

THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN SHAPING PLACE MARKETING – TÂRGU SECUIESC, A YOUTH-FRIENDLY CITY

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Abstract. The role of youth in shaping place marketing – Târgu Secuiesc, a Youth-Friendly City. In recent years, one of the significant challenges for Szeklerland has been the migration of young people and the need for the renewal of local communities. Development is essential to ensure that the region remains attractive and competitive in tourism, economy, and culture alike. The involvement and active participation of young people in municipal life and decision-making not only contribute to strengthening the local brand but also increase the likelihood of young people staying in the area.

The Municipality of Târgu Secuiesc supports youth initiatives to create a youth-friendly brand. Place branding is not just a communication strategy but a series of concrete actions reflecting the city's true identity and strengths. The active involvement and satisfaction of the local community and residents are crucial for the success of urban marketing. This study examines the role of young people in shaping place marketing.

Keywords: place marketing, youth, participation, image, Târgu Secuiesc

1. Introduction:

The Szeklerland region, particularly the municipality of Târgu Secuiesc, faces significant challenges due to the migration of young people and the need for the renewal of local communities. Branding and developing places is a process in which the active participation of young people is crucial to ensure that the region remains attractive and competitive in tourism, economy, and culture alike.

The involvement and participation of young people in municipal life, decision-making, event organization, and implementation not only enhance the city's image but also increase the chances of young people staying in the long term by making the city more attractive to them. Additionally, youth-led initiatives and programs contribute to invigorating the city's cultural and economic life and help in community building and strengthening identity.

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Youth participation and involvement are thus key factors in successful urban marketing and the long-term development of the city. The fresh mindset, creativity, and innovative ideas of young people open up new perspectives for municipalities while strengthening the community and increasing residents' attachment to the place. The active participation of young people in urban marketing processes and city life not only creates an attractive environment for young people but also contributes to the long-term success and sustainable development of the municipality.

The Municipality of Târgu Secuiesc supports youth initiatives, which help in creating a youth-friendly brand. Several measures, events, and programs have been implemented in the city in recent years, all reinforcing this. Organizations can collaborate to form a strong community that helps young people envision their future in Szeklerland. This study examines the role and participation of young people in the context of Szeklerland, particularly Târgu Secuiesc, highlighting the strategies and methods that can help involve and activate young people in local community building.

Successful city marketing enhances economic potential and increases local residents' satisfaction, thereby reducing the risk of migration. Young people stay in the area, build their careers locally, supporting the local economy, and start families in the community, thus decreasing the region's demographic vulnerability. Additionally, city marketing contributes to strengthening community cohesion and preserving cultural identity, which further enhances the attractiveness of the area and establishes a stable foundation for sustainable development in the long term.

2. Place Marketing

The emergence of place marketing has been facilitated by the intertwining of several academic disciplines, such as marketing, urban studies, and tourism. Originally, marketing aimed at the promotion and sale of products or services. However, in the case of place marketing, this concept is applied to promote the quality of life, opportunities, and experiences offered by a location (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990). Urban studies or urban planning focus on the development of inhabited areas and the improvement of urban environments, while tourism seeks to exploit the tourism potential of areas (Pike, 2018).

As an academic discipline, marketing primarily deals with the promotion and sale of products or services, while paying close attention to satisfying consumer needs and maintaining market competitiveness. On the other hand, urban studies concentrate on the development and planning of inhabited areas, considering the sustainability of the urban environment, infrastructural developments, and urban planning processes. Finally, the science of tourism aims to identify and exploit the tourism potential of areas, including the development

of attractions and services that appeal to tourists and the maximization of the economic benefits of tourism.

These disciplines collectively contribute to the comprehensive approach of place marketing, which enables the sustainable development of places and enhances their attractiveness. The close relationship between the fields of marketing, urban studies, and tourism allows place marketing to consider the needs and priorities of local communities while supporting economic growth and the development of the tourism sector (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005).

All these areas have contributed to the establishment of place marketing as an independent field of study. The concept of branding emerged in the 19th century (Low & Fullerton, 1994), primarily in connection with the rise of mass production and physical products. Later, the concept of branding extended to services (Grönroos, 2006; Stern, 2006), and in the 1990s, branding approaches expanded to include not only products and services but also companies and organizations (Hankinson, 2015).

Today's concept of branding is applied in many ways, especially in areas where there are numerous choices in the market (Keller, 2013). According to Levine (2003), anything that affects consumers, including people, can be a brand. As a result, place branding, which involves the promotion and positioning of geographical areas and settlements in the market, has emerged as a new research area.

