

Local Leadership and Collective Action for Inclusive Development: Enhancing Governance and Branding in Oradea

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Abstract

In contemporary urban development, good governance – characterized by responsibility, transparency, inclusivity, and responsiveness – and effective city branding are fundamentally interconnected. As cities navigate an increasingly competitive global landscape, distinguishing themselves to attract investments, tourists, and a skilled workforce has become essential. This branding process is no longer just a top-down marketing effort, requiring profound engagement with local stakeholders to ensure authenticity and relevance.

Oradea, a city located in northwestern Romania, exemplifies how participatory governance and community-driven branding can mutually reinforce one another while promoting socio-economic inclusion. Through active engagement in urban planning, policy-making, and promotional initiatives, local actors harness Oradea's historical, cultural, and socio-economic assets to shape a brand with both national and European appeal. This inclusive approach fosters civic pride and strengthens the legitimacy of governance structures, resulting in a city identity that authentically reflects its community's values.

Oradea's experience illustrates that involving residents and local organizations in governance and branding not only cultivates trust and pride but also empowers cities to strategically position themselves on broader regional and international stages with an authentic, community-rooted identity that reflects their diverse population and shared aspirations.

Keywords

Governance, branding, urban development, socio-economic inclusion.

1. Introduction. Leadership, identity and urban evolution

In the age of decentralized governance and global visibility, cities must navigate not only administrative challenges but also the complexities of creating an authentic and engaging urban identity. Two interlinked concepts – local governance and urban branding – have become pivotal for cities

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aiming to enhance institutional effectiveness and project a distinctive image on the national and international stage.

Local governance refers to the structures, processes, and relationships through which local authorities interact with stakeholders, make decisions, and shape policy. It encompasses both the formal institutions of government and the informal mechanisms of collective action, civic participation, and leadership. Meanwhile, urban branding is the strategic construction and communication of a city's identity – its culture, infrastructure, values, and aspirations – with the aim of drawing investment, encouraging tourism, and fostering a strong sense of community belonging.

In this evolving landscape, socio-economic inclusion emerges as a critical dimension that binds governance and branding to the lived realities of urban populations. An inclusive city is characterized by its commitment to guaranteeing that all inhabitants – irrespective of socioeconomic background, educational level, ethnicity, religion, or physical and cognitive abilities – are both facilitated and empowered to actively participate in the social, economic, and political dimensions of urban life (United Nations Habitat, 2022). When urban centers prioritize inclusion, they not only address systemic disparities but also harness the full potential of their human resources, thereby promoting innovation, resilience, and social cohesion.

Inclusive growth seeks to improve both wealth and living standards, while simultaneously diminishing poverty, advancing equity for future generations, and safeguarding economic freedoms. (Agarwal, 2025). By integrating inclusive practices into both governance structures and branding strategies, cities can cultivate identities that resonate broadly across diverse communities. This approach transforms urban branding from a promotional exercise into a participatory narrative. In doing so, cities strengthen their legitimacy, deepen civic trust, and position themselves as models of equitable and sustainable development in the global arena.

In Romania, the city of Oradea has become a noteworthy example illustrating the convergence of these forces. Through participatory planning processes, transparent budgeting, and open forums for civic dialogue, Oradea has cultivated a governance model that values the voices of residents from all walks of life. This inclusive approach is mirrored in the city's branding efforts, which highlight not only its architectural heritage and economic potential, but also its commitment to community well-being. Unlike many cities still struggling to define themselves, Oradea has leveraged visionary leadership and collective civic engagement to transform its governance and strengthen its brand.

2. Methodological approach

Research Hypothesis. This study argues that Oradea's recent trajectory of socio-economic development illustrates how strong local leadership, when paired with inclusive collective action, can improve governance and strengthen urban branding. It further suggests that effective city branding not only reinforces a shared local identity but also relies on participatory decision-making processes that integrate diverse stakeholder perspectives.

Research Design. To address this key premise, the study sets out two specific *research objectives* that guide the analytical framework. First, it aims *to analyze the role of local leadership in shaping Oradea's governance practices and urban branding strategies*, with particular attention to how institutional vision and strategic coordination have contributed to measurable socio-economic outcomes. Second, it seeks *to evaluate the impact of participatory decision-making mechanisms on the development of a cohesive urban identity*, by examining how diverse stakeholder engagement influences policy formulation, implementation, and public perception.

The research employs a *qualitative case study methodology*, selecting Oradea as a particularly illustrative example of integrated urban governance combined with strategic urban branding. This approach allows for an in-depth and contextualized analysis of the complex interactions between local leadership, institutional frameworks, and active community participation. By focusing on Oradea, the study can closely examine how these factors collectively influence policymaking, implementation, and the city's evolving identity.

Data for this research were collected from a diverse range of sources, including local government policy documents, strategic development plans, records of public investment, media reports, and scholarly literature. This triangulation of data ensures a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms driving Oradea's transformation.

This case study is situated within the broader theoretical landscape of sustainable urban development, participatory governance, and place branding. By integrating localized insights from Oradea's experience with established global frameworks, the research offers a nuanced understanding of how strategic leadership and collective civic engagement can drive urban competitiveness, social cohesion, and inclusive growth.

