, and quantitative research. A series of studies were conducted (see Table 1), beginning with an international-level documentary analysis. More specifically, an analysis of European Capital of Culture bid books from the 2020–2026 period was carried out in order to investigate cultural branding strategies adopted by European cities. Additionally, the study examined key image-related challenges faced by these cities, given that the persistence of such issues can undermine brand perception.

Subsequently, the research was extended to the municipality of Braşov, a city with well-established national and international tourism visibility, selected as a case study due to its significant yet underutilized cultural potential. In this context, two qualitative studies (focus groups and in-depth interviews with cultural operators) were conducted, alongside a quantitative survey targeting Generation Z respondents, with the aim of exploring pathways for building and strengthening the city's cultural brand.

Beyond its descriptive and exploratory goals, this thesis relies on data triangulation to sharpen the validity and practical relevance of its findings. By pairing an international comparative analysis of European Capital of Culture bid books with locally grounded research in Braşov, the study bridges a critical gap between theory and practice in cultural city branding.

Table 1. Types of Research Conducted, Methodologies Applied, and Objectives Pursued

Nr.	Type of Research	Method	Title and Objectives	Sample / Units of Analysis
•	Qualitative	Descriptive research	Associating the city with a cultural personality O1: Identifying and operationalizing associations between cities and personalities from cultural fields (architecture, literature, music, visual arts) as a mechanism for constructing city image and brand.	4 cultural domains
•	Qualitative	Document analysis	“How can a cultural city brand be built? An analysis of European Capital of Culture bid books (2020–2026)” O2: Identifying patterns regarding the perceived image of contemporary European cities. O3: Investigating key challenges faced by contemporary European cities that may influence their perceived image (issues which, if addressed, could positively impact the city brand). O4: Identifying patterns of an ideal cultural city brand for cities applying for the European Capital of Culture title (2020–2026). O5: Identifying events within the proposed cultural programmes of ECoC candidates that can be scaled at city level and transformed into cultural branding strategies.	14 EcoC Bidbooks
•	Qualitative	Group interviews (focus groups)	“Developing the city brand of Braşov through cultural marketing strategies” O6: Identifying the general perception of the target audience regarding the image of Braşov. O7: Determining the extent to which this image is correlated with cultural events and culture in general. O8: Assessing the target group’s perception of the city’s cultural offer.	3 interviews, 23 participants

		O9: Identifying perceived ways in which Braşov's cultural offer could be improved. O10: Exploring opinions on strategies for improving the promotion of culture and cultural events in Braşov.		
•	Qualitative	In-depth interviews	"How can the cultural brand of Braşov be built?" O11: Investigating cultural operators' perceptions of Braşov's current brand. O12: Exploring respondents' views on the city's cultural framework (infrastructure and cultural vitality). O13: Determining the extent to which the local context facilitates the organization of cultural events and the development of the cultural-creative sector. O14: Identifying key challenges faced by cultural operators that affect the development of a positive cultural image of the city. O15: Exploring cultural operators' views on how Braşov's cultural brand can be developed.	11 experts (NGOs, managers, artists)
•	Quantitative	Survey-based research	"The role of Generation Z in building the cultural brand of Braşov" O16: Investigating Generation Z's perception of Braşov's current brand and identifying dominant brand dimensions in their spontaneous perceptions. O17: Examining how Generation Z relates to cultural events in Braşov and to culture in general. O18: Assessing the openness of Generation Z to new technologies in art and culture (AI, VR, AR). O19: Determining the extent to which young people are willing to engage in the cultural sector in the future. O20: Exploring Generation Z's views on the influence of education on participation in cultural events.	600 valid responses

Source: Author's own elaboration based on conducted research.

In order to achieve the established objectives, as presented in Table 1, the proposed research combines theoretical analysis with empirical investigations within a coherent and methodologically well-grounded framework. The author's methodological contribution lies in the use of a multi-method approach, which

enabled the correlation of data obtained from different sources and the validation of results through triangulation. The integration of document analysis with qualitative research and quantitative study has led to a deeper understanding of the processes through which culture contributes to the shaping of urban identity and image.

The results obtained are anchored in a solid scientific framework, developed through an extensive documentation process in the fields of cultural marketing, city branding, and cultural participation. The bibliography comprises approximately 300 relevant sources, supporting the positioning of the conclusions in relation to the existing literature. Throughout the thesis, 60 tables and 42 figures are included, designed to synthesize information and facilitate the understanding of the results. These are listed at the beginning of the thesis in order to support a structured navigation of the content.

STRUCTURE OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

The present doctoral thesis is composed of seven chapters. The first chapter focuses on the analysis of the specialized literature in the fields of culture and creative industries, aiming to define key concepts such as mass culture, popular culture, subcultures, and countercultures, as well as to establish the distinction between high culture and low culture. The chapter further examines cultural products and services, alongside the expansion of cultural industries within the context of the creative economy. In order to illustrate the contribution of culture and creative industries to urban quality of life, a case study is employed, the Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor, an instrument developed by the European Commission that enables cities to assess the contribution of culture to urban well-being. The final section of the chapter addresses urban regeneration through arts and culture, a process of profound urban transformation, highlighting both its potential and its limitations.

The second chapter is dedicated to the analysis of how a city brand can be constructed and strengthened through cultural marketing strategies. The first part introduces theoretical concepts related to destination marketing, with a focus on city branding as a response to the challenges of globalization and the need for its sustainable development in the digital era. The second part highlights the role of cultural potential in defining an urban brand, addressing aspects such as the impact of major cultural events and the possibility of associating a city with personalities from fields such as architecture, music, literature, or visual arts. This theme is further explored through a descriptive research approach, in which the author identifies relevant examples of cities whose image has been shaped through the use of this strategy. The chapter also analyzes cultural elements with identity value, such as iconic buildings, artistic districts ("cultural headquarters"), and the hypothesis of using a dominant cultural field as a central branding theme (e.g., Cannes, France, often referred to as the "City of Film").

The third chapter proposes a qualitative marketing research study based on document analysis, using as a case study the bid books of European cities applying for the title of European Capital of Culture. These documents provide valuable insights into cities' cultural promotion strategies. The choice of bid books as a starting point is also justified by the fact that they reflect the cities' vision regarding the promotion of their image at both local and international levels. Thus, the research enables a comparative perspective on various cultural branding approaches across Europe.

Within the study, fourteen bid books submitted for the European Capital of Culture title between 2020 and 2026 were analyzed in order to investigate essential components of city branding. The research examines aspects such as the perceived image of candidate cities, the underlying issues shaping this perception, and the ideal brand (the aspirational image), identifying recurring themes that define contemporary European cultural cities. Additionally, the study aims to identify new strategies that complement the framework proposed by G.J. Ashworth (2009), by introducing additional cultural branding tactics.

Following the analysis, the author identified a series of common trends and strategies in the cultural branding approaches of European cities, as well as the challenges they face in defining a clear and attractive long-term image. This research provides an extended knowledge framework and serves as a reference point for the development of subsequent studies focused on the cultural dimension of the city of Braşov.