It is important to understand the impressions and opinions that prevail about a city. The views and comfort of local residents fundamentally determine how at home they feel in the city and how satisfied they are with life there. Additionally, it is crucial to consider the mental map that residents have of the place. The image and reputation of a city determine how attracted people are to live in, or visit, that place (Kotler et al., 1993).

Place branding is closely intertwined with governance and politics (Jørgensen, 2015; Lucarelli, 2015; Oliveira, 2016). It is essential to emphasize that place branding is not limited to creating slogans or logos, nor is it restricted to developing communication strategies. It involves concrete actions that reveal the true identity and strengths of the city. These actions can include infrastructural developments, cultural programs, organizing urban events, supporting community life, and other measures that improve residents' quality of life.

Place marketing is fundamental to the long-term success of cities. The local community, as the most important customer, plays a crucial role in place marketing, as the city's population determines the viability and attractiveness of a settlement in the long run (Lindgreen, 2009). Therefore, city management and local decision-makers must actively cooperate with residents to develop appropriate strategies for the positive perception and appeal of the city. This may include involving residents in urban development processes, prioritizing infrastructural investments, and emphasizing cultural and tourism attractions.

Successful place marketing is based on highlighting the city's true values and resources while working with residents to ensure that every inhabitant is proud of their home and motivated to develop and promote it.

One of the most important goals of place marketing is the proper involvement and satisfaction of the local community. The long-term success of a settlement depends on the support of urban development by local residents, their positive experiences in the area, and their pride in living there. Therefore, active communication with residents, considering their needs and opinions in urban development plans and decisions, is crucial. The satisfaction and loyalty of the local population are fundamental to place marketing, as this contributes to the creation and maintenance of a positive image of the city.

When someone chooses a place to live, operate, develop, or consume, they essentially invest trust in it. They believe that the given place is worthy of living, working, producing, investing, or visiting and using its services. Therefore, the consumer trusts the products, services, values, and opportunities offered by the place, and its overall competence. This trust-based sales activity is referred to in the literature as competence marketing (Puczkó, 2015). Competence marketing encompasses not only the physical and service infrastructure offered by the place but also the hidden values found in the community, culture, and quality of life. Preserving and highlighting these values are closely linked to residents' satisfaction and the positive experiences they have, which long-term shape and strengthen the reputation and attractiveness of the place.

3. Youth Participation and Contribution to Place Marketing

In the process of place branding, residents are not merely passive beneficiaries or consumers but active partners and co-producers of public goods, services, and policies (Freire, 2009; Hospers, 2010; Olsson & Berglund, 2009). Consequently, there is an increasing demand for their involvement in place branding activities (Braun et al., 2013; Kavaratzis, 2012). Therefore, place branding is not just one-way communication but an interactive process where residents should have the opportunity to participate and engage in joint decision-making in urban development and place branding. Other researchers also emphasize the importance of participatory place marketing and branding approaches (Kalandides, 2011; Klijn et al., 2012).

There is no doubt that this participatory approach poses significant political challenges, as local authorities must step into a new realm based on honesty, openness, and active engagement of the population (Ind & Bjerke, 2007). As a result, local leaders need to be prepared to step out of their comfort zones and adopt new, innovative approaches to promote citizen involvement in place branding processes. Additionally, to work effectively with the public, local leaders must maintain credible and transparent communication and actively consider and respond to people's needs and opinions. Thus, place branding is not

merely about shaping the external image of the city but about building real and lasting relationships with residents, contributing to the long-term sustainable development and success of the city (Zenker, 2014).

To genuinely achieve active resident participation, professionals must focus not only on involving residents but also on going beyond the simple measurement of their connection to the place, actively engaging them in the processes. This can include the creation of interactive working groups, regular consultations, and transparent communication to ensure that residents can genuinely participate and influence decision-making processes (Harvey, 1989).

The branding processes enable the collection of feedback through, for instance, online surveys of young people's opinions or discussion forums where youth can express their thoughts and feelings about the brand or the place. Branding thus becomes participatory when it is embedded in an interactive process (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013) where citizens' feelings, opinions, and style preferences are incorporated into the brand. Government and local marketing literature also support this, emphasizing the interactive nature of local marketing (Bennett & Savani, 2003; Hankinson, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; O'Guinn & Muniz, 2010).