Through this integrated approach, the study delivers practical guidance for urban policymakers aiming to foster resilient and identity-driven cities. The findings demonstrate that effective governance, when coupled with meaningful community participation, serves as a critical

catalyst for sustainable urban transformation – one that balances economic vitality with social inclusivity and a strong sense of place.

3. Exploring the dynamics between city branding and inclusive urban governance: a review of the literature

Existing theoretical frameworks provide important insights into the reciprocal relationship between governance models and branding strategies, highlighting how governance structures shape branding approaches, and how effective branding can, in turn, support and strengthen governance outcomes, ultimately contributing to the promotion of inclusive socio-economic development.

Good governance has emerged as a pivotal factor in shaping urban brand identity and enhancing the appeal of city environments, especially amid growing competition among cities in a globalized world.

Urban governance is a multidimensional construct that underscores the collaborative efforts of diverse stakeholders working toward sustainable city growth. Effective governance structures are essential for navigating the intricate challenges of urban development (Baud et al., 2021). According to Eshuis and Klijn (2017), effective governance encompasses both strategic policy formulation and the implementation of initiatives that address immediate urban needs while positioning cities as attractive destinations for business, tourism, and investment. These governance strategies act as essential instruments for guiding urban development in ways that enhance both reputational capital and economic prospects. Achieving this level of effectiveness depends on the collaborative involvement of key stakeholders, particularly local authorities, private sector actors, and community organizations. This collective effort reflects a deeper understanding that a city's brand image extends far beyond traditional marketing – it is embedded in comprehensive urban development plans that resonate with local identities and values (Eshuis and Klijn, 2017). Consequently, well-executed governance fosters public confidence and civic engagement, both of which significantly contribute to a city's overall appeal for residents and visitors alike.

Freire et al. (2016) highlight both the challenges and opportunities linked to inclusive urban growth, emphasizing the necessity for urban governance to address diverse socio-economic realities. They argue that effective city branding strategies are grounded in a thorough understanding of the local context, enabling a customised approach to urban development. Such strategies often include fostering collaborations with local businesses and community organizations to ensure that branding initiatives reflect and support the needs and interests of all community members.

Public perception plays an increasingly important role in understanding how urban governance interacts with city branding. Governance strategies that actively involve local communities and key stakeholders tend to foster more favorable views of the city. Meijer and Rodríguez Bolívar (2016) highlight that smart governance methods can strengthen public engagement and support creative branding approaches. This governance model leverages technology and data to create branding narratives tailored to a diverse urban population.

Scholars have also examined the economic influence of governance on urban attractiveness. Governance strategies that promote multi-level stakeholder participation are pivotal in enhancing a city's reputational capital. These coordinated efforts not only position cities advantageously within the competitive global arena but also foster social cohesion and support sustainable economic development. The interplay between governance, city branding, and economic vitality thus emerges as a key area of inquiry in understanding contemporary urban dynamics (Morgan et al., 2011).

Urban socio-economic conditions frequently pose barriers to inclusive economic growth. According to Kajiita and Kang'ethe (2024), cultivating a strong city brand can help overcome these challenges by crafting a distinct and cohesive identity that connects with varied communities. They argue that inclusiveness must be a core aspect of a city's brand, allowing marginalized populations to access and benefit from economic opportunities. Without actively involving under-represented groups, branding initiatives may unintentionally perpetuate existing inequalities and social divides within urban settings (Anttiroiko, 2014). Building on this, Anttiroiko and de Jong (2020) introduce the concept of the "inclusive city", which reflects the ideal of shared urban prosperity. Their findings indicate that governance strategies need to adapt by integrating inclusive branding principles that acknowledge and elevate the voices of marginalized populations. Therefore, the city's brand should avoid promoting exclusivity and instead aim to empower all residents, fostering a sense of belonging and encouraging their participation in urban governance.

Merrilees et al. (2014) further develop this discussion by linking the city brand directly to social inclusiveness. They suggest that a city brand represents its commitment to being inclusive, shaping how both residents and external stakeholders perceive and respond to the urban environment. This view highlights that urban attractiveness extends beyond physical aesthetics or infrastructure, encompassing dimensions of social equity. Brands grounded in inclusiveness have the potential to drive meaningful changes in governance approaches, encouraging city planners and decision-

makers to prioritize community involvement and equitable resource allocation.

Smart cities reflect this inclusive approach, as demonstrated by Lee et al. (2022). Their study shows that technology-driven initiatives can support socio-economic inclusiveness by improving access to information and opportunities for all residents. In this context, a city's brand effectively promotes innovation while addressing social inequalities, highlighting a mutually reinforcing relationship between smart governance and the city's brand image. According to Rossi (2016), the economic impact of smart cities on social cohesion depends largely on how the city's brand is strategically managed. When urban governance leverages the city's brand image effectively, it can enhance socio-economic outcomes. Therefore, governance frameworks must evolve to incorporate diverse perspectives, using the city's brand as a strategic tool to foster inclusiveness.

Ginesta and De San Eugenio (2020) emphasize the importance of incorporating political dimensions into city branding, advocating for sustainable governance systems that address community needs. Within this framework, public administrations play a central role in shaping place branding initiatives not only at the local level, but also nationally and internationally. To ensure long-term impact, these strategies must actively involve residents in the branding process, creating narratives that support urban governance, local development, and economic growth.

