

STUDY ON THE PERCEPTION OF YOUNG PEOPLE REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF ROMANIAN HISTORICAL CITIES IN PROMOTING THE COUNTRY BRAND

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ABSTRACT

The branding of a country translates the idea of discovering the place or creating its uniqueness, an aspect that differentiates one country from another in order to gain a competitive advantage in the nations' struggle for resources. The paper aims to outline an image of the perception that tourists or potential visitors have on some aspects analyzed but also the importance of their evolution in promoting the country brand. The purpose of this paper was to quantify the collective image of young people from Bucharest regarding the historical towns of Sighisoara, Alba Iulia, Sibiu, Baia Mare and Suceava in terms of the level at which the offer and the tourist infrastructure is perceived in the urban environment of Bucharest and also the potential that these cities represent in promoting the country brand.

KEYWORDS: *Country branding; Promotion; Historical cities; Urban Competition*

1. INTRODUCTION

A favorable image and a strong brand represent an important step in the economic development of a country that is variable with the number of cities it has and which attracts through the visual identity created, investors, tourists, media coverage and talented people.

Although the brand concept of a country or city is considered to be of major tourist importance, it brings competitive advantages in several areas or across multiple development areas of a country.

The image of a country is currently a powerful weapon in the competition for investment, tourism and resources, but not only, due to its good reputation and strong brand, a country can easily attract highly skilled human resources to the labor market.

Country Marketing is a complex field with far more variable implications than those applicable to products or services, the image of a country and the value added gained from its promotion combines scientific research from a variety of study areas such as: communication, marketing, tourism, sociology, psychology, public administration, culture, international relations, economy, etc.

Kotler and Gertner (2002) defined the image of a place as "all the impressions and ideas people have about the place." The statement of the two denotes the difficulty behind the process of building a country image, its brand, because the image is influenced by a variety of elements that are poorly controllable and as a result difficult to manage.

Recently, special attention has been paid to the concept of urban branding, being integrated in the field of marketing as a result of the applicability of the instruments in this field in the creation and development of a country image (Jensen & Richardson, 2005; Okano & Samson, 2010; Grodach, 2009; Gibson, 2005; Kilduff & Núñez Tabales, 2016; Polyorat, 2017; Sun et al., 2016; Dinnie, 2015; Che-Ha et al., 2016; Oguztimur & Akturan, 2016).

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The American Marketing Association has defined the brand as "a name, a sign, a term, a design, a symbol or a merger between these elements, the main purpose of which is to identify the goods and services of a supplier or group of suppliers and differentiate them from those of competitors" (Armstrong et al., 2015).

A definition of the brand that penetrates into its urban dimension is, in our opinion, the one offered by Schmitt, "A rich source of cognitive and sensory assemblages resulting in significant brand experiences" (Schmitt, 2015).

Warren and Dinnie (2017) defined the brand as a specific and distinctive product or service by the way it is positioned against the competition and through its personality that includes a special combination of functional attributes or symbolic values.

According to Kapferer (2015), the brand has more functions for the consumer because it gives him more benefits, arguing that a fundamental role of the brand is the development and optimization of consumer relations: Identification function, which aims to guide the consumer to the product and understand the offer or identify the alternatives; Guarantee function, which ensures trust in the quality of the product or service; Practical function, aimed at saving time and energy for the consumer; Characterization function, the brand helps to establish an image that wants to be displayed in relationships with others; Optimization function, wants to ensure the consumer is making the best choice; The continuity function, ensures the availability of consumption over a long period of time; The hedonistic function, due to the visual identity elements and the brand's communication efforts, can provide the consumer with the attractiveness transmitted; The ethical function, the consumer's interest that the brand chosen to show a socially responsible behavior.

Kotler (2015) grouped the brands into four types based on the name assignment method: Patrimony Brands, which bear the name of a person, usually the founder or the owner, may also be their abbreviations or acronyms; Distinctive Brands, whose names have been chosen due to their association with the product and its resonance with the purpose of transmitting a differentiating idea; Symbolic Brands, which have a special significance, may have a name that is historically, geographically or mythological well known; Compound Brands resulting from mergers or acquisitions and are composed by joining multiple names.