In a 2022 study by Maria Pevnaya and her team, surveys were conducted among youth in several cities across Poland, Romania, Armenia, and Russia. The research aimed to determine the potential for youth involvement in place branding based on two main indicators: the attractiveness of the area and the willingness of young people to participate in promoting their place of residence. Differences in the potential for involvement in local area branding were identified among different youth groups in each country. The article aimed to explore the main characteristics of youth participation in place branding, considering the scientific approach to city branding and the participation of residents from different countries. This is the first article to relatively address the issue of youth participation in place branding while considering the diverse experiences of various countries.

Youth involvement and participation in place branding are important for several reasons. Firstly, the fresh perspectives and creative thinking represented by young people can open up new opportunities for the region and identify new possibilities for development and tourism. Secondly, active youth participation can contribute to local community building and the strengthening of identity, increasing residents' attachment and commitment to the region (Pearce et al., 2009).

There are numerous strategies and methods for involving young people in place branding. These include organizing programs and events that are attractive to youth, providing opportunities for their participation and expression of opinions. Additionally, it is crucial to establish and maintain communication

channels aimed at young people to facilitate dialogue and information flow between the local community and the youth (Florida, 2002).

The involvement of young people in place branding has a significant impact on regional development, as it contributes to economic growth, social cohesion, and cultural preservation. Their innovative ideas and creative approaches bring fresh perspectives to regions, adding dynamism and attractiveness to the local economy. Youth initiatives often create new opportunities, fostering entrepreneurship and facilitating job creation (Zhang & Li, 2022). Furthermore, active participation by young people in community life strengthens social cohesion, increases engagement with local communities, reduces migration, and stabilizes the population (Smith et al., 2021). The retention of young people, who can build their careers locally, mitigates demographic issues such as labor shortages and population decline (Hughes & McCormick, 2023). Politically, involving young people in decision-making brings fresh perspectives and innovative approaches, contributing to the renewal of democratic processes and improvements in transparent governance (Brown & Green, 2020). Their role in preserving and developing cultural values enhances local identity and boosts the attractiveness of cultural tourism, thereby contributing to the region's economic stability (Johnson & Carter, 2019). Thus, the active involvement of young people in place branding is crucial for the sustainable economic and social development of the region, reinforcing its cultural and community foundations.

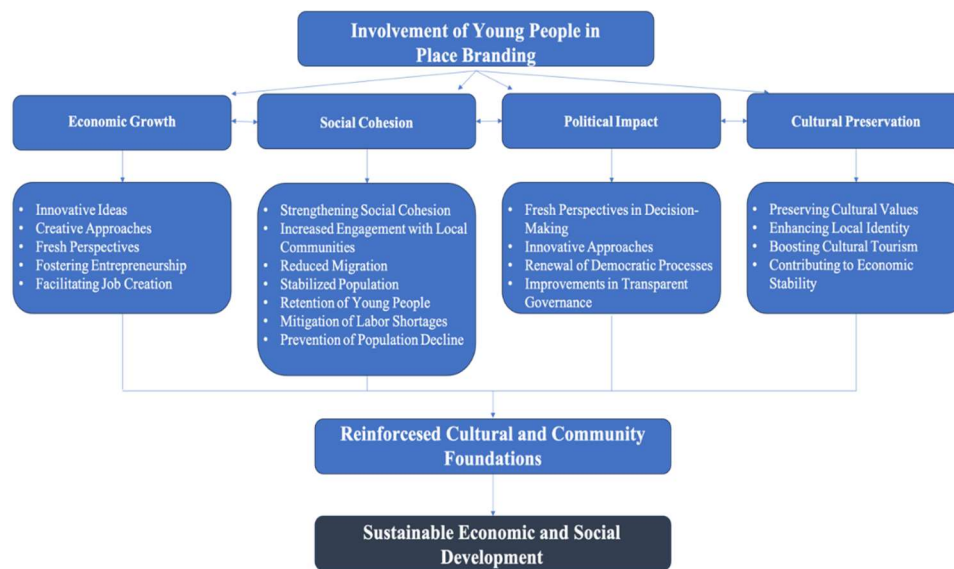


Fig. 1: Impact of Young People’s Involvement in Place Branding
(Source: created by the author)

This 1st figure visually breaks down the significant effects of young people's involvement in place branding, showing how it contributes to various aspects of regional development and its overall importance for sustainable progress.