The synergy between governance and sustainable city branding is increasingly shaped by the principles of public diplomacy. Public diplomacy initiatives enhance a city's global stature by fostering meaningful connections with international stakeholders, showcasing distinctive local attributes, and reinforcing commitments to sustainability. Through its diverse instruments and broad range of actors, public diplomacy creates fertile ground for urban development and regional cooperation (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Șoproni, 2018; Șoproni and Stoica, 2022; Șoproni, 2023). These dynamics affirm that when branding efforts are supported by robust governance practices, local governments can craft compelling narratives that resonate on the global stage.

City brand theories often overlap with governance paradigms, generating new perspectives into how cities shape and manage their identities (Lucarelli and Berg, 2011; Hankinson, 2015).

The city brand focuses on strategic efforts to enhance and promote the identity, reputation, and appeal of a city for residents, investors, and tourists. Kavaratzis (2004) presents a theoretical framework that transitions from city marketing to city branding, emphasizing the importance of building a brand that resonates with the target audience while reflecting the city's

values and aspirations. The research highlights that the brand is not merely a marketing tool but a fundamental aspect of urban governance that shapes public perception and engagement. His analysis is consistent with the findings of Lucarelli and Berg (2011), who emphasize that building a strong city brand depends on a deep understanding of place management dynamics, where governance plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions. Their research shows that effective branding must be grounded in everyday urban realities and supported by governance practices that actively engage citizens in the branding process.

Place branding has emerged as an increasingly prominent topic in both scholarly research and the practical policy-making of local governments (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013, Kavaratzis et al., 2015). It is often adopted as a strategic governance tool aimed at enhancing environmental quality, social cohesion, and economic vitality within urban and regional contexts (Ma et al., 2019; Chan et al., 2021).

Green et al. (2016) demonstrate that city branding is increasingly intertwined with broader urban governance strategies. According to their analysis, a city's branding success depends on its ability to align governance practices with branding efforts. Recognizing the mutual influence between governance and branding allows cities to use branding as a tool to reinforce governance principles – and, in turn, to let governance inform branding initiatives.

Medeiros and Van der Zwet (2020) emphasize the critical role of sustainable and integrated urban planning in effective governance. They argue that a city's brand image should extend beyond mere marketing to also encompass environmental sustainability, inclusiveness, and socio-economic equity. Their findings support the notion that successful branding initiatives contribute to a more sustainable urban environment when governance strategies adopt comprehensive and inclusive approaches.

Modern branding strategies often mirror broader regional development strategies. When effectively executed by local authorities, these branding efforts can substantially enhance their region's attractiveness (Barkun et al., 2021; Sedra and El Bayed, 2022; Potapovs, 2024).

All things considered, the convergence between urban governance and city branding reflects a multifaceted web of relationships that shape both a city's development and its image locally and internationally. Governance strategies – especially those that emphasize transparency, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable development – play a crucial role in shaping urban reputation and driving economic growth. As cities navigate increasingly complex challenges brought on by globalization and competitive pressures, the importance of effective governance in fostering a distinct city

identity remains essential. To successfully handle through this intricate landscape, cities must leverage their brand image not merely as a marketing tool but as a catalyst for comprehensive governance strategies that address socio-economic disparities and promote equitable growth.

4. Local leadership in action. Collaborative strategies for city branding and governance in Oradea

Cities cannot operate in isolation; they must engage a broad network of stakeholders – including industry, the non-profit sector, academia, and the citizens – whose actions significantly influence sustainable urban development (Argento et al., 2025). Scholars argue that urban development and city branding requires participatory and inclusive approaches to be effective and enduring (Fung, 2006; Kavartzis et al., 2017; Ripoll González et al., 2025). The pursuit of sustainable urban development is often hindered by a range of challenges and uncertainties, which complicate decision-making processes for city managers and policymakers. In response to this unpredictability, a flexible approach to managing relationships between the city and its contributing stakeholders is essential for successful place branding (Källström and Siljeklint, 2024).

The city of Oradea, situated in northwestern Romania near the Hungarian border, has responded decisively and effectively to the challenges of the global economy – challenges that demand innovative solutions grounded in reimagined power dynamics between cities and their citizens (Mihăilescu, 2022). In recognition of its strategic approach and transformative initiatives, Oradea has been designated an "urban development pole of regional importance", playing a key role within three interregional development axes (*The Integrated Urban Development Strategy for the City of Oradea and Oradea Metropolitan Area 2021-2027*).

In recent years, the city has consistently ranked among Romania's top performers, marked by robust economic expansion, significant inflows of European funding, and a growing influx of tourists. Its proximity to the western border offers a strategic advantage, as prosperity often correlates with closeness to this region, through which over 70% of the country's exports are routed (Cristea et al., 2017).

Oradea's local policymakers have recognized that the foundation for a city's internationalization begins with robust local development. This process entails building a resilient and competitive economic base while simultaneously crafting a compelling and distinctive image that resonates with target audiences – whether within the region or across the country. By prioritizing strategic investments, urban regeneration, and effective branding, Oradea has positioned itself not only as a dynamic regional hub,

but also as a city with growing appeal on the national and international stage.