The city's brand concept was created long ago, with a long and controversial history that leads us to the efforts of the Greek cities, where, starting with the image of the divine protector, they enjoyed certain attributes such as the image of Athena, a divinity with the attribute of warrior, but also with the protector of arts and crafts.

According to Batey (2015), the grinding of the city brand concept can be noticed in the Middle Ages, in the case of the guilds, or in Italy at the beginning of the 14th century, when the names of some families became urban, giving as an example the first major international bank - Buonsignori from Siena, followed by Frescobaldi of Florence or Ricciardi of Lucca, and then families such as Acciaiuoli, Peruzzi or Bardi, who built business empires and defined the image of the cities they belonged to, with branches in Europe, Middle East and North Africa (Sapori, 1982; Anholt, 2016).

Like the examples given by Batey, Sapori or Anholt, Romania has its cities that have begun the process of creating a brand of historic city hundreds of years ago, also through guilds, historical cities such as Sighisoara, Sibiu, and Sebes. Sighisoara is now a renowned historical city with a large cultural load through the symbolism it transposes with the help of the Medieval Festival.

The country brand has been founded since ancient times by means of symbolic elements that have a meaning for national identity, being represented by the signs of any sovereign and independent state, the name, the flag and the anthem (Fan, 2006).

However, socio-economic development entails increased international and global competition between states, leading to the emergence of a country brand concept and the need for its theoretical

and practical deepening in order to increase the positive impact that a strong country brand builds on competitive advantages (Agrawal and Kamakura, 1999).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was based on the following hypotheses, the confirmation or refutation of which will be analyzed at the end:

H1. The visit time of the five historic cities analyzed by the young people is 1-3 days.

H2. Tourists choose as the first option to visit Transylvania, preferring the cities of Sibiu, Sighișoara and Alba Iulia.

H3. The most important aspect in the process of attracting young people in the area of cultural-historical tourism is represented by the architecture and the urban aspect.

H4. Young people in Bucharest consider that the development of historic cities is a significant contribution to the promotion of the country brand.

H5. Integrated and sustainable development of historic cities in Romania is not considered to be a catalyst in attracting investors.

The methodology used in the study comprised the use of the questionnaire as a basic tool. It outlined the objectives pursued in the research most accurately and contributed to the confirmation or refutation, according to the respondents' opinions, of the research hypotheses presented earlier.

The target group of this study was represented by young people from Bucharest aged 18 to 35, in order to identify and analyze their perceptions regarding the tourist industry of the historical towns of Sighisoara, Alba Iulia, Sibiu, Baia Mare and Suceava.

The target group was composed of young students who are in the process of finalizing their undergraduate or masters' studies.

The structure of the questionnaire was conceived with a degree of progressive difficulty, starting with the familiarization of those questioned with the five historic cities by classifying them in the order of personal preferences, a question that reveals the popularity of each city among the young people in Bucharest.

The early part of the research tool also contained questions about the optimum visit time of respondents when choosing to travel to one of the five historic cities, and this question was not broken down at the level of each city due to the similar characteristics they showed in the analysis.

The questionnaire was applied to a sample of 527 respondents by distributing the online address to which the questionnaire could be accessed. The people surveyed for the study are youngsters from Bucharest aged between 18 and 35 years old.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first question addressed to the respondents was meant to familiarize them with the theme of the study, but also to draw a scientific opinion on the popularity of the five historical towns (Sighișoara, Sibiu, Alba Iulia, Baia Mare and Suceava) among the young residents of Bucharest.