Youth involvement in place branding is crucial to engage and commit younger generations (Richards, 2016). Below are five key steps to help facilitate active youth participation in place branding:

1. **Establish Youth Councils and Forums:** Creating dedicated youth councils and forums allows young people to express their ideas and concerns. These platforms provide a structured environment for youth to participate in discussions on urban development, ensuring their voices are heard in decision-making processes.
2. **Implement Participatory Budgeting:** Allocating a portion of the municipal budget for youth-led projects encourages young people to take an active role in their community. This approach not only empowers them to propose and manage projects but also fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility towards their city.
3. **Develop Educational and Training Programs:** Offering educational workshops and training programs on civic engagement and urban planning equips young people with the necessary skills and knowledge to contribute effectively. These programs can cover topics such as project management, public speaking, and community organizing.
4. **Create Youth-Focused Development Strategies:** Integrating the needs and perspectives of young people into the city's development strategies ensures that urban planning is inclusive. This can be achieved through regular consultations with youth representatives and incorporating their feedback into policy-making.
5. **Foster Partnerships with Youth Organizations:** Collaborating with local youth organizations and networks can enhance the reach and impact of youth participation initiatives. These partnerships can provide additional resources, support, and platforms for young people to engage in municipal development activities.

By implementing these steps, cities can create a more inclusive and dynamic environment where young people are active contributors to urban development and municipal marketing efforts.

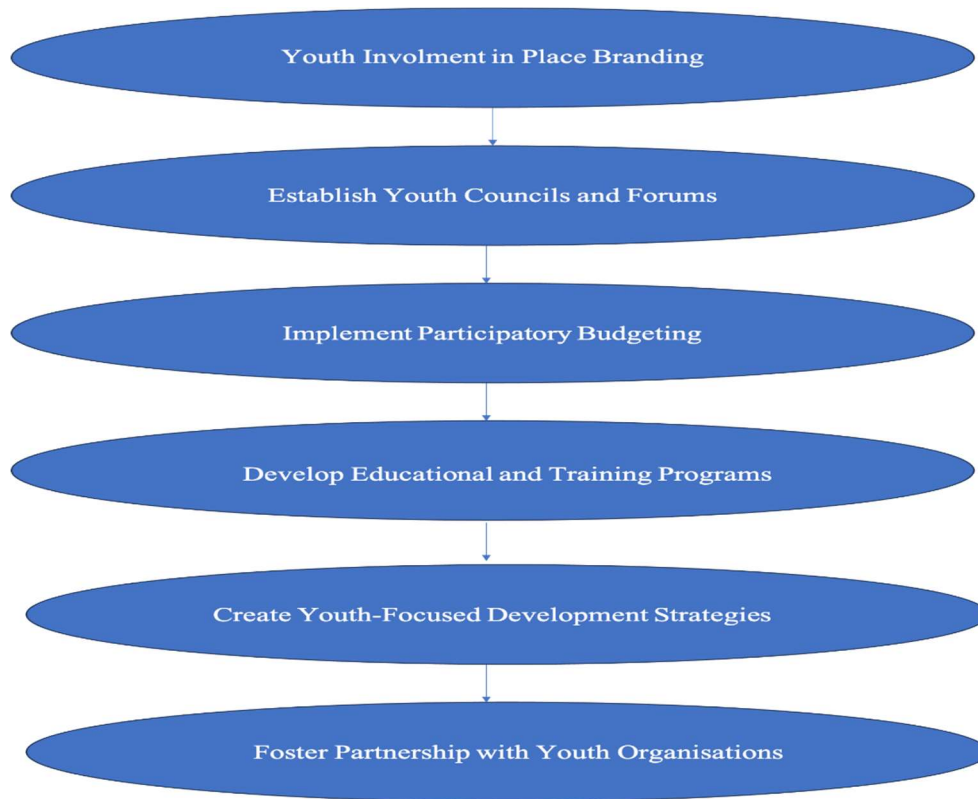


Fig. 2.: Flowchart to visually represent the steps for facilitating youth participation in place branding.
(Source: created by the author)

3.1. Youth Participation in the EU

Involvement of young people in Europe plays a crucial role in both political and community life, although participation rates and forms vary across countries. According to Eurostat (2023), youth electoral participation tends to be lower compared to older generations, with only 42% of the 18-24 age group voting in the 2019 European Parliament elections, compared to an average of 51% (Eurostat, 2023). Despite this, young people are actively engaged in various social movements and community initiatives. The European Youth Forum (2022) reports a growing level of civic activity among young people on issues like climate change, social justice, and equality, with over 60% participating in community work or volunteer activities in 2021 (European Youth Forum, 2022).