Local authorities, civil society organizations, and private sector stakeholders actively engage in joint initiatives that foster civic participation and ensure governance reflects the diverse interests of the community. These partnerships generate synergies that enhance the efficiency of decision-making and contribute to a more vibrant civic life. By embracing this collaborative model, Oradea effectively mobilizes local resources and expertise to meet the community's specific needs and aspirations while simultaneously strengthening the city's reputation.

In Oradea, participatory governance is actively cultivated through a range of mechanisms aimed at enhancing citizen engagement, promoting operational transparency, and fostering collaborative policy development. Local actors have embraced *cooperative strategies* that bring together public authorities, academia, businesses, and civil society to shape the city's future through shared vision and coordinated action (Oradea City Hall, *Development Strategies*).

The Integrated Urban Development Strategy of the Municipality of Oradea and the Oradea Metropolitan Area (2021-2027) serves as a comprehensive roadmap for urban transformation. It outlines priority areas for intervention across sectors and consolidates the perspectives of key stakeholders into a unified development vision. This strategy ensures that planning is not only technically sound but also socially inclusive, reflecting the contributions of local administration, academic institutions, private enterprises, and community organizations.

The Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan represents a strategic and operational commitment to improving mobility within Oradea. Developed through broad stakeholder engagement, the plan promotes efficient movement of people and goods while positioning the city as accessible, equitable, and resilient. It envisions Oradea as a hub of innovation and urban sustainability, capable of exporting best practices and expertise to surrounding localities in the Metropolitan Area and across Bihor County. In doing so, the city becomes a source of regional "welfare export", offering models of success that others can emulate.

The adoption of electronic governance tools has played a pivotal role in strengthening participatory governance in Oradea. By facilitating a more direct link between public input and policy outcomes, they foster a governance environment that is both responsive and adaptive to community needs. The public administration has introduced several tools to enhance transparency, streamline processes, and improve communication with citizens:

- platform *digital.oradea.ro* – designed to simplify administrative procedures within Oradea City Hall. Through it, citizens can submit requests and complaints, make online payments, register documents, and even sign up for public hearings (Oradea in direct, 2023).

- The digitalization of public services within this project aims to reduce the time required for citizens to access services, simplify procedures, and design user-friendly systems grounded in a citizen-centered approach.

- online *participatory budgeting platform activ.oradea.ro* – an empowering initiative that invites citizens to take an active role in shaping their urban environment. Through this digital tool, residents can submit project proposals focused on enhancing public spaces and improving neighbourhood life across the city. To date, 22 out of the 72 selected projects have been successfully brought to life, reflecting the community’s vision and involvement (Oradea City Hall, *Participatory Budgeting in Oradea*).

- *Oradea City Report* – a free, user-friendly mobile and tablet application that empowers engaged citizens to report complaints and incidents directly to Oradea City Hall and local public service providers (*Oradea City Report*).

These digital tools can have far-reaching effects on the socio-economic landscape by enhancing administrative efficiency, reducing inequalities in service access, and fostering greater civic engagement. By streamlining interactions with public institutions, digitalization can empower marginalized populations, promote social inclusion, and strengthen trust in governance. Ultimately, such transformations contribute to improved social cohesion and a more equitable distribution of opportunities across urban communities.

These transformative efforts in digitalizing public services set the stage for Oradea’s proactive response to administrative challenges through its *Digital Strategy for Oradea Smart City*². Beginning in September 2025, City Hall embarked on wide-ranging consultations with city-owned enterprises, institutional partners, academia, businesses, NGOs, and residents, collaboratively crafting a strategic framework to guide ongoing and future digitalization initiatives (Oradea City Hall, 2025). This framework provides a unified, comprehensive roadmap empowering public institutions to harness technology in ways that effectively address the evolving needs of the city’s diverse population.

² The project’s total budget amounts to €104,770,39. The Digital Innovation Hub secured funding from both the European Commission, under the Digital Europe Programme, and the Romanian Government, through the Operational Program for Smart Growth, Digitization and Financial Instruments (POCIDIF) 2021-2027. This grant was obtained by Oradea City Hall through the Directorate for Internationally Funded Project Management.

Building on this foundation of collaboration and innovation, Oradea prioritizes sustained partnerships across public institutions, the private sector, and civil society to continually refine and expand its digital and participatory programs. This inclusive, ongoing dialogue ensures that technological progress aligns with community values and aspirations, fostering an environment where innovation advances both operational efficiency and social equity. By upholding principles of transparency and inclusiveness, the city cultivates trust and encourages active citizen participation, thereby reinforcing the democratic fabric and enhancing the responsiveness of local governance.

Looking ahead, Oradea recognizes the importance of adaptability in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. To this end, the city is committed to continuous skill development for both public servants and community members, ensuring that all stakeholders can effectively navigate and contribute meaningfully to the smart city ecosystem. By integrating participatory frameworks into e-governance technologies, Oradea aspires to establish a model of sustainable urban development that harmonizes technological innovation with human-centered values, ultimately elevating the quality of life for all its residents. This forward-looking approach ensures that the city not only embraces progress but does so inclusively, maintaining its commitment to social equity and responsive governance.