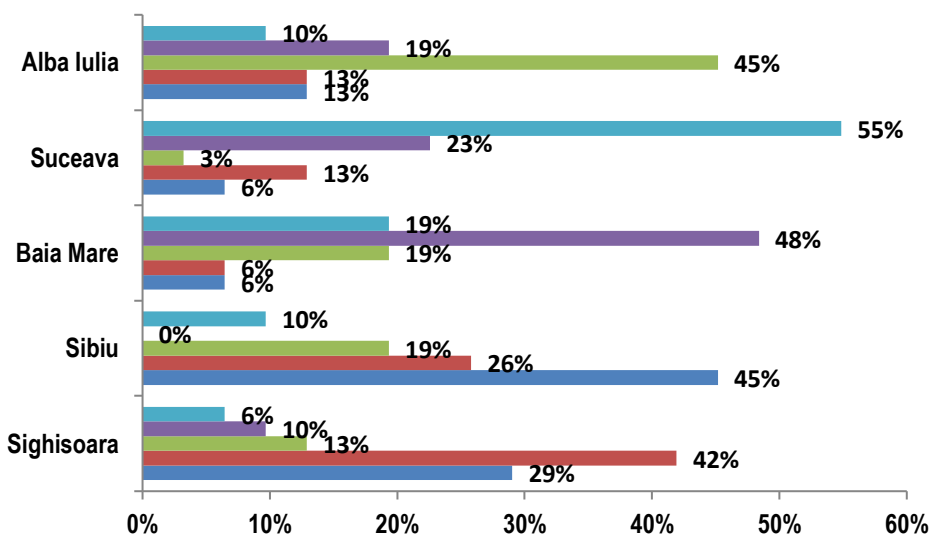


Figure 1 - Ranking of the five historic cities according to the respondents' preferences
 Source: Authors, based on collected data

According to the answers collected and presented with the help of figure 1, the historic city of Sibiu ranks first when young people in the capital are asked to express their personal preferences according to the perception they have acquired either by visiting the cities or by interacting with their promotion methods. Thus, on the first place, Sibiu has a 45% share, being elected by 238 of the total of 527 respondents. The next ranked, is the historic city of Sighisoara, with 42%, meaning 221 votes of those questioned. In the middle of the preferences is Alba Iulia, with 45%, the last two places being divided between Baia Mare and Suceava, 48% for the Maramures Entrance Gate, being the leader of the fourth place, and at the end of the ranking, Suceava with a percentage 55% and 289 of the total respondents ranked it fifth.

The second question that was addressed to the respondents referred to the period when young visitors choose when planning their departure to one of the five historic cities, or when they have visited them.

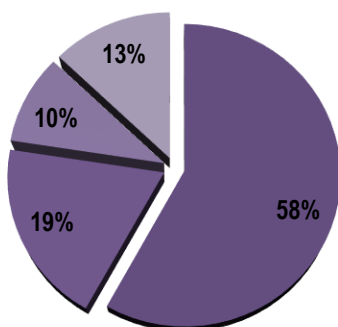


Figure 2 - Optimal visit time of historical cities in Romania
 Source: Authors, based on collected data

The reason why this question was applied in general, without its breakdown for each of the five historic cities, is based on the similarity between them in terms of size and the tourist, cultural and artistic offer. Thus, most of the respondents, 306 of them, opt for a one-to-three-day stay, 58%, considering this time as sufficient to visit (see Figure 2). Of the 527 respondents, 19% (102) considered that the duration of the visit is within 3-5 days. A small fraction of those surveyed, 13%, think they would spend more than a week and 10% would choose a seven-day stay.

Following the analysis, the respondents were asked to choose more variants to form an overview of the types of tourist accommodation structures that they want and prefer during a stay.