Moreover, the EU-supported Erasmus+ program, which provides opportunities for young people to gain international academic and professional

experience, significantly impacts their social engagement and mobility. Each year, over 800,000 young individuals participate in various projects and exchange programs under Erasmus+ (EACEA, 2023). In addition, young people play an active role in place branding and urban development processes across Europe. Initiatives such as the European Youth Capital project highlight cities with innovative, youth-led programs that shape community and cultural life. For instance, Nijmegen, named European Youth Capital in 2019, saw over 40 local projects initiated by young people aimed at enhancing social engagement and urban life (Eurocities, 2022).

Furthermore, youth-led organizations and movements, including the EU Youth Dialogue and the European Youth Forum, are actively involved in local and national place branding and development initiatives. These organizations implement projects designed to improve urban livability and strengthen local identity, involving thousands of young people annually (European Youth Forum, 2022). Erasmus+ youth exchanges also contribute to local community development by allowing young people to explore and influence the cultural and social dimensions of various European cities (EACEA, 2023).

Overall, while youth participation in elections may be lower, their involvement in social and community initiatives significantly contributes to political and social change across Europe.

Table 1.: Youth Participation and Impact in Europe

Asperct	Statistic	Source
Electoral Participation (18-24 years old, 2019)	42%	Eurostat, 2023
Average Electoral Participation (All Ages, 2019)	51%	Eurostat, 2023
Youth Involvement in Community Work/Volunteering (2021)	Over 60%	European Youth Forum, 2022
Annual Erasmus+ Participants	Over 800.000	EACEA, 2023
Youth-led Projects in Cluj-Napoca (European Youth Capital 2015)	Over 1000 Projects	Eurocities, 2024
Youth Capitals	20	European Youth Forum
Active Youth-led Projects in 2023	Over 4500	European Youth Forum, EU Youth Dialogue

(Source: created by the author)

3.2. Challenges and Downsides

While youth councils and participatory budgeting can be powerful tools for engaging younger generations in place branding and urban development, they are not without their challenges and potential downsides. Here are some examples and considerations:

A youth council established in a medium-sized city exemplifies the challenge of limited representation and inclusivity. If the council primarily consists of students from a single high school, this narrow demographic can result in a lack of diverse perspectives. Such a scenario might mean that the needs and interests of other youth groups, including those from different schools, socio-economic backgrounds, or community organizations, are not adequately represented. This limited scope can lead to policies and projects that do not address the broader concerns of the entire youth population and may further exacerbate existing inequalities if only certain groups' voices are heard.

Similarly, participatory budgeting initiatives can encounter significant issues when faced with implementation and resource constraints. For instance, a city may allocate a portion of its budget for youth-led projects, but if the administrative processes are overly complex or if there is insufficient support, these initiatives might not achieve their intended outcomes. Inadequate funding or bureaucratic hurdles can hinder the execution of projects, leading to unmet expectations and diminished impact. Such constraints can undermine the effectiveness of participatory budgeting by creating a disconnect between the allocated resources and the actual needs of the youth-led projects.

To effectively address the challenges faced by youth councils and participatory budgeting, municipalities can adopt several key strategies. Ensuring broad representation is crucial; for example, a city could proactively recruit members from diverse schools, community groups, and underrepresented areas to join youth councils. This approach helps to capture a wide range of perspectives and ensures that policies and projects reflect the needs of the entire youth population, not just a select group. Additionally, providing adequate support is vital for the success of participatory budgeting. A city might implement training workshops for youth on project management and budgeting, and streamline administrative processes to reduce bureaucratic barriers, thus facilitating more effective project implementation and fostering a greater sense of ownership among young participants.

Creating genuine engagement opportunities involves designing processes where youth input leads to real influence on decision-making. For instance, a municipality could establish regular feedback loops where youth council recommendations are reviewed and acted upon, demonstrating that their contributions have tangible impacts. Collaborating with various stakeholders, including those with differing interests, is also essential to navigate potential conflicts and build consensus. For example, engaging local business owners and policymakers early in the planning process for youth-led projects can help address concerns and integrate diverse perspectives. Finally, balancing priorities ensures that while youth perspectives are integrated into urban development, the needs of other community members are also considered. This holistic approach

prevents the overemphasis on any single demographic and promotes equitable development across the community.