The originality of the study also lies in its approach to European Capital of Culture bid books as a collection of cultural branding strategies proposed by candidate cities. Each bid book represents, in essence, a cultural vision of the city under optimal financial conditions, thereby holding significant relevance for research in this field.

The following three chapters present research conducted at the level of the city of Braşov, Romania. Although Braşov has benefited from relevant cultural initiatives (including its candidacy for the European Capital of Culture title in 2021), the city's branding continues to be primarily centered on tourism, with a strong emphasis on natural landscapes and architectural heritage. Braşov does not yet

possess a coherent framework for coordinating cultural actions and integrating them into a broader urban development strategy. This structural gap highlights the need for applied research aimed at exploring how the city can develop a coherent cultural brand.

Chapter four consists of a study entitled *“Developing the city brand of Braşov through cultural marketing strategies”* and aims to analyze the perceptions of young people in Braşov regarding the local cultural landscape. The research pursues four main objectives: to determine the general perception of the target audience regarding the image of Braşov; to assess the extent to which this image is associated with cultural events and culture in general; to explore the target group’s views on ways to improve the city’s cultural offer; and to investigate young respondents’ perceptions regarding strategies for promoting culture and cultural events in the city. To this end, three focus group interviews were conducted: two with six participants each and one with eleven participants, involving young individuals aged between 18 and 21 who had been living in Braşov for at least one year. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents who met the selection criteria were considered eligible. Each focus group session was audio-video recorded, and the relevant information was transcribed and coded for subsequent analysis.

The discussion guide included both open-ended and closed-ended questions, with response options such as “yes” or “no.” Two projective research techniques were also employed. The first was a *City Persona* exercise (“If Braşov were a person, how would you describe its personality? How old would it be? How would it spend its day? What passions and hobbies would it have?”). The second was a collage-based *vision board* exercise entitled “Braşov, my ideal city,” in which participants were divided into teams of five to six individuals. They were provided with various materials (A3 sheets, books, magazines, glue, markers) to collaboratively create a collage using words, images, drawings, and symbols. Following the activity, a group discussion was held to reflect on the elements chosen by each team. Each focus group session lasted approximately 150 minutes.

In order to obtain a multidimensional understanding of the artistic environment in Braşov, the next stage of research focused on gathering the perspectives of field experts. Chapter five therefore presents a qualitative study consisting of eleven in-depth interviews with artists, cultural managers, event organizers, and members of cultural NGOs. The objectives included: investigating cultural operators’ perceptions of Braşov’s current brand; exploring respondents’ views on the city’s cultural framework, including infrastructure and cultural vitality; assessing the extent to which the urban context facilitates the organization of cultural events and the development of the cultural and creative industries; identifying key challenges faced by cultural operators that negatively influence the city’s cultural image; and exploring potential directions for developing Braşov’s cultural brand.

The quantitative research, presented in Chapter six, aimed to evaluate the role of Generation Z in building the cultural brand of the municipality of Braşov. A total of 623 individuals participated in the survey, resulting in 600 valid responses. In order to better understand how Generation Z perceives and values the cultural brand of Braşov, the research focused on five main objectives: investigating young people’s perceptions of the current city brand and identifying its dominant dimensions; analyzing how Generation Z relates to cultural events and culture in general; assessing their openness to new technologies in art and culture (AI, VR, AR); determining their willingness to engage in the cultural sector in the future; and examining the influence of education on their participation in cultural events.

The final chapter of the thesis synthesizes the main issues identified through the research, which affect the image and dynamics of Braşov’s cultural environment, and proposes a coherent set of strategic directions for the development of the city’s cultural brand. In its second part, the thesis advances an applied approach, materialized in the concept of a multiannual festival designed as a strategic cultural marketing instrument, capable of generating memorable experiences, stimulating the participation of young audiences, and contributing to the distinctive positioning of Braşov within the contemporary cultural landscape.

RESULTS OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

The analysis of the image of cities applying for the European Capital of Culture title (at the time of drafting their bid books) reveals recurring themes, which were categorized into four major dimensions.

The first identified pattern relates to post-industrial cities. The analyzed documents indicate that cities such as Rijeka, Eleusis, and Chemnitz face challenges associated with transitioning from their industrial past. For these cities, obtaining the European Capital of Culture title represents an opportunity to redefine themselves beyond their industrial roots by leveraging their cultural potential. A second dimension reflects perceptions of isolation and distance. Bodø and Tartu exemplify this pattern: Bodø is associated with a cold and distant atmosphere, while Tartu's academic legacy is overshadowed by a perceived lack of dynamism and enthusiasm among both residents and visitors. Once a vibrant multicultural city, Kaunas in Lithuania is perceived as neglected and undervalued. Similarly, Nova Gorica and Gorizia fall into this category, being described as "lacking soul and vitality."

Some of the analyzed cities either lack an established brand or possess one that does not align with the desired image promoted by local administrations. Consequently, another identified pattern concerns challenges related to identity and recognition. For instance, Nova Gorica remains relatively unknown, while Rijeka struggles with a fragmented identity. Esch-sur-Alzette is primarily associated with its financial status and role as a tax haven, overshadowing other important aspects of its identity. Veszprém in Hungary carries the historical label of the "City of Queens" but grapples with the burden of historical trauma and fragmented identities, which affect its visibility. Bad Ischl in Austria is often perceived primarily as a natural retreat for relaxation, which limits the visibility of other dimensions of its identity. In the case of Ljubljana, a candidate city for 2025, its reputation is strongly tied to environmental awareness, to the detriment of its cultural identity. Oulu in Finland faces the challenge of being perceived mainly as a rigid technological city, which undermines other aspects of its character. Finally, Trenčín is regarded as one of Slovakia's historical gems and seeks to add a cultural dimension to its existing image through its ECoC candidacy.

The fourth category includes negative image stereotypes. Kaunas, once a vibrant multicultural city, was perceived at the time of its bid as undergoing a process of stagnation and neglect. Timișoara is associated with a passive and nostalgic perception, overshadowed by its historical image as the first Romanian city to overcome communism. Nova Gorica and Gorizia are burdened by stereotypes of lacking energy, while Eleusis is labeled as a city marked by indolence and unproductivity. Overcoming these image stereotypes in order to promote a positive perception among stakeholders constituted a key objective addressed by the cities in their cultural programmes.

The second research question addressed in the study was: *"What are some of the major underlying issues shaping the perceived image of European cities bidding for the European Capital of Culture title?"* In their bid books, each candidate city identified a series of challenges to be addressed through their cultural programmes. These challenges vary significantly, reflecting the complex historical trajectories of urban transformation.

During the analysis related to this objective, five major categories of issues associated with city image were identified. These were subsequently coded as follows: economic challenges, including low investment and unemployment (5); demographic ageing, youth emigration, brain drain, and knowledge deficits (6); lack of active citizenship and limited civic responsibility (7); difficulties in integrating immigrants and marginalized groups, alongside concerns related to xenophobia (8); and individualism at the expense of solidarity (9), as detailed in Annex 15.