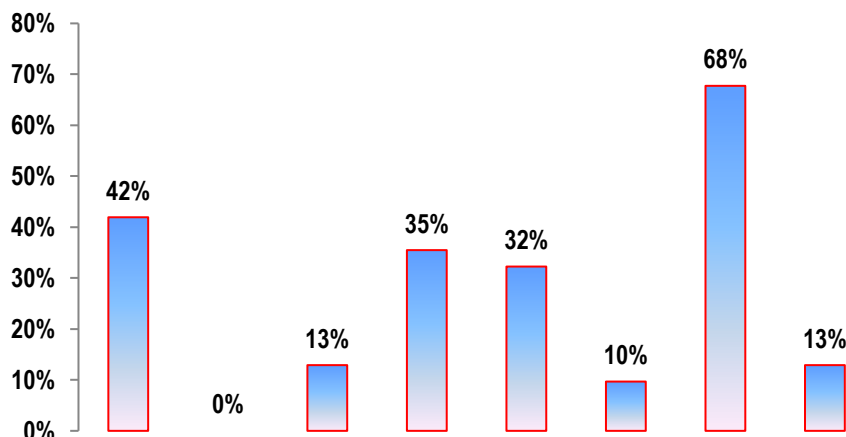


Figure 3 - Respondents' preferences for types of tourist reception facilities

Source: Authors, based on collected data

Boardinghouses were the first accommodation option for tourists and potential tourists, 357 of whom also chose this option, accounting for 68% (see Figure 3), hotels ranked among the preferences of the respondents with 48% of them opting for hotel accommodation, the percentage being again correlated with the data collected on the National Institute of Statistics website on the number of units, accommodation capacity, number of arrivals and number of overnights. Tourist villas and chalets were voted 35% and 32% and the lowest percentages were for agro-tourism hostels, campsites and motels. None of the respondents showed the desire to stay in a hostel-type structure during their stay. Deepening the questionnaire was done with a question that respondents were asked to organize according to how they perceive the importance of cultural manifestations, the association of the city with a historical personality, architecture and urban aspect, tourism infrastructure and ways of promoting within the personal decision-making process of a historic city in Romania. Most of the respondents choose to visit a historic city for its architecture and urban aspect (see Figure 4), 45% (238) of those surveyed being of this opinion. Tourism infrastructure is the next aspect according to which, the young residents of Bucharest take the decision to organize a vacation in Romania for historical tourism, so 35% rank second in this aspect.

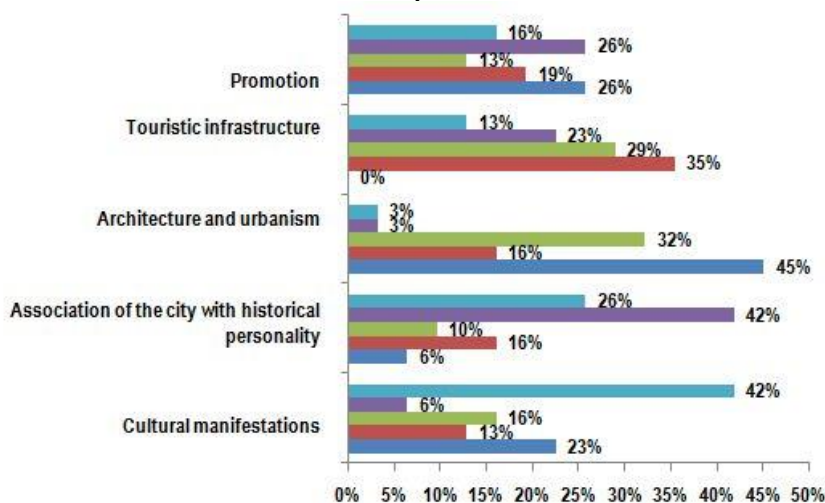


Figure 4 - Top of the criteria that influence respondents' decision to visit a historic city in Romania

Source: Authors, based on collected data

At the end of the ranking we had criteria such as cultural manifestations, the association of the place with a historical personality or the promotion of the city.

In order to be able to study the importance of historical city development in promoting the country brand, participants were asked to rank on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being "Not important" and 5 "Very important". Of the 527 respondents, 255 and 48%, respectively, considered that a high level of tourist quality among Romanian historic cities will play a very important role in the overall picture of the country (see Figure 5).