4. Positioning Târgu Secuiesc as a Youth-Friendly City

Positioning Târgu Secuiesc as a youth-friendly city holds paramount importance from a place marketing perspective. Actively involving and supporting young people in the city's life creates an attractive environment not only for the youth demographic but also benefits the city as a whole in the long run.

Incorporating youth in community and decision-making processes positively impacts the city's image and appeal. Consequently, Târgu Secuiesc projects a youthful and dynamic image, attracting young individuals seeking to live, study, and work there. Additionally, the active participation of youth in urban life contributes to generating creative ideas and innovations, thereby stimulating the city's economic and cultural development over time.

Highlighting a youth-friendly cityscape assists Târgu Secuiesc in distinguishing itself as a desirable destination for tourism, education, and investment. Youth involvement in organizing programs and events further enhances the city's positive reputation while strengthening community cohesion and identity.

5. Declaration on Youth

In 2020, the Municipality of Târgu Secuiesc and the Târgu Secuiesc Youth Organization (Kézdivásárhelyi Ifjúsági Szervezet) jointly signed a declaration emphasizing the importance of prioritizing the future of young people living in the city and its surrounding villages. The situation of Hungarian youth in Transylvania, particularly in Széklerland, is less favorable compared to the European average, necessitating concerted efforts to reverse this trend. Key issues include youth unemployment, migration, home creation, education, and the future outlook of the younger generation. The agreement stipulates that the city's development strategy will comprehensively assess youth-related topics, and the Municipality will establish a Youth Fund. This fund will enable young people to realize their ideas and initiatives, thereby reinforcing the city's youth-friendly image and aspiring to attain the title of Romania's Youth Capital.

Kézdivásárhely is a youthful city, with hundreds of students studying there as it serves as an educational hub. Numerous youth and civil organizations operate within the city, necessitating coordinated efforts. Comprehensive research is required to utilize available resources effectively, preparing the youth for future changes and fostering responsible Székely, Hungarian, and European citizens. It is crucial that young people play a prominent role in the city's development strategy, as they form the foundation of society and are integral to the city.

5.1. Youth Research in Târgu Secuiesc, 2020

In November 2020, the Târgu Secuiesc Youth Organization conducted an online consultation to better understand the goals, dreams, and situations of young people, and to broadly assess their needs. The consultation aimed to build connections with the youth and base ongoing youth advocacy work on their current needs and aspirations. Conducted online due to the pandemic, the research involved completing a comprehensive bilingual (Hungarian and Romanian) questionnaire targeted at the 14-35 age group residing, studying, working, or spending time in the city.

The questionnaire focused on various life stages, entertainment, education, work, and migration, considering all aspects that shape the daily lives and futures of the concerned age group. It was essential to address the youth in their language and use methods they could easily relate to. Thus, the motto "Kézdin fiatalON – Engaging Youth in the Community!" was chosen, employing a catchy design reminiscent of the meme culture, thereby strengthening connection and identification with the youth.²

The results of the consultation (Szöllősi, 2020) significantly contributed to a deeper understanding of young people's thoughts, situations, visions, and daily lives. Over 600 participants shared their views and completed the questionnaire, helping to map out their family planning, leisure activities, information acquisition habits, and community and educational experiences, as well as future issues like migration and employment. This comprehensive approach allows the city and the Youth Organization to form a thorough and precise understanding of the youth closely associated with Târgu Secuiesc after a long hiatus.

The research encompasses six main chapters, examining various aspects of youth life. These include life events, leisure activities, information acquisition habits, community involvement, and education, future plans, and employment.

Over half of the participants (55%) live in Kézdivásárhely, while the majority reside in the surrounding area of Kézdiszék. However, many spend time in Târgu Secuiesc for education, work, or entertainment purposes. For the youth, marriage and childbearing are particularly important, with 92% expressing positive views on these topics and either having children or planning to have them.

In organizational life, 85% of the youth have participated in some form of organizational activity. Most of them speak at least one foreign language other than Romanian. Three-quarters of the surveyed youth are satisfied with their educational opportunities, and 82% plan to continue their education, participate in courses, or learn new things.