The first pattern thus relates to economic challenges, including low investment and unemployment. These issues are mentioned by cities such as Rijeka (unemployment and transition challenges linked to its industrial past) and Eleusis (unemployment and youth migration). Esch also highlights migration from outside Europe as an additional economic challenge. A second recurring issue concerns demographic ageing, youth emigration, brain drain, and knowledge deficits, which affect the image of cities

competing for the ECoC title. These aspects are particularly emphasized by Rijeka and Eleusis in the context of deindustrialization, as well as by Tartu, which identifies marginalization as a key concern. Trenčín also raises the issue of brain drain, while expressions such as “my city has no soul” and “my city has no life,” voiced by residents of Nova Gorica and Gorizia, reflect the consequences of youth emigration.

A third dimension identified is the lack of active citizens and limited civic responsibility. Timișoara highlights declining civic participation and a lack of responsibility for shared spaces. The Veszprém-Balaton region identifies entrenched passivity and a lack of trust among residents. Similarly, Kaunas faces challenges related to weak civic responsibility, compounded by limited cross-sector collaboration and insufficient connections between culture, education, business, and social sectors.

A fourth category of issues concerns difficulties in integrating immigrants and marginalized groups, as well as concerns related to xenophobia. Ljubljana points to challenges in linguistic and cultural integration, while similar issues are noted in the bid books of Timișoara and Esch-sur-Alzette. Xenophobia, intolerance, and political extremism are highlighted by Chemnitz, underscoring the need to address these issues through culture and public policy. Trenčín also emphasizes the issue of individualism at the expense of solidarity. Additionally, Oulu and Trenčín point to socio-economic imbalances within urban communities, while Ljubljana highlights disparities between urban, suburban, and rural areas, leading to unequal access to resources, uneven distribution of public services, and challenges in fostering social cohesion.

For cities competing for the European Capital of Culture title, the aspirational city brand is closely linked to an ideal cultural profile. However, each candidate city presents distinct characteristics. The first ideal image identified is that of a “dynamic city revitalized through culture.” Cultural diversity is viewed in several bid books as a means of restoring social energy. Cities such as Rijeka, Kaunas, and Eleusis aim to revitalize their cultural fabric in order to enhance quality of life, while Veszprém-Balaton and Esch-sur-Alzette aspire to become culturally attractive and relevant destinations.

The image of a “city with active and engaged citizens” represents another aspirational model. Timișoara seeks to become a city driven by civic energy, where citizens are motivated to participate actively in public life. Similarly, Tartu is envisioned as a place that encourages residents to “stand up and speak out,” while Chemnitz aspires to become a “truly democratic city.” Cities such as Bodø, Chemnitz, and Ljubljana also associate their ideal cultural image with digitalization and innovation, giving rise to the “smart city” model as a third identified pattern.

The theme of the “green and sustainable city” is recurrent across most bid books. Some cities, however, focus explicitly on this dimension. Oulu expresses its ambition to become a “creative and vibrant city” with a strong emphasis on sustainability, while Trenčín envisions a “green cultural capital for all.” Bad Ischl aims to transition from a city characterized by mass tourism to one practicing sustainable tourism. Finally, Nova Gorica (Slovenia) and Gorizia (Italy) envision a “conurban brand,” the first of its kind among European Capital of Culture winners, introducing a distinct model of the “collaborative city.”

With regard to achieving the fourth objective (O4), ten emerging strategies for developing a city brand through culture were identified. These are outlined as follows.

The first identified strategy is “culture on water” or culture adapted to a specific natural environment. Cities located near water bodies (such as seas, rivers, or lakes) can enhance or strengthen their image by organizing cultural events tailored to these environments. These may include floating stages, underwater performances, as well as sound and art installations. Extending this idea further, city administrations can also explore other natural settings, such as hills, forests, or even unused agricultural land, to create successful cultural events that can become associated with the city’s brand image.

The second strategy involves transforming alternative spaces into cultural hubs, including the revitalization of former industrial sites. Administrators can repurpose spaces such as historic cafés, pavilions, containers, old garages, mountain cabins, or rooftops to host events and performances. This can also be combined with the adoption of a cultural theme for the city, such as “City of Film” or “Music City.” In Chemnitz, Germany, for instance, 3,000 old garages are planned to be converted into creative

laboratories or cultural venues by 2025. Similarly, rooftop events are proposed in the Veszprém-Balaton bid book, while Trenčín mentions spa centers as potential cultural spaces. Former industrial sites—factories, water towers, ships, cranes, and railways, can be reimagined as cultural infrastructure, contributing to a profound transformation of urban perception.

Another strategy consists of transforming transport systems into moving art galleries. Cities can promote their identity by turning buses, trams, trains, or boats into spaces for exhibitions, theatre performances, poetry sessions, and film screenings. Subway systems in Stockholm and Moscow are well-known examples of underground artistic environments, with Moscow featuring numerous stations listed as cultural heritage sites.

Beyond associating cities with historical personalities, as suggested by Ashworth, cities may also promote themselves culturally by focusing on specific historical moments or artistic movements. Notable examples include Vienna and the Secessionist movement, or Tokyo and the Superflat movement initiated by Takashi Murakami. Proposed initiatives in this category include light holograms of lost historical buildings or public spaces transformed into 360-degree digital panoramas that present the city's history. Thus, emphasizing historical and artistic movements represents another viable branding strategy.

Some European Capital of Culture bid books incorporate gamification-based cultural activities within urban circuits or thematic tours. Beyond contributing to the preservation of local heritage, cultural gamification encourages both visitors and residents to engage more deeply with urban narratives, discovering artworks, architecture, and public spaces that might otherwise go unnoticed. Activities such as treasure hunts can enhance urban dynamism and increase awareness of local potential. These strategies can be integrated with artistic walks, cycling routes, and thematic circuits, using either physical installations or virtual reality technologies, and can be expanded across key neighborhoods.

“Grassroots culture,” or the promotion of arts in unconventional spaces such as kindergartens, schools, hospitals, or restaurants, represents another strategy capable of generating a broad cultural movement involving both residents and tourists. Although its effects may not be immediately measurable, this approach can produce long-term benefits, including increased well-being and the integration of amateur artistic practices into the creative economy.

City administrations may also choose a representative cultural domain (such as gastronomy) and use it as a central branding theme. A relevant example is Cannes, France, internationally recognized as a “City of Film.” The UNESCO Creative Cities Network, established in 2004, currently includes over 350 cities from more than 100 countries, each associated with one of seven creative domains: film, literature, music, crafts and folk art, design, gastronomy, and media arts. This thematic positioning contributes to the formal recognition and strengthening of cultural city brands.

Another identified strategy involves highlighting minority cultures. Events centered on the Sami culture in Bodø, Norway, demonstrate how cities can become associated with the positive attributes of minority cultural identities.