5. Branding Oradea: identity and communication

The creation and positioning of a city brand must be founded on a comprehensive framework that encompasses historical, economic, demographic, social, cultural, and political dimensions. Successful city branding draws on a blend of economic vitality, strategic geographic positioning, robust infrastructure, skilled human capital, active stakeholder participation, tourism potential, environmental resources, and a distinctive cultural identity. Together, these factors shape the territory's brand identity and serve as strategic inputs in the branding process. Their interplay significantly influences the city's perceived image – whether positive or negative – thereby influencing its attractiveness to investors, residents, visitors, and other target audiences.

Building on this comprehensive approach, Oradea's urban marketing strategy demonstrates coherence by effectively integrating *key success factors that contribute to the creation of a strong and distinctive city brand*. These interconnected elements – planning group, vision and strategic analysis, place identity and image, public-private partnerships, and leadership – work together to ensure the strategy's consistency, fluidity, and meaningful execution (Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009: 22-23).

A committed *planning group*, consisting of public and private local stakeholders, plays a central role in coordinating Oradea's branding initiatives. In addition to steering strategic efforts, this group ensures financial support for these activities, largely by leveraging European funding mechanisms. Such resources have been pivotal in driving Oradea's remarkable development, positioning the city as a national leader in successfully attracting and utilizing European resources (Oradenii.ro, 2025). Between 2008 and 2025, public projects financed through European funds have surpassed €1.6 billion, with investments spanning across key sectors such as infrastructure, healthcare, education, energy, green spaces, and urban regeneration (InfoOradea, 2025a; Digi24 Oradea, 2018). Notable achievements include the development and restoration of Union Square, the construction of the Aquapark, the renovation of Oradea Fortress, and the rehabilitation of historic buildings in the city center. Major infrastructure upgrades have also been completed, including the Metropolitan ring road, central heating system modernization, new transport corridors, passage construction, and the creation of green zones. Efforts to improve mobility and sustainability are evident in the building and refurbishment of bridges to ease traffic flow, the modernization of public transport through the purchase of electric buses, and the expansion of tram lines. The city has also invested in healthcare and education, with hospital renovations, new nurseries, and upgraded schools. Local authorities anticipate that the sustained implementation of non-reimbursable funding projects, combined with strong public-private partnerships, will keep Oradea on a steady path of economic, social, and cultural growth.

These achievements have transformed the city into a model of urban development, marked by significant investments in infrastructure, healthcare, education, and the enhancement of green spaces.

The action group functions as both the designer and coordinator of Oradea's *development and branding strategy*. This effort is grounded in comprehensive *territorial analyses* that have highlighted the city's internal strengths and weaknesses alongside external opportunities and challenges. Based on these insights, a series of strategic documents were developed, outlining the city's vision, general and specific objectives, and the planned actions for implementing its marketing strategy.

Urban Development Strategy of the Municipality of Oradea and the Oradea Metropolitan Area, elaborated by Oradea City Hall, articulates the city's development vision as *an innovative, strong, and sustainable European benchmark, economically developed, integrated into a metropolitan area that defines a living, working, and high-quality lifestyle space*. The document outlines strategic objectives for urban development, along with priority axes, targeted programs to support these objectives, and a detailed action plan to

guide implementation within the urban development pole (*The Integrated Urban Development Strategy of the Municipality of Oradea and the Oradea Metropolitan Area, 2021-2027*).

Public-private partnerships have proven highly effective in Oradea's urban development, generating a critical mass that has already yielded tangible results in fundraising, project implementation, communication, and promotional activities.

Established in 2015, the Oradea Destination Management Organization (*Visit Oradea*) represents a collaboration between the local government and key stakeholders within the tourism sector. This partnership is tasked with shaping and executing tourism policies for Oradea, encompassing destination marketing, visitor services, event coordination, and the cultivation of strategic alliances across multiple levels. (*Visit Oradea, #WeAreVISITORADEA*).

Oradea's local authorities actively promote business growth by leveraging the city's strategic location near the Hungarian border, primarily through the establishment of industrial parks managed by the *Oradea Local Development Agency* (ADLO), in which the municipality holds a majority share. ADLO functions as a crucial link connecting private investors with educational institutions, facilitating interactions with public authorities, and supporting both domestic and foreign investments. Additionally, it plays a vital role in promoting investment opportunities and encouraging entrepreneurship (ADLO Oradea).

These initiatives embody a common belief among local stakeholders that transparency, proactive governance, and collaborative engagement are fundamental drivers for sustainable urban development.

Oradea has developed a *positive image* as a Central European hub for tourism and business, shaped by the city's strategic branding efforts. While its identity is still evolving, proactive initiatives by local authorities have created a unique profile that differentiates Oradea from both regional and cross-border rivals. This distinctive image is actively communicated through carefully targeted channels.

City leadership is secured when local actors recognize and actively apply strategic management, seeing the city as a collaborative network of political leaders, businesses, civic organizations, trade unions, and the wider community (UrbanizeHub, 2017). Demonstrating professionalism and strong managerial expertise, public authorities effectively motivate and guide stakeholders toward achieving shared goals by articulating a clear vision, making informed strategic decisions, and sustaining open communication.