² Kézdin fiatalON- Engaging Youth in the Community! <https://www.kezdi.ro/hirek/kezdin-fiatalon-ifjusagi-kutatas-2020/> (Accessed 15.06.2024)

According to the research findings, 72% of the youth envision their future within the country, and 58% would choose Szeklerland, while 67% do not wish to move to another country, as they value family ties significantly.³

5.2. Integrated Urban Development Strategy

As part of a Romanian urban policy project, the Municipality of Târgu Secuiesc collaborated with the Ministry of Development and Administration and the World Bank to update the Integrated Urban Development Strategy (SIDU)⁴ for 2030. This strategic update involved weighting the development strategy based on the vision of the residents, suggestions from the business community, and the goals of the local government. The comprehensive document, nearly 700 pages long, incorporated suggestions from the youth, ensuring their contribution to the city's development strategy.

The collected suggestions were processed and converted into statistical data, which were then summarized in the final strategy. The project was realized under an agreement on reimbursable technical assistance, co-financed by the European Social Fund under the Administrative Capacity Operational Program (POCA) 2014–2020. The total value of the project was twenty million lei, of which 16,796,772 lei were non-reimbursable funds, and the self-contribution amounted to 3,203,227 lei.⁵

5.3. Youth Fund and Participatory Budgeting

The city not only improves the quality of life for young people through support for cultural and sports activities but also provides non-reimbursable financial support under Law no. 350/2005. This law established a youth fund to support and develop local youth initiatives. As a result, Târgu Secuiesc supports young people in a coordinated manner and contributes to enriching youth activities in surrounding communities.

The municipality annually announces the participatory budget, for which individuals and associations can apply. This budget supports initiatives originating from residents that are not part of the official municipal investment plan. The participatory budget allows any resident over the age of 18 to make subjective proposals for the benefit of the community. This measure strengthens

³ The youth research has concluded: <https://www.kezdi.ro/hirek/lezarult-a-kezdin-fiatalon-ifjusagi-kutatas/> (15.06.2024)

⁴ Integrated Urban Development Strategy for the Urban Area of Târgu Secuiesc 2021 -2030 https://www.kezdi.ro/public_html/wp-content/themes/kezdi/dokumentumok/letoltheto/2021/all-in-one.pdf (15.06.2024)

⁵ Maszol.ro: The city development strategy of Târgu Secuiesc has been released for public consultation <https://maszol.ro/belfold/Kozmeghallgatasra-bocsatottak-Kezdivasarhely-varosfejlesztési-strategiajat> (15.06.2024)

local community participation and democratic decision-making while providing young people with the opportunity to actively shape urban life.⁶

Proposals can be submitted in six categories:

- Street infrastructure: promenades, sidewalks, squares, and pedestrian areas
- Public spaces and furniture arrangements
- Green spaces, playgrounds, and public area arrangements (public furniture, street lighting, etc.)
- Mobility, accessibility, and safe transportation (improving transportation routes, increasing accessibility for people with disabilities, video surveillance systems, etc.)
- Educational and cultural infrastructure
- Smart City, digital city initiatives.

5.4. Declaration of Youth Support

In the summer of 2021, twenty-five youth organizations from the Kézdi-Orbaiszék region signed a joint declaration supporting Târgu Secuiesc's bid for the title of Romania's Youth Capital. The declaration emphasized the youth's goal to increase the popularity of youth initiatives in the region. The collaboration allows young people to actively participate in decision-making and contribute to shaping the city's future. The nomination was also endorsed by the Municipality of Covasna and the Covasna County Council through a joint declaration.

5.5. Târgu Secuiesc 2023 - Romania's Youth Capital

In the autumn of 2021, the Municipality applied for the title of Romania's Youth Capital for 2023. The program aims to actively involve young people in decision-making processes related to education, culture, and other youth-related areas. Over a one-year period, various projects, programs, and events are designed to encourage youth participation.

Each year, a Romanian city is awarded this title, providing an opportunity to strengthen local youth movements and increase their visibility at the national level. The local youth aimed to place Târgu Secuiesc on the "mental map" of Romanian youth, encouraging visitors to discover the city. The application concept was based on an English wordplay, where "Y" stood for "youth," accompanied by "your" or "our" in parentheses, highlighting the collective ownership of the city and the region.

Applicants agreed that initiatives should involve different parts and neighborhoods of the city, identify alternative locations, and organize more events in rural areas under the youth capital's banner. The youth capital annually

⁶ Starting from Monday, the new participatory budgeting application process begins.
<https://www.kezdi.ro/hirek/hetfotol-indul-az-uj-reszveteli-koltsegvetes-palyazat/> (15.06.2024)

hosts the national youth summit and youth gala, attracting hundreds of people. The program's focus areas include education, entertainment, environmental awareness, young entrepreneurs, youth tourism, agriculture, arts, and other fields, with a primary focus on young people.