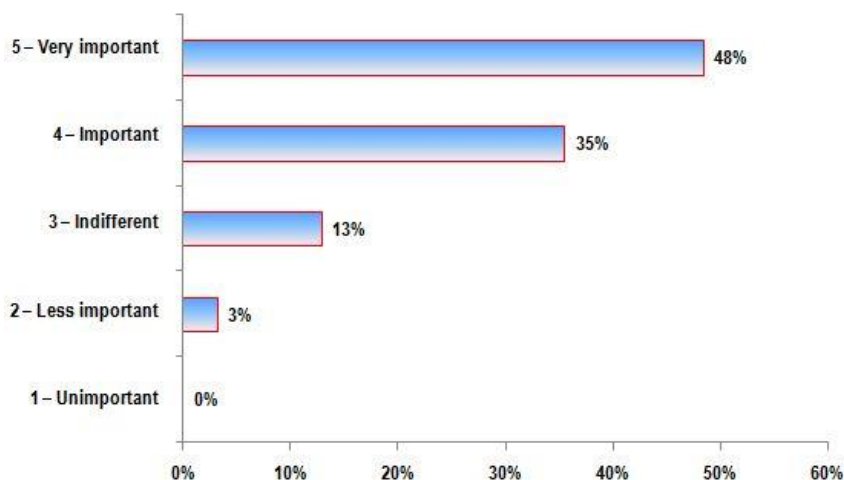


Figure 5 - The Importance of Developing Historic Cities in Romania to Promote Country Brand

Source: Authors, based on collected data

In percents, 35% of the respondents classified this criterion as being important for Romania's branding strategy and 13% claimed that it would not have a significant impact, while 3% believe that the development of historic Romanian cities is of little importance for the homeland brand.

The historical cities that form the scientific research base of this work, Sighisoara, Sibiu, Baia Mare, Suceava and Alba Iulia, have been merged at the level of the regions they represent, following the perception of the respondents regarding the area of maximum interest from the point of view of marketing. They were asked to choose between Bucovina, Maramures and Transylvania, the area they consider to have the most important strategic role in promoting the country brand of Romania.

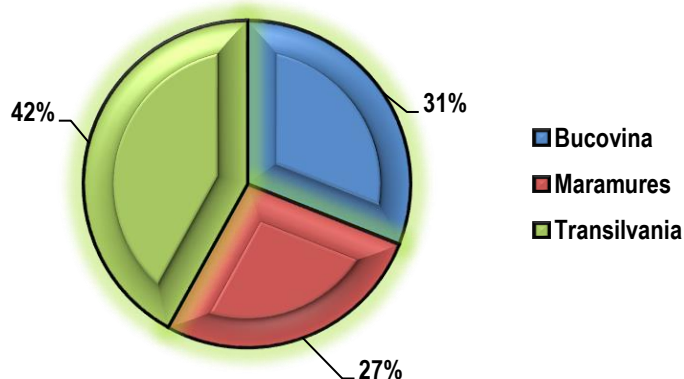


Figure 6 - Top of regions according to respondents' perception of the role historic cities play in promoting the country brand

Source: Authors, based on collected data

Although a predictable but well-founded result, considering the popularity of this area in terms of tourism, but not only, Transylvania was considered by 42% of the respondents to have the most important role in Romania's branding strategy. It was followed by Maramures and Bucovina, which

were almost equal, with 31% of the study participants choosing the Bucovina area and the remaining of 27% chose Maramures (see Figure 6).

We have elaborated in the present study five aspects that would require improvement for the evolution and economic development of the historical cities in Romania, which represent general frameworks, in order to ease the difficulty of the questionnaire among the respondents. The question was conceived with the possibility of choosing several variants of the following: development of tourism infrastructure, diversification and extension of cultural offer, architectural restoration and urban aspect, preservation of cultural heritage, development of tourist services or others, a section offering the questioned the opportunity to support new ideas for development.