Cross-border collaboration represents an additional strategy, whereby neighboring cities located on either side of a border can enhance their brands by combining cultural resources into shared artistic experiences. Cities may also gain recognition through innovative approaches to art, including digital media, sustainable architecture, sound installations, and hybrid cultural forms. Cultural fusion can emerge through the creative combination of subcultures and traditional elements, for example, blending contemporary music genres with folk dance performances, as proposed in Trenčín.

The tenth strategy involves leveraging local folklore and mythical figures. Beyond associations with well-known mythological characters (such as King Arthur and Winchester), cities can develop narratives around local legends, creatures, or symbolic figures (e.g., the Beast of Kaunas or the Loch Ness Monster) to differentiate their cultural identity.

The analysis of European Capital of Culture programmes revealed that, over time, bid books tend to present fewer novel ideas regarding large-scale cultural events that could be transformed into city-wide

strategies. However, future bid books, particularly those developed after 2026—may introduce new approaches, especially in the context of rapid global transformations such as political instability, the rise of artificial intelligence, and increasing emphasis on sustainability.

The following three studies focused on Braşov, Romania, a tourist city with significant latent cultural potential. The qualitative research conducted through focus groups aimed to explore young people's perceptions of the city's image and its relationship with the local cultural offer. The findings indicate that the general image of Braşov is strongly associated with its natural and historical heritage (Mount Tâmpa, the medieval center), while the cultural dimension plays a less prominent role in defining the city's brand. Moreover, the link between the city's image and its cultural events is perceived as moderate to weak.

Participants expressed a critical view of the city's cultural offer, describing it as insufficiently diversified and not fully aligned with the interests of younger audiences. Despite the presence of established cultural institutions and recurring events, these do not consistently attract young participants. A recurring issue highlighted was the low level of youth engagement in cultural life, often attributed to lack of time, limited interest, or insufficient promotion of events.

In terms of improving the cultural offer, participants emphasized the need for diversification and innovation, including the development of contemporary, youth-oriented events, the extension of nightlife beyond 22:00, and the organization of thematic festivals throughout the year. The involvement of universities and educational institutions was also seen as essential in revitalizing the cultural scene.

Regarding cultural promotion strategies, the findings highlight the need for a more modern and proactive approach. Current communication efforts are perceived as insufficient, particularly in reaching younger audiences. Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are underutilized, and participants suggested the implementation of interactive digital campaigns, visually engaging content, and the creation of a centralized online platform or mobile application for cultural events in Braşov.

The investigation of cultural operators' perceptions confirmed that tourism remains the dominant sector associated with Braşov. While some respondents consider that the city lacks a clearly defined brand, several recurring descriptors emerged, including "the most beautiful city in Romania," "green city," "nature," "Tâmpa," and "multicultural," alongside references to conservatism. Key events and landmarks identified as relevant to the city brand include traditional festivals, cultural events, and emblematic buildings such as the Black Church and Council Square.

Overall, the findings highlight the central role of natural heritage and the historic center in shaping Braşov's image, while also revealing the need for a stronger integration of cultural elements into the city's branding strategy.

The second objective, namely, exploring respondents' views regarding the city's cultural framework (infrastructure and cultural vitality), was achieved by addressing five key questions: "What is your general opinion on Braşov's cultural infrastructure (museums, creative hubs, available spaces for cultural events, heritage buildings and sites, facilities and technologies supporting cultural industries)?", "Please mention three venues in Braşov where you have organized events. How would you evaluate these experiences in terms of infrastructure? What could be improved for future projects?", "How would you assess the cultural dynamism/vitality of the city (number of events per year, seasonal distribution, level of centralization, etc.)?", and "How would you describe the audience for cultural events in Braşov?"

The responses indicate that, although the city benefits from clear advantages in terms of geographical positioning, particularly the ability to attract foreign tourists, which is seen as a major asset for organizing cultural projects, available spaces remain insufficient, and access to them is often hindered by bureaucratic barriers. Most respondents noted improvements in communication with funding authorities and increased transparency in funding allocation in recent years. However, cultural operators still perceive a lack of logistical support in the implementation of activities. Another issue highlighted by event organizers is the difficulty in attracting participants and building audience loyalty, despite the existence of recurring events validated by the local community. Overall, the extent to which

the urban context facilitates the organization of cultural events and the development of the cultural and creative sector is perceived as moderate, thus addressing the third research objective. More broadly, the findings suggest that cultural infrastructure remains insufficient and requires improvement.

The fourth research objective was achieved through the analysis of responses to the question: “What do you consider to be the main challenges faced by cultural operators in Braşov?” In addition, throughout the interviews, respondents consistently emphasized the difficulties encountered in planning and implementing cultural projects, providing a comprehensive picture of the shortcomings within the local cultural ecosystem.

The most pressing issues identified include insufficient funding and limited know-how in accessing funding opportunities, a lack of qualified personnel, bureaucratic obstacles in accessing spaces, insufficient logistical support from public authorities, ineffective communication with local authorities, the absence of a cohesive artistic community, the lack of a Faculty of Arts to bridge the generational gap between vocational high school graduates and established artists relocating to Braşov, a general preference for mainstream events over niche cultural initiatives, and a relatively inexperienced audience that is difficult to retain.

The final objective of the qualitative research, namely, identifying cultural operators’ perspectives on how Braşov’s cultural brand can be developed, was addressed through four guiding questions. The analysis revealed that most respondents do not perceive the existence of a clearly defined cultural brand for Braşov, as the city’s image remains strongly associated with other dimensions such as its natural environment, ecological orientation, and historical architecture. Although culture is recognized as a component of the city’s brand, it does not occupy a central role. Suggested directions for strengthening the cultural brand include focusing on a specific theme (e.g., gastronomy), emphasizing multiculturalism, diversifying events, adopting international trends, promoting cultural education in schools, and fostering collaboration with cities at both national and international levels.

The subsequent quantitative research aimed to determine the role of Generation Z in shaping Braşov’s cultural brand. The need for this study emerged from the findings of the previous qualitative research, including focus groups with students and in-depth interviews with cultural operators. These earlier studies provided insights into perceptions of the city’s image, the local cultural environment, existing challenges, promotional practices, and the overall cultural branding potential of Braşov.

Building on these insights, a quantitative study targeting young people in Braşov was conducted to complement previous findings and to assess both current and potential levels of engagement of Generation Z in the city’s cultural life. The author considered it particularly relevant to explore this demographic segment, given its future role as both residents and professionals. Generation Z, characterized by openness to cultural diversity, emerging technologies, and innovation, has the potential to contribute significantly to the transformation of Braşov into a vibrant cultural hub.

The study focused on individuals aged 18–27, representing a transitional stage into adulthood and labor market integration. Some respondents are already socially and culturally active, contributing to the city’s dynamics through entrepreneurial initiatives. Understanding their expectations and perspectives is essential for developing an attractive cultural identity for both tourists and investors.

Moreover, Generation Z exerts a strong influence in the digital environment, and their feedback can support effective promotion of Braşov on social media platforms, strengthening the city’s reputation nationally and internationally. Integrating their perspectives into cultural branding strategies is therefore essential for ensuring long-term relevance and attractiveness.