An effective *communication strategy* is crucial for defining a city's brand and projecting its identity to a broader audience. For local authorities, consistently delivering clear and trustworthy messages is key to establishing an authentic and attractive image. However, before initiating any promotional campaign, it is crucial for stakeholders to acknowledge that long-term success depends largely on their dedication to enhancing infrastructure, developing tourist attractions and recreational facilities, and elevating the overall quality of life and attractiveness of the region. This foundational investment ensures that promotional activities rest on a solid base capable of sustaining growth and delivering lasting benefits to the community. Within this framework, Oradea's promotional budget for 2025 totals 18.4 million lei, of which 15.35 million lei is directly financed by City Hall (Bihoreanul, 2005). These funds are dedicated to boosting tourism through carefully targeted online and offline campaigns, along with the production of specialized promotional materials aimed at both domestic and international audiences. Additionally, a significant portion supports the planning and execution of cultural and leisure events that showcase the city's vibrant community and attractions.

Oradea's *communication mix* embodies a carefully balanced combination of branding tools aimed at clearly expressing the city's value and engaging its target audiences. This approach incorporates advertising, promotion, and public relations – each contributing uniquely to the formation and reinforcement of the city's image.

The advertising strategy has utilized multiple media channels to build and strengthen Oradea's brand visibility, including local and national television, print media, outdoor displays, and digital platforms. Promotional activities have encompassed the creation of multilingual brochures, leaflets, flyers, tourist maps, and various other materials; the enhancement of the official tourism website; the development and ongoing management of the Oradea City App; and the introduction of the Oradea City Card, which provides discounts, a city map, and 48 hours of complimentary transportation. Public relations efforts have concentrated on fostering strong media connections through press releases and conferences, coordinating infotrips for travel journalists and agencies, and actively engaging in tourism fairs both nationally and internationally. Communication related to events has involved organizing and supporting cultural and promotional activities in partnership with local institutions and businesses (Visit Oradea, *Activity Reports 2015- 2024*).

As a result of this integrated communication campaign, the main achievements of 2024 were (Visit Oradea, *Activity Report 2024*):

- Event of the year: the extraordinary concert by Andrea Bocelli in November, one of the most significant cultural moments ever organized in Oradea

- Major social media impact: nearly 10 million people were reached through Visit Oradea's own channels

- Instagram growth: the Visit Oradea account surpassed 100,000 followers, strengthening the city's digital presence

- Increase in tourism: over 235.000 tourists visited Oradea, with overnight stays rising by 4% compared to the pre-pandemic period.

- Record-breaking events: Oradea FestiFall attracted more than 120.000 participants, and December marked the best month in Visit Oradea's history, with nearly 31.000 overnight stays.

Together, these coordinated efforts demonstrate the implementation of an integrated marketing communication strategy driven by Oradea's local authorities, effectively harmonizing all channels to deliver a cohesive, persuasive, and distinctive message about the city and its unique character.

Oradea's highly effective branding strategy has firmly positioned the city as a leading destination for tourism and business in Romania. This standing is anchored in a range of *competitive advantages* that collectively boost the city's visibility and attractiveness. Situated at the western border of the European Union, Oradea benefits from a *strategic location* that encourages cross-border collaboration and trade, while its *vibrant economic cluster* continues to draw significant national and international investment. The city's *business environment is increasingly supportive*, particularly in innovative sectors like information technology, and is complemented by significant *infrastructural developments* driven by proactive public investment and urban planning. Oradea's distinctive identity is further enriched by its *rich cultural legacy*, recognized through its title as Romania's Art Nouveau Capital and membership in the European Network of Art Nouveau Cities. This cultural vitality is complemented by a *dynamic culinary scene*, featuring numerous establishments acknowledged in the Gault & Millau Romania guide, alongside *sophisticated leisure and wellness facilities*, including an advanced aquatic and spa center.

Together, these interconnected assets contribute to the city's successful branding and its growing reputation as a competitive urban center in both national and European contexts (Șoproni, 2023). The city's ongoing commitment to leveraging its geographic advantages, economic dynamism, cultural heritage, and quality-of-life offerings underscores a comprehensive vision of sustainable urban development. Looking ahead, Oradea is well-positioned to build upon this foundation by deepening cross-sector collaboration, embracing innovative urban policies, and continuously

enhancing its cultural and infrastructural assets, while prioritizing socio-economic inclusion to ensure that growth benefits all members of the community. This integrated focus will help sustain long-term development and resilience in an increasingly interconnected and competitive landscape.

6. Conclusion: synergy in action

Oradea's governance and branding strategies exemplify a cohesive and integrated approach, anchored in strong local leadership, collaborative action, and a shared commitment to fostering inclusive growth and social cohesion. A clearly defined and authentic city identity does more than attract investment and strengthen vital economic sectors like business and tourism; it also cultivates equal opportunities and reinforces the community's social cohesion. These intertwined aspects collectively influence the city's reputation and are deeply integrated into its urban policy frameworks and participatory governance structures. This comprehensive and inclusive approach has played a crucial role in Oradea's transformation into a dynamic hub of economic growth, creating a powerful regional magnet while guaranteeing that the advantages of development are equitably distributed throughout the community.

This progress isn't just based on stories, but is supported by solid data showcasing **the urban values** shaped by Oradea's strategic approach to urban management across key areas such as city identity, business environment, tourism, and overall quality of life. These measurable achievements highlight how thoughtful governance and coordinated efforts translate into tangible improvements that resonate throughout the community and bolster the city's ongoing growth and appeal.