The project required extensive preparatory work, which proved fruitful as Kézdivásárhely reached the final round. At the final vote on December 2nd, alongside Craiova and Târgu Jiu, Târgu Secuiesc participated. However, the jury decided that Târgu Jiu would hold the title of Romania's Youth Capital in 2023. Nevertheless, the application process initiated significant ongoing activities for the youth in the city. It opened new communication channels, and the Romanian media, in addition to the Transylvanian Hungarian press, paid considerable attention to the city and its initiatives.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the municipality of Târgu Secuiesc in Szeklerland faces a significant challenge in retaining its youth and revitalizing its local communities. A comprehensive approach to place branding, which includes both marketing and meaningful youth involvement, is vital for enhancing the region's appeal and competitiveness. This study underscores the importance of youth participation in urban development, demonstrating that their engagement can significantly boost the city's image, cultural vibrancy, and economic vitality, while also encouraging them to remain and invest in their local community.

Incorporating youth perspectives into place branding brings numerous advantages: it introduces innovative ideas, strengthens community connections, and fosters a robust local identity. These elements are crucial for creating an environment that attracts and retains young people, addressing broader demographic and economic challenges. By empowering young residents to lead and contribute to municipal initiatives, Târgu Secuiesc can harness their creativity and enthusiasm to drive sustainable growth and enhance the city's overall attractiveness.

Recent efforts in Târgu Secuiesc, such as establishing youth councils, implementing participatory budgeting, and creating a Youth Fund, reflect a clear commitment to involving young people in shaping their environment. The city's pursuit of the Romania's Youth Capital title and the detailed research on youth needs further highlight the municipality's dedication to becoming a vibrant, youth-friendly city.

This diagram highlights the key components of how youth engagement can benefit Târgu Secuiesc in its place branding efforts, emphasizing the challenges, advantages, recent efforts, and positive impacts of involving youth in the development process.

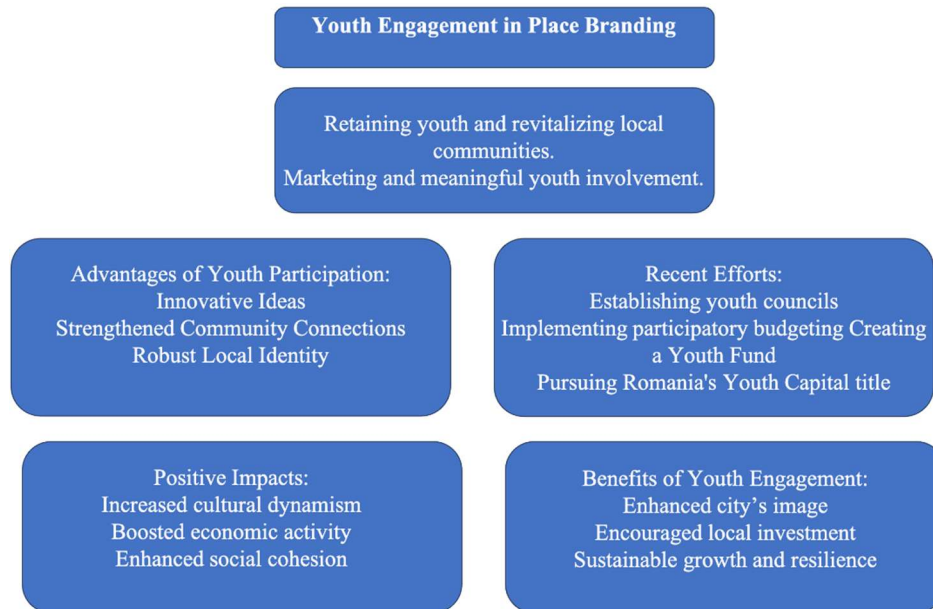


Fig 3.: Key Elements of Youth Engagement in Place Branding
(Source: created by the author)

The positive impacts of active youth involvement in place branding are evident in the increased cultural dynamism, economic activity, and social cohesion observed in other cities with engaged youth populations. Târgu Secuiesc's ongoing initiatives to support and integrate its young residents into the city's development not only enhance the local quality of life but also lay a solid foundation for future growth and resilience. By prioritizing and empowering its youth, Târgu Secuiesc is poised to address its challenges effectively and serve as a model for successful urban branding and sustainable community development through youth engagement.

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