The research was structured around five main objectives, each corresponding to the questions included in the questionnaire. The first objective aimed to highlight young people’s perceptions of Braşov’s current brand, as well as to identify the brand dimensions associated with the city. In this regard, the study examined the extent to which respondents reported feeling attached to the city, their spontaneous associations with various identity elements (such as the natural environment, architecture, community, or culture), and the affective vocabulary associated with Braşov. The results revealed that, although it was initially assumed that Generation Z’s attachment to the city would be relatively weak,

the data contradict this hypothesis. In response to the question “Do you feel attached to the city of Braşov?”, an overwhelming 91% of respondents answered affirmatively, while only 6% reported not feeling attached, and 3% were unsure. These figures indicate a high level of emotional identification with the city, suggesting that Braşov successfully fosters a sense of belonging among young people, whether they are natives or individuals temporarily residing in the city for studies or work.

This discrepancy between the high level of emotional attachment and the relatively weak association of the city with its cultural dimension is particularly relevant for the analysis of Braşov’s urban brand. The findings suggest that the city benefits from strong symbolic capital, built around its natural setting, architectural heritage, and perceived quality of urban life; however, this capital does not automatically translate into a consolidated perception of Braşov as a contemporary cultural city. Furthermore, the results indicate that existing cultural events have not yet become defining elements of the city’s image among Generation Z. From this perspective, the development of a cultural urban brand requires not only the existence of a cultural offer, but also its capacity to generate memorable, recognizable, and relevant experiences for young audiences.

Regarding spontaneous identity associations, frequency analysis revealed that young people primarily associate the city’s image with its natural environment (43% of responses) and its architecture (38.5%). A smaller proportion of respondents (8.5%) identified the local community (“the people”) as a defining feature of the city. Other aspects, such as mountain sports, economic opportunities, or job availability, were mentioned marginally (below 5%), indicating their limited relevance within the spontaneous identity hierarchy. The cultural dimension was only weakly associated with the city: just 3.5% of respondents mentioned culture or cultural events as part of Braşov’s image.

The hypotheses regarding how young people associate Braşov with different identity elements were largely confirmed. The city is perceived primarily through its natural environment and architectural features, while the cultural dimension is not spontaneously associated with its identity, thus confirming the third hypothesis.

The second objective aimed to explore the relationship between Generation Z and local cultural events. The study analyzed areas of artistic interest, frequency of participation in cultural events, key barriers to access, and perceptions of the current cultural offer. The questionnaire also included questions regarding suggestions for improving the city’s cultural attractiveness, reflecting on types of events that could stimulate interest among this demographic group.

The analysis of artistic preferences, based on a sample of 600 respondents who were allowed to select multiple options, indicates that music is the most popular domain (71%), followed by film (63%). Theatre attracts 41% of respondents, while visual arts such as painting and sculpture are preferred by 39%. Fashion and design were selected by 36.5% of respondents, and gastronomy by 29%. Literature and reading are appreciated by 27.5% of Generation Z respondents in Braşov, while urban culture and street art appeal to 25%. Digital culture and new media were selected by 22% of respondents, while traditional cultural events ranked last (17%). Additionally, 20% of respondents selected the option “other types of events.” These results highlight a clear preference for music and film, while also emphasizing the need for adaptability in cultural programming to reflect the diverse interests of young audiences.

The analysis of participation frequency revealed that most respondents engage in cultural events at a moderate level, with a tendency toward lower participation. 53.5% of respondents attend cultural events in Braşov at least once every two to three months.

The analysis of barriers to participation showed that the most frequently cited obstacle is a busy schedule. This is followed by a lack of information about events, peer influence (particularly when friends do not participate), and alternative leisure preferences such as sports or gaming. Other barriers include ticket costs and the perception that existing cultural events are not tailored to young audiences. These findings highlight the need for a more relevant and accessible cultural offer.

The data also show that the majority of respondents consider culture and art essential for their education and personal development, with over 70% expressing this belief. However, only slightly more

than half consider that the city provides sufficient cultural opportunities, indicating a moderately positive perception but also a significant potential for development.

An important finding is that over 90% of respondents would like Braşov to become more culturally active after 22:00, reflecting a clear need to adapt event programming to the lifestyle of young people. There is also a strong interest in hybrid events that combine culture with other domains: over 50% believe that such formats (including sports, IT, or masterclasses) would enhance the city's attractiveness. More than 80% expressed interest in interactive experiences such as creative workshops, immersive performances, or theatre and dance courses, and a similarly high proportion are open to digital and experimental art experiences. Furthermore, the idea of establishing a Faculty of Arts in Braşov was well received, with over 70% support, being perceived both as an educational opportunity and as a means of strengthening the city's cultural profile among younger generations.

The hypothesis that over 70% of young people prefer less traditional, more contemporary cultural events was not confirmed, as only 49.5% associated such events with increased urban attractiveness.

The third objective focused on assessing Generation Z's openness to new technologies in the cultural and artistic fields. The study evaluated respondents' familiarity with emerging concepts such as new media art, artificial intelligence, and augmented reality, as well as their involvement in artistic content creation, including at an amateur level. The findings indicate a moderate level of familiarity with contemporary art concepts, thus invalidating hypothesis H15. Virtual reality (VR) is the most widely recognized concept, with 47% of respondents considering themselves knowledgeable or highly familiar with it, while NFTs and new media art are less well understood, with only 13% reporting familiarity.

The research results highlight a significant transformation in the way Generation Z relates to cultural consumption. For this audience segment, culture is no longer perceived exclusively as a contemplative act, taking place within a formal and institutionalized framework, but rather as a participatory, social, and interactive experience. Respondents' preference for creative workshops, immersive experiences, multimedia installations, or events that combine art with technology indicates an orientation toward fluid, hybrid, and multisensory cultural forms, characteristic of contemporary digital culture.

At the same time, the strong interest in cultural activities taking place after 22:00 suggests the need to reconfigure the temporal dynamics of the city's cultural life. For Generation Z, leisure time and cultural experiences are often associated with social interaction, urban mobility, and engagement outside conventional schedules. In this context, the development of a nighttime cultural economy may represent an important strategic instrument for enhancing Braşov's urban attractiveness. Cultural spaces activated in the evening or at night, light installations, performative routes, multimedia projections, or pop-up events can contribute to redefining the relationship between young people and urban space.

Furthermore, the preference for events that combine culture and technology reflects broader global transformations within the cultural and creative industries. In recent years, numerous European cities have begun to employ digital tools and interactive experiences in order to attract younger audiences and to foster contemporary forms of cultural participation. Augmented reality, interactive installations, VR experiences, and the integration of artificial intelligence into artistic practices are increasingly present in festivals and urban cultural projects. In this regard, respondents' interest in such experiences indicates a significant potential for the development of innovative cultural projects in Braşov.