- **City identity and perceived urban image.** Oradea has steadily positioned itself as a premier urban destination in Romania, renowned for its rich multicultural heritage, lively social and cultural environment, diverse culinary scene, and internationally recognized thermal spa facilities. The city's identity values are firmly anchored in its historical legacy, while simultaneously embracing modern priorities such as clean energy, sustainable urban development (green city), modern educational frameworks, technological innovation – including IoT integration – along with wellness, public health, and a strong focus on family safety.

This approach emphasizes sustainable growth, innovation, and inclusivity, ensuring that development projects not only boost the local economy but also create vibrant, liveable spaces that meet the evolving needs of the community. By integrating smart technologies, green infrastructure, and participatory governance, Oradea fosters a dynamic urban environment where residents actively contribute to shaping their

city's future, making it a model for balanced and forward-thinking urban transformation.

Recent *recognitions and rankings* highlight Oradea's evolving status as a model city (Destination of the Year, 2025; InfoOradea, 2025b; Best Art Nouveau Destinations in Europe, 2025; *City Performance Index – 2024*; ADLO Oradea, *Investors in Oradea*, Transilvania Business, 2022):

- in 2025, Oradea was awarded the title *Destination of the Year* in the category "*Cities that Inspire*" at the *Gala Destination of the Year*, Romania's leading competition for tourism destinations.

- Oradea ranks among *the top three Romanian cities in terms of resident satisfaction*, according to the *2025 T.R.A.I. Index* published by the Storia platform.

- the city was designated the *second most beautiful Art Nouveau destination in Europe* (following Budapest) by *European Best Destinations* in 2025.

- in the *2024 Urban Attractiveness Index*, Oradea placed *third nationally among the most desirable cities for residential relocation*.

- Oradea ranked among the *top 10 Small European Cities of the Future 2023 for cost effectiveness*, according to a report evaluating the investment appeal of various cities.

- a 2023 analysis conducted by *Numbeo* identified Oradea as the *safest city in Romania*, based on comparative urban safety indicators.

- in 2022, Oradea secured *the second position in the World Bank's ranking of the most liveable cities*.

- a 2022 survey by *UrbanizeHub* placed Oradea among the *top three cities most favored by young people as a relocation destination*.

- in 2021, the *World Bank* included Oradea in its report on *magnet cities*, alongside Cluj-Napoca and Timișoara, highlighting its capacity to attract talent and investment through sustainable urban policies.

These qualities underscore Oradea's rising status as a city that successfully combines cultural heritage, urban safety, and strategic development to promote an elevated quality of urban living.

- **Business environment.** Oradea has emerged as a highly *attractive destination for investors*, driven by its advanced infrastructure and proactive, business-friendly public policies.

In 2025, the municipality's projected total revenues are estimated at approximately €750 million – marking the largest budget in the city's history (Oradea24.ro, 2025). This milestone reflects not only Oradea's financial resilience, but also the local administration's effectiveness in securing external funding to support sustainable urban growth.

The year 2025 is set to be a landmark for investment, with development projects expected to reach nearly €400 million. This unprecedented figure underscores Oradea's position as *a leading model of urban transformation*, where strategic planning, economic vitality, and visionary governance converge to shape a thriving city of the future.

According to the *City Index 2024*, Oradea boasts the *highest entrepreneurial density among cities with populations under 200,000* (RisCo, 2024). This metric, closely linked to regional economic growth and development, is strongly influenced by forward-thinking local policies.

From 2019 to 2023, Oradea led the country in attracting European funds for public development, securing an average of around 5,000 lei per resident. These resources have driven significant investments in urban regeneration, sustainable transportation, heritage conservation, and vital public services.

The city's entrepreneurial spirit is evident in its *dynamic business ecosystem*. By the end of 2022, the city recorded 8 active companies per 100 residents, ranking just behind Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest in entrepreneurial density. This vibrant business landscape contributes to Oradea's notably low unemployment rate and reflects the strength of its local economic model. The city exemplifies an efficient and supportive ecosystem, offering access to financial resources, strategic public policies, tax incentives, business support programs, and robust infrastructure – all of which foster innovation and sustainable growth.

Oradea ranks *4th nationally among Romania's leading cities with tech startup communities*, following Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, and Timișoara. The city is emerging as a dynamic center for startups and entrepreneurial innovation. Its remarkable progress was highlighted in the *2025 Startup Ecosystem Report* by StartupBlink, a globally acknowledged leader in startup ecosystem analysis (StartupBlink, 2025). In the latest report, Oradea jumped 15 positions in the global rankings compared to the previous year, marking the highest national growth rate of 22.1%. The city now holds the 729th spot out of 1,000 cities worldwide.

With a supportive environment for entrepreneurship, Oradea continues to attract talent, investors, and innovators. Key sectors such as IT, software development, e-commerce, renewable energy, and tourism are experiencing rapid expansion. The city's startup landscape is fuelled by a growing number of co-working spaces, incubators, and accelerator programs – most notably Bright Labs Incubator, powered by *Make IT in Oradea*. These initiatives are drawing in young entrepreneurs from across the region and even from the Romanian diaspora.

Oradea's thriving ecosystem is built on strong collaboration between private enterprises, public institutions, and academia, fostering knowledge exchange and cross-industry connectivity.