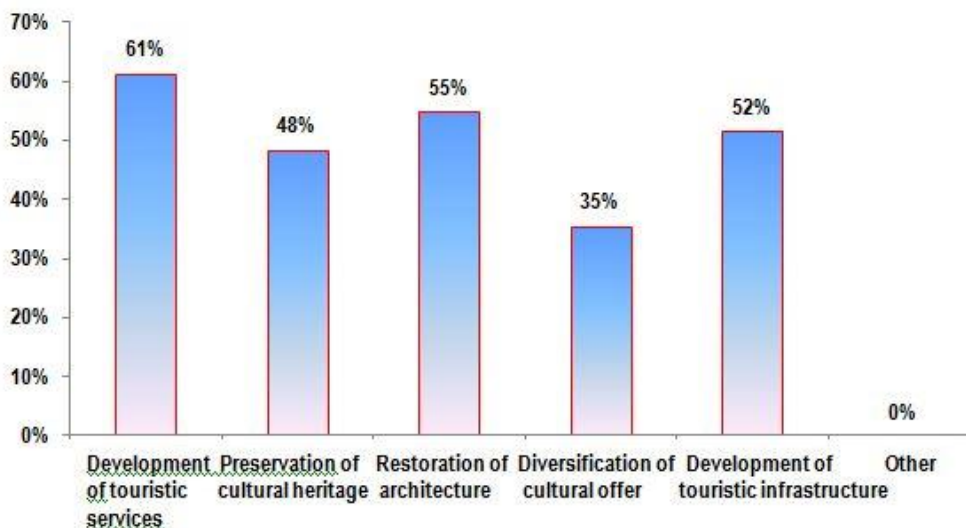


Figure 7 - Importance of the annual organization of cultural events in promoting the country brand

Source: Authors, based on collected data

The young people in Bucharest were of the opinion that the development of tourist services is the first step to increase the contribution of Romania's historic cities in promoting the country brand. This variant was selected in a proportion of 61%, followed closely by the architectural restoration and the urban aspect (55%), the development of the tourist infrastructure (52%). Less selected but preserving its importance were the preservation of cultural heritage (48%) and the diversification and expansion of cultural supply (35%) (Figure 7).

The paper also aimed at studying the ways and the importance that Romania's historic cities can have in promoting the country brand. Thus, the end of the questionnaire focused on organizing some considerations that young respondents in Bucharest might perceive as potential benefits to Romania's urban branding strategy.

The question was conceived according to the previous model, and the study participants could choose as variants: the development of tourism industry, the dispersal of tourists to other historic cities, the attraction of talents on the labor market and academia, the attraction of investors and the economic growth of the country.

Of the 851 selections of the 527 respondents, 48% of them are in favor of economic growth, followed by 221 related selections of 42%, to the development of the tourism industry. Of the 527 participants in the study, 35% of the share of responses provided turned to attract investors. Other benefits are considered to be less likely, with only 19% of the selections being addressed to the dispersion of tourists to other historic cities in Romania, and 16% consider that historic cities could attract talent into the labor market or academia.

After analyzing the data, we were able to get an overview of the perception and collective image that formed in the young minds of Bucharest residents regarding five historical reference cities of Romania, Sighisoara, Alba Iulia, Sibiu, Baia Mare and Suceava.

The first hypothesis, which asserted that the majority of young people aged 18-35 years prefer to visit a historical city in Romania, a period of one to three days is confirmed because the larger intervals, for a week or more than seven days, are not considered appropriate for these visits, also due to cultural and artistic offerings that generally cover a larger event or festival, but which generally take place over the course of a year.

The second hypothesis of the study argued that young people choose as the first option the Transylvanian area, characterized in the present work through the historical towns of Sighisoara, Sibiu and Alba Iulia. The first question of the questionnaire showed the inclination of tourists or potential tourists to the most sought-after area of Romania, Transylvania.

In the continuation of the study, we have also noticed that the three historical towns of the Transylvania area have again come to the forefront of their tourism infrastructure, with the respondents maintaining the same trend as Sibiu was, and this time the most well seen. The former European Cultural Capital has managed, over the ten years, to preserve the image of a well-developed city in terms of tourism infrastructure, but not only. A change in the perception of the collective image of the respondents was observed among the towns of Sighișoara and Alba Iulia. If the respondents choose as a secondary option to visit the Pearl of Transylvania, they consider that the tourist infrastructure of Alba Iulia is better developed than Sighișoara, 58% of them categorizing it as "Well-developed" and 48% of the 527 respondents, considered that Sighisoara is on the same position within the scale from 1 to 5.