Another relevant aspect is the orientation of young people toward cultural experiences characterized by a high degree of participation and personalization. Unlike traditional cultural models, based on a clear separation between artist and audience, Generation Z in Braşov appears to prefer contexts in which the spectator becomes an active participant, co-creator, or integral part of the cultural experience, aligning with current European trends of direct audience engagement. At the same time, the findings suggest that the cultural attractiveness of a city no longer depends solely on heritage or the presence of traditional cultural institutions, but also on the capacity of urban space to generate contemporary experiences relevant to new generations. In the case of Braşov, there is a clear opportunity to develop an urban cultural model that simultaneously leverages historical heritage, public spaces, and emerging

creative technologies, thereby positioning the city within a contemporary and competitive cultural landscape.

The fourth objective of the research was to determine the degree of willingness among young people in Braşov to engage in the city's cultural life in the future. The intention to become actively involved, whether as volunteers, organizers, or creators of cultural events, was considered an indicator of this generation's potential to energize the local cultural scene. The analysis of responses shows that 33% of respondents would like to work in the cultural sector, while 39.5% are willing to volunteer in the organization of cultural events. Together, these categories represent 72.5% of the sample, indicating a significant level of interest in the cultural sector. By contrast, 17.5% of respondents stated that they would not consider working in this field, while 10% were uncertain.

The final objective of the research focused on the relationship between education and participation in cultural events. The analysis of responses allowed for an assessment of the extent to which educational institutions in Braşov contribute to fostering a positive attitude toward culture and stimulating young people's interest in active cultural participation. The findings indicate that, although 89% of respondents believe that their education contributes to their participation in cultural events to some extent, only 15% perceive this influence as being very strong, while 11% do not perceive education as having any influence in this regard.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

European cities increasingly use cultural projects not only to respond to structural challenges, such as economic decline, population ageing, youth migration, or social polarization, but also to develop and strengthen their brand identity.

The main objective of this thesis was to investigate how cities can construct their brand identity through cultural marketing strategies. More specifically, the study sought to answer the central research question: *how can a city brand be concretely built through arts and culture?* Existing studies identify a limited number of cultural branding approaches, such as associating cities with cultural personalities, leveraging iconic architecture, or organizing mega-events, but they do not provide a comprehensive set of directions nor an operational understanding of how these strategies are implemented in practice. The research therefore originated from the identification of this gap in the literature.

In this context, the first two studies of the thesis address the same issue from complementary perspectives. The descriptive research, based on international examples, highlights concrete ways in which cities strengthen their cultural image through associations with prominent figures from fields such as architecture, music, literature, and visual arts. These associations are operationalized through instruments such as the development of cultural infrastructure (museums, memorial houses), the organization of thematic festivals, the creation of cultural tours, interventions in public space (monuments, urban art), and the use of digital communication campaigns.

The analysis of fourteen European Capital of Culture bid books extends this perspective by identifying additional cultural branding tactics. Beyond the strategies traditionally discussed in the literature, European cities develop their cultural identity by repurposing alternative spaces into creative hubs, transforming transport systems into moving art galleries, leveraging historical moments or artistic movements, incorporating gamification into cultural experiences, promoting “grassroots culture,” highlighting minority cultures, fostering unexpected cultural fusions, and reactivating local folklore. These thematic directions can be scaled at the city level and transformed into strategic pillars for urban brand development.

Furthermore, the documentary analysis reveals that European cities use culture as a response to a series of recurring structural challenges that shape their image, including economic decline (low investment and unemployment), population ageing, youth migration, lack of civic engagement, difficulties in integrating marginalized groups, and social polarization. In this context, cultural strategies can function as instruments for reconstructing local identity.

The following three studies were conducted at the level of the city of Braşov, Romania, with the main objective of investigating the local cultural environment and examining how a cultural identity can be developed alongside the city’s predominantly tourism-oriented image. Braşov was selected as a case study because it illustrates the tension between an already established urban image, centered on tourism and natural landscape, and the existence of cultural potential capable of supporting a more nuanced redefinition of its identity.

The results of the three focus group interviews, conducted with young people aged 18 to 22 from Braşov, reveal a city brand primarily characterized by an attractive natural environment, historical architecture, and green development strategies, with only moderate recognition of its cultural potential. Participants highlighted several directions for improving the cultural offer, including the need for more diverse activities, the organization of events after 22:00, contemporary performances, and the development of year-round festivals (including winter editions), particularly those built around distinctive themes (e.g., vintage, gothic, rustic). They also emphasized the importance of niche events and the need for promotional strategies adapted to the “TikTok generation,” characterized by short attention spans and different patterns of engagement with cultural content.

Furthermore, the analysis of the eleven in-depth interviews with cultural operators reinforced the idea of Braşov as a predominantly tourism-driven brand and brought to the forefront several key directions for the development of the city’s cultural brand. The majority of respondents agreed that the cultural

sector currently occupies a marginal position within the city's brand identity and identified a number of challenges affecting the local artistic ecosystem, including insufficient administrative support, limited know-how in accessing funding, and a lack of spaces for events and cultural infrastructure in general.

Respondents proposed several directions for strengthening Braşov's cultural dimension, including a focus on distinctive themes such as gastronomy or multiculturalism, which align with both the city's heritage and current international trends. Another key recommendation was the diversification of cultural events, with broad consensus on the need for a greater variety of performances, including experimental and niche formats. Increasing educational initiatives aimed at familiarizing young audiences with the value of cultural events was also emphasized. The involvement of schools and universities in Braşov's cultural programming could contribute to the development of a more informed and engaged audience. Additional strategies include building partnerships with other cities, both nationally and internationally, in order to exchange cultural practices and enhance the city's attractiveness. These collaborations could take the form of cultural exchanges, artist residencies, or community festivals, showcasing Braşov's unique cultural offerings to a broader audience. Finally, integrating sustainability into the city's cultural offer could further strengthen Braşov's identity as a "green city." Organizing environmentally friendly events, promoting sustainability as a cultural theme, and linking the natural environment with cultural activities could attract environmentally conscious tourists while also fostering ecological awareness among local residents.

The results of the quantitative research (the final study of the thesis) further emphasize the importance of strengthening communication strategies in the cultural sector, diversifying the cultural offer, and intensifying educational efforts in order to more effectively engage Generation Z in Braşov's artistic landscape. Conducted on a sample of 600 Generation Z respondents, the study aimed to better understand young people's perceptions of the city's cultural life, to assess their level of cultural literacy, and to evaluate their potential future involvement in the cultural sector. One of the most notable findings was the overwhelmingly high level of attachment to the city, with 91% of respondents expressing a strong sense of belonging. Additionally, 86% reported being involved in the creation of artistic content. Openness to new technologies varied, with the highest levels of familiarity recorded for virtual reality (47%) and augmented reality (37.3%), while concepts such as NFTs and new media art remain less widely understood. Interest in future engagement in the cultural sector is also high, with 198 respondents expressing a desire to work in the field and 237 willing to volunteer at cultural events. Finally, the study highlighted the important role of education in promoting cultural participation, with 89% of respondents stating that their attendance at cultural events is influenced by their educational experience.