In 2025, Fitch Ratings reaffirmed Oradea's position among the cities with the highest investment credibility, assigning a BBB- rating for long-term loans (Fitch Ratings, 2025). This reaffirmation within the investment-grade category underscores Oradea's financial reliability and signals a low-risk environment for investors, reflecting the local administration's capacity to manage and repay public loans effectively. Beyond its technical implications, a strong international credit rating acts as a strategic asset, serving as a "business card" that communicates the city's attractiveness, competitiveness, and fiscal discipline to potential investors and development partners.

• **Tourism**

Oradea stands out as *a leading example in Romania for destination development and tourism promotion*. Thanks to strategic investments in cultural and leisure infrastructure, the city has firmly positioned itself as one of the country's most attractive urban travel spots.

Consistently ranked among Romania's top 8 tourist destinations, Oradea continues to captivate visitors with its vibrant atmosphere, diverse recreational offerings, and well-curated events. The steady rise in overnight stays reflects not only increased visitor interest but also the effectiveness of Oradea's tourism strategies, infrastructure improvements, and hospitality services. Over the past five years, the city has demonstrated resilience and adaptability, fostering an environment where tourism can thrive even amid broader global challenges.

In 2024, Oradea recorded a moderate yet sustained growth in tourism, welcoming over 4% more tourists than in the previous year. This increase is particularly significant as it marks the first time overnight stays have exceeded pre-pandemic levels, signalling a robust recovery and renewed confidence in the city as a travel destination (Visit Oradea, *Activity Report 2024*). This milestone underscores Oradea's successful efforts to position itself as a must-visit city in Romania, one that balances cultural richness with modern amenities, ensuring memorable stays for visitors while driving economic benefits for the local community.

• **Quality of life**

Oradea's urban development strategy clearly places *quality of life at the heart of its long-term vision* rather than treating it as a secondary goal. Through smart governance and targeted public investment, the city has

cultivated an environment where well-being is both measurable and widely accessible.

A cornerstone of this strategy is the *Oradea Green City* program, which prioritizes the expansion and accessibility of green and recreational spaces as a means to enhance the overall well-being of residents. By 2030, the city plans to ensure that 91.3% of its population will live within a five-minute walk of a public urban green space. Additionally, the green space available per resident is set to increase from 23 sqm to 29.4 sqm—an impressive benchmark aligned with European standards.

Oradea's commitment to quality of life extends beyond environmental planning. The city offers a multifaceted cultural and social landscape, including:

- a vibrant urban setting characterized by increasing cultural activity and civic engagement;
- recognition by art historians as an “architectural reserve,” featuring 77 officially registered historic monument buildings;
- a robust cultural agenda facilitated by *Oradea Heritage*, encompassing exhibitions, performances, concerts, and community-based programs (Oradea Heritage);
- comprehensive infrastructure supporting both competitive and recreational sports activities.

Together, these assets empower Oradea to pursue its development goals and establish itself as a recognized urban growth center, generating lasting value for the region it serves. In this context, Oradea continues to evolve not merely as a city striving to improve quality of life, but as one in which quality of life is actively realized and experienced by its residents. This transformation is evidenced by sustained improvements in urban planning, cultural participation, and environmental accessibility, positioning Oradea as a model for integrated urban development in Romania and beyond.

Oradea's recent trajectory illustrates how the convergence of robust local leadership and inclusive collective action generates tangible outcomes in both governance and urban branding. The city's achievements – reflected in national and international rankings, economic indicators, and quality-of-life metrics – demonstrate that strategic coordination between institutional vision and civic participation fosters a resilient, inclusive, attractive, and future-oriented urban environment. *These outcomes validate the study's research hypothesis*, confirming that strong local leadership, when combined with mechanisms for inclusive engagement, can significantly enhance governance effectiveness and reinforce a shared urban identity. Oradea's participatory governance model, which integrates diverse stakeholder perspectives into decision-making processes, has proven

instrumental in shaping policies that reflect community needs while advancing the city's strategic goals.

By aligning governance practices with a coherent place identity and leveraging cross-sector collaboration, Oradea positions itself not only as a model of urban transformation within Romania, but also as a compelling case study in the broader discourse on sustainable city development and strategic urban management. The lessons from Oradea's experience offer valuable insights for other cities seeking to navigate the complexities of urban development in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. Key takeaways include the need for transparent leadership, adaptive policy-making, and the cultivation of civic trust through inclusive engagement. These elements are not only replicable but essential for cities aiming to achieve integrated growth and resilient urban futures.

Based on the insights gained from Oradea's strategic initiatives, this study recommends prioritizing the integration of participatory mechanisms within urban planning processes, strengthening investments in place-based identity development, and ensuring long-term institutional continuity to maintain and advance transformative progress.

However, the research also acknowledges certain limitations inherent in the Oradea case study. The city's specific administrative structure, regional context, and access to European funding may not be directly transferable to all urban settings. Additionally, while Oradea's success is well-documented through quantitative indicators and public perception, further longitudinal studies are needed to assess the durability of its governance model and its adaptability to future challenges. Despite these constraints, Oradea's evolution remains a powerful example of how strategic vision, community involvement, and institutional capacity can converge to redefine urban potential.

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