All Romanian cities have an important role in promoting the country brand, but the focus remains on areas of tourism, especially cultural. Thus, the participants in the study had the opportunity to express their opinion on the three areas that the five cities in the study represent Transylvania, Maramures and Bucovina, by selecting the one they consider the most important in the branding strategy of the country. And this time, the ranking leader was Transylvania, with a 42% selection, followed by Bucovina with 31% and Maramures 27%.

Favoring Transylvania, but especially Sibiu, is not only due to its high level of development but also to geographic positioning, being accessible to all Romanian visitors by its location in the center of the map. Of course, this is a personal opinion, and the likelihood of a similar degree of response to the same survey on potential foreign visitors would be high.

Thus, the second hypothesis of the study is confirmed, the tourists choose as the first option to visit the Transylvanian area, but especially the city of Sibiu, considering the following tourist points, Sighișoara and Alba Iulia.

The third hypothesis was to check the importance of architecture and the urban aspect in the decision to visit or whether if other factors are more important. The study participants were asked to classify five elements in the order in which they desire to visit a historic city impacts them. They considered with 45% the fact that architecture and urban design are the ones for which they choose to move into a cultural-historical environment. At the secondary level, young people are interested in the accommodation conditions, selecting 35% of the tourist infrastructure on the second place. Promoting, associating with a historical personality or cultural manifestations does not equally affect the decision of the young respondents.

Consequently, the third hypothesis is confirmed, young people in Bucharest are interested in the architecture and urban aspect of a historic city, and less of the cultural or artistic offer of events.

The fourth hypothesis implied that, in the opinion of the young people of Bucharest, the integrated and sustainable development of the historic cities in Romania is not considered to be a catalyst in the process of attracting investors.

This hypothesis was verified through a question that the respondents were asked to select which would be the benefits the country and its urban brand will achieve from the development of the country's historic cities. Multiple choice response options included criteria such as economic growth, attracting investors, attracting talent, spreading tourism to other historic cities, developing the tourism industry, or others that they could specify themselves.

Although the economic growth and the development of the tourism industry were the main aspects considered as benefits, the young respondents believed that attracting investors could be a consequence of the development of historical cities in Romania, with 187 of the respondents selecting this option as well.

It can be concluded that not only the big cities, the economical fields of the country, are magnets of foreign investors, but also the small historical towns, which offer peripheral spaces for the construction of offices, warehouses, factories, etc. It is well known the situation of Sibiu, which benefits from multilateral competitive advantages, being more than a cultural and historical center. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis was invalidated as a result of the study, as the young respondents did not completely neglected the possibility that these cities could attract investors from the development processes they run from year to year.

The last hypothesis of the study was to verify the perception of the importance of historical Romanian cities in promoting the country brand. Thus, almost half of the participants in the study considered that the development of these cities is a very important point in the promotion of the country brand, 48% being of this opinion. When respondents were asked about the impact that the annual organization of cultural events it could create on promoting the country brand, they agreed in 86% of the fact that cultural events are an advantage of the national branding strategy. Taking all these aspects into account, the H5 hypothesis has been confirmed.

5. CONCLUSION

The brand of Romania requires a multilateral approach to its international drive, and the development of each historic city of Romania will actively contribute to the promotion of the country brand.

Historical towns in Romania can bring value to the image and brand of the country through local interventions. Respondents ranked the development of tourism services, 61%, as the main axis of contribution of Romania's promotion as a whole. Following on, the local public administrations can focus their attention on architectural restoration and urban planning, as previously noted, architecture is a catalyst for historical and cultural tourism. Conservation of cultural heritage and development of tourism infrastructure represented points of interest in the respondents' opinion, followed by the diversification of the cultural offer.

The conclusion of the study denotes the cultural heritage of Romania and the importance of its preservation, development and promotion as a whole. Every historical city becomes a brick in the construction of the country brand, with an invaluable value brought in the efforts to promote Romania at international level.

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