The final chapter of the thesis represents the point of convergence of the entire research process, synthesizing the main dysfunctions of Braşov's cultural ecosystem, namely the lack of a coherent strategic vision, the fragmentation of the cultural offer, and the absence of a clearly defined cultural brand. Based on these findings, a set of strategic directions is proposed, aimed at structuring the city's cultural identity, diversifying its cultural events, and increasing the engagement of young audiences.

Building on these directions, the chapter operationalizes the research results through the development of an applied model for strengthening the urban cultural brand, materialized in the proposal of the multiannual festival "*Braşov: Now Playing.*" Conceived as both a cultural marketing instrument and a tool for urban activation, the festival functions as an integrative mechanism capable of generating coherence within the cultural offer, stimulating participation and co-creation, and contributing to the positioning of Braşov as a space of contemporary culture, oriented toward innovation and new generations. The present research offers both a theoretical contribution, by extending the conceptual framework of cultural city branding, and a practical one, through the formulation of an operational model adapted to the analyzed urban context and aligned with both local realities and international trends.

The thesis is relevant for marketers, city administrators, cultural leaders, and urban planners, providing insights into how cities can leverage cultural resources and associated marketing strategies to address structural challenges and to build a coherent brand identity.

Despite these contributions, the research presents a number of limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results and assessing their degree of generalizability.

Over the five years dedicated to the development of this thesis, the field of urban cultural branding has undergone substantial transformations within a rapidly evolving socio-technological context. The acceleration of digitalization, the rise of video-centered social media platforms, and the development of interactive technologies have significantly reshaped the ways in which audiences perceive, access, and engage with cultural heritage and urban identity. During the same period, cities worldwide have increasingly integrated technologies such as augmented reality, virtual reality, and digital heritage projects into the urban experience, generating new forms of participation and opening innovative research directions. At the same time, the emergence and development of generative artificial intelligence represent a turning point. The ability of these technologies to analyze large volumes of data, identify patterns in digital feedback, and generate artistic and narrative content introduces significant methodological opportunities. Had such tools been available in the early stages of this research, the methodological design would likely have evolved differently, particularly in terms of data collection and analysis efficiency, as well as in simulating co-creation scenarios involving community participation in cultural branding.

Within the thesis, the documentary analysis focused on a limited number of European Capital of Culture bid books, which may restrict the global generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the empirical research is anchored in a specific local context, namely the municipality of Braşov, characterized by a strong identity associated with tourism and natural heritage. This specificity influences the strategic directions identified and limits the direct transferability of the results to other cities, particularly those with different economic, social, or cultural profiles.

Another important limitation concerns the structure and diversity of the investigated samples. The quantitative component of the research focused predominantly on Generation Z (600 respondents), offering a relevant perspective on a key segment of the cultural audience, but only a partial view of the broader urban population. The absence of a balanced representation of other age groups, such as middle-aged adults or seniors, may lead to an incomplete understanding of cultural behaviors and needs across the entire community. In addition, the methods employed, particularly interviews and questionnaires, rely on self-reported data, which may be affected by social desirability bias or the tendency to provide socially acceptable responses.

Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the research does not allow for capturing the evolution of the studied phenomenon over time. Cultural branding is a dynamic process, influenced by socio-economic, political, and technological factors; therefore, the analysis provides a snapshot specific to a particular moment. The lack of a longitudinal perspective limits the understanding of how cultural strategies contribute to long-term transformations of urban identity and the consolidation of the city brand.

Overall, these limitations do not diminish the relevance of the findings, but rather highlight the need for future research to expand the scope of analysis, diversify samples, and further investigate the phenomenon through complementary methodological approaches.

Building on the results of the present study, several relevant directions for future research in the field of cultural city branding can be identified.

Extending the comparative analysis of cultural branding strategies emerges as a necessary step for strengthening the proposed conceptual framework. Integrating a larger number of cities from diverse geographical and cultural contexts, as well as conducting comparative analyses between winning and non-winning European Capital of Culture candidates, would enable the identification of additional recurring patterns and the validation of the emerging strategies highlighted in this research.

Further in-depth comparative studies of tourist cities with significant but underutilized cultural potential could be conducted through multi-case research designs, including cities from Romania and Central and Eastern Europe. Such an approach could combine interviews with decision-makers, analysis of cultural policies, and evaluation of public perceptions, in order to identify the mechanisms through which cultural identity can complement or reconfigure tourism-based identity.

The dynamic nature of city branding calls for the development of longitudinal research capable of tracking changes over time in public perception, cultural participation, and the economic impact of cultural interventions. A concrete research direction could involve the annual monitoring of indicators such as event participation frequency, levels of attachment to the city, or perceptions of the cultural offer, both before and after the implementation of strategic interventions (for example, the launch of a multiannual festival). Such an approach would enable the evaluation of the sustainability of proposed strategies and provide a deeper understanding of the processes of constructing and reconstructing urban identity.

Expanding the analysis to include other audience segments becomes essential for a comprehensive understanding of the urban cultural ecosystem. Exploring the perceptions and cultural behaviors of adults, seniors, and tourists would contribute to the development of more inclusive and audience-sensitive branding strategies.

The integration of emerging technologies into urban cultural experiences represents another area with significant research potential. Virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and new forms of digital art can redefine how culture is produced, distributed, and consumed, requiring in-depth investigation into their impact on the relationship between audiences and cultural space.

The relationship between cultural branding and urban sustainability also opens an important field of inquiry. Examining how cultural strategies can incorporate ecological dimensions and contribute to the development of socially responsible cities is becoming increasingly relevant in the current context.

Finally, the findings of this research highlight the need for further exploration of community involvement, particularly that of young people, in the process of building a cultural city brand. Investigating mechanisms of co-creation, forms of active participation, and models of collaborative governance may lead to the development of cultural strategies that are more closely aligned with audience needs. At the same time, future research could explore the role of culture as an instrument of social inclusion, by examining how cultural practices contribute to reducing polarization and integrating social diversity into the city brand.

PERSONAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The present study was developed with the aim of investigating how cities can construct their brand identity through cultural marketing strategies, seeking to formulate an operational response to this issue. The entire research process was designed and conducted by the author, with personal contributions evident at all stages of the work, from the definition of the conceptual framework to the development of the applied model presented in the final chapter of the thesis.

The research makes a significant contribution to the field of cultural branding, beginning with the analysis of bid books submitted by European cities competing for the European Capital of Culture title—a type of document rarely explored in the literature from a cultural branding perspective. Based on the analysis of fourteen such bid books, a series of concrete strategies used by European cities to construct their cultural identity were identified, including the reconversion of industrial spaces into creative hubs, the transformation of transport systems into mobile artistic spaces, the valorization of historical moments or artistic movements, the use of gamification in cultural experiences, and the promotion of “grassroots culture.” These findings complement existing theories in the literature, which primarily emphasize association with prominent cultural personalities, the use of iconic architecture, and the organization of mega-events as fundamental elements in shaping a city’s image and brand.

Another key contribution lies in highlighting the role of culture as a response to structural urban challenges that affect the image of cities. The documentary analysis demonstrated that European cities employ cultural strategies to counteract phenomena such as economic decline, youth migration, and lack of civic engagement, thus supporting the idea of culture as a tool for reconstructing local identity.

At the local level, the research identifies a critical aspect in the case of the municipality of Braşov—a city in central Romania known for its historical heritage and well-established tourism profile—namely the absence of a clearly defined cultural brand. The investigation of the local cultural ecosystem, conducted through three focus groups with young people and eleven in-depth interviews with cultural operators, provides a relevant perspective on how the city’s cultural identity is perceived, constructed, and negotiated at the local level. The findings indicate the need to diversify the cultural offer, to develop niche events, and to adapt cultural communication to the specific characteristics of Generation Z.

The quantitative research conducted on a sample of 600 Generation Z respondents complements the previous studies, offering an empirical perspective on a key audience segment for the future of the urban cultural ecosystem, which has been insufficiently explored in local research. The analysis highlights several findings relevant to the development of local cultural strategies. Thus, 91% of respondents reported a strong attachment to the city, while 86% indicated involvement in the creation of artistic content, pointing to a high potential for cultural participation. At the same time, the results underline the need to integrate emerging technologies into the cultural offer. An additional element of originality lies in the analysis of the relationship between education and cultural participation. The findings show that 89% of respondents consider their participation in cultural events to be influenced by their educational experience, highlighting the role of the educational system in shaping cultural behaviors and the need to develop tailored educational initiatives.

On a practical level, the main contribution of the thesis consists in the development of an operational model for strengthening the cultural city brand, materialized in the proposal of the multiannual festival *“Braşov: Now Playing.”* This concept was built on the basis of the research findings and is designed as a mechanism for integrating the cultural offer, stimulating young audience participation, and positioning the city within the sphere of contemporary culture. By addressing an insufficiently explored topic, namely the interaction between cultural education, youth participation, and the integration of emerging technologies, the thesis introduces an innovative perspective that is applicable not only to the context of Braşov, but also to other European cities with similar historical and social contexts that seek to update and diversify their cultural offer for younger generations.

The methodological contribution of this research lies in the use of a multi-method approach, which enabled the correlation of data obtained from different sources and the validation of findings through triangulation. The integration of document analysis with qualitative and quantitative research led to a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon and to the formulation of empirically grounded conclusions.

In the current context, marked by social transformations and a visible decline in civic engagement, culture is redefining its role within the dynamics of urban development. In many Romanian cities, including Braşov as analyzed in this study, the cultural dimension often remains marginal within development strategies, while cultural actors operate within a framework characterized by limited resources, fragmentation, and low visibility. At the same time, interest in traditional cultural forms is declining, particularly among younger generations, highlighting the need for interventions adapted to new patterns of cultural consumption. These developments contribute to the weakening of social capital and affect the capacity of cities to construct relevant cultural identities.

Within this framework, the contribution of the thesis lies in moving beyond a strictly functional perspective on cultural branding, by promoting an approach centered on participation, collaboration, and co-creation. The proposed directions aim at the development of open artistic formats, the integration of the educational sector into the cultural ecosystem, the cultivation of an active relationship between young people and culture, and the involvement of audiences in both the production and consumption of artistic content, as key premises for strengthening a sustainable cultural city brand.

LIST OF PUBLISHED WORKS

Published papers::

- **Ciuculescu, L.** and Luca, F.A., 2025. Developing a Sustainable Cultural Brand for Tourist Cities: Insights from Cultural Managers and the Gen Z Community in Braşov, Romania. *Sustainability*, 17(8), p.3361, <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/17/8/3361>
- **Ciuculescu, E.L.** & Luca, F.A. (2024), *How Can Cities Build Their Brand through Arts and Culture? An Analysis of ECoC Bidbooks from 2020 to 2026*. *Sustainability*, 16(8), p.3377, <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/16/8/3377>
- **Ciuculescu, E.L.** & Luca, F.A. (2023), A balancing act: urban regeneration through arts & culture. *Cross-Cultural Management Journal*, XXV, (2), pp.143-147, disponibil online https://seaopenresearch.eu/Journals/articles/CMJ2023_I2_7.pdf
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- **Ciuculescu, E.L.P.** and Luca, F.A., 2022. *Milestones In The Evolution Of Cultural Marketing And Current Challenges*. *Management Intercultural*, (48), pp.17-22, disponibil online https://seaopenresearch.eu/Journals/articles/MI_48_2.pdf

Participation in international conferences::

- Title: *Branding Creative Cities: Navigating Modern Challenges*. Authors Ciuculescu (Pătraşcu) Elena-Lavinia, Florin-Alexandru Luca, EUROINVENT, 2024, Conference catalogue available at: https://www.euroinvent.org/cat/EUROINVENT_2024.pdf
- Title: *How Cultural City Branding Fosters Green Tourism and Drives Innovation*, Authors Ciuculescu Elena-Lavinia, Florin-Alexandru Luca, conference *SEA 18 Hybrid - ECONOMIC EXPERIENCES IN SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES - Exploring Economic Resilience, Green Tourism and Inter-organizational Innovation*, <https://seaopenresearch.eu/sea-18-economic-experiences-in-sustainable-societies/>
- Title: *Merging Arts and Innovation When Designing City Branding Strategies*. Authors Elena Lavinia Pătraşcu (Ciuculescu), Florin-Alexandru Luca, EUROINVENT, 2024, Conference catalogue available at: https://www.euroinvent.org/cat/EUROINVENT_2023.pdf
- Title: *Can City Branding Through Culture Lead to Economic Growth and Innovation?* Authors: Pătraşcu (Ciuculescu) Elena-Lavinia, Luca Florin-Alexandru, EUROINVENT, 2022, Conference catalogue available at: https://www.euroinvent.org/cat/EUROINVENT_2022.pdf

Awards and distinctions::

- **Bronze Medal**, *Branding Creative Cities: Navigating Modern Challenges*. Authors: Ciuculescu (Pătraşcu) Elena-Lavinia, Florin-Alexandru Luca, EUROINVENT Conference, 2024 Catalogue: https://www.euroinvent.org/cat/EUROINVENT_2024.pdf
- **Medal of Excellence in Innovation**, *Merging Arts and Innovation When Designing City Branding Strategies*. Autori Elena Lavinia Pătraşcu (Ciuculescu), Florin-Alexandru Luca, **EUROINVENT, 2024**, Conference catalogue: https://www.euroinvent.org/cat/EUROINVENT_2023.pdf
- **Silver Medal**, *Can City Branding Through Culture Lead to Economic Growth and Innovation?* Autori: Pătraşcu (Ciuculescu) Elena-Lavinia, Luca Florin-Alexandru, Conferinţa **EUROINVENT, 2022**, Conference Catalogue: https://www.euroinvent.org/cat/EUROINVENT_2022.pdf



- **Organization of workshops and conferences:**

Member of the organizing committee of the workshop *Strategic Marketing and Entrepreneurship in Construction*, <https://acadiasi.org/marketing-strategic-si-antreprenoriat-in-constructii/>

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