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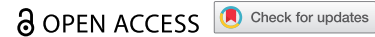


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RESEARCH ARTICLE



"You're all welcome!": citizens' attitudes towards tourism and its development in a post-European Capital of Culture

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes citizens' attitudes towards tourism and its development, examining how residents of Sibiu/Hermannstadt, the former European Capital of Culture in Romania, perceive the positive and negative effects of increased tourism. Using an original dataset from a sociological survey ($N = 923$), the analysis reveals an overwhelmingly positive view of tourism, considered beneficial for the city's image and the local economy, alongside concerns about its potential negative effects. Through a multiple linear regression analysis, the article explores the characteristics and social attitudes that shape residents' negative assessments of increasing tourism in the city. The results suggest that negative attitudes stem from dissatisfaction with economic agents' largely unregulated practices within a state-driven neoliberal model of touristic development that challenges the protection of local cultural heritage. Theorising Sibiu as a *touristifying city* – an urban formation in which municipal authorities actively promote tourism as the primary engine of economic development while residents broadly legitimate this trajectory – the article advances understanding of how post-socialist contexts shape public responses to tourism-driven urban development in ways that existing frameworks, developed primarily in Western and Southern European settings, do not fully capture. The findings carry implications for both urban tourism research and the sustainable management of tourism cities.

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Introduction

For almost two decades, since the city served as European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2007, Sibiu/Hermannstadt (Romania) has experienced steady tourism growth. During this period, the city welcomed more than eight million tourists, around one third of whom came from abroad. Except for the brief period of mobility restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania (2020–2022), the flow of visitors to this picturesque Saxon town in Transylvania increased continuously, reaching a record 578,234 in 2023 and consolidating Sibiu's position as one of Romania's leading tourist destinations (Institutul Național de Statistică [INS], 2024). Each time the National Institute of Statistics released its annual tourism data, the new record was welcomed by the local media as yet another victory for both the municipal authorities and the local community at large (Bratu, 2023). Over time, these recurring announcements contributed to consolidating a dominant narrative of uninterrupted tourism growth, reinforcing the perception that Sibiu's development trajectory was closely tied to the expansion of the tourism sector.

That pattern faltered the following year. Data released in early 2025 showed that arrivals had effectively flatlined: the city recorded 579,601 tourists in 2024, barely 0.2% above the 2023 figure, after two decades of near-continuous expansion. Although Sibiu retained its position among Romania's most visited destinations, the interruption of growth was widely read locally as a downturn. Regional media announced that tourism in Sibiu was in decline (Bratu, 2025), and stakeholders – city officials, managers of public cultural institutions, owners of tourism-related businesses, and ordinary citizens – sought to explain the setback and

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identify remedies for what they feared might become a tourism crisis. Nevertheless, the anxiety proved short-lived: arrivals rose again by 8.5% to 628,805 in 2025 (INS, 2026).

Sibiu's tourism-driven growth model, together with the anxiety produced by even a brief interruption of its expansion, contrasts starkly with the emerging paradigm of anti-overtourism that has been gaining momentum across Europe and beyond. In recent years, as popular destinations have gradually succumbed to growing influxes of tourists, an increasing number of community-led initiatives and resistance movements have pressured local authorities to adopt policies aimed at containing the increasing flow of tourists, which has led to overtourism in many European cities. As the widespread concern triggered by the mere interruption of growth suggests, Sibiu's case tells a rather different story: here, unlike in many European cities where overtourism has become a major public issue, tourism does not appear to have a significant 'dark(er) side'.

It is precisely this contrasting position within an emerging broader pattern that renders Sibiu an intriguing case for examining social attitudes towards touristification in a post-ECoC city that has established itself as a tourist destination. Consequently, this article sets out to investigate how ordinary citizens of Sibiu perceive tourism, including both its positive consequences and its negative effects. By doing so, this approach seeks to better understand Sibiu's peculiarity within a wider context of changing attitudes, practices, and policies towards tourism and its development.

Urban tourism – broadly understood as the complex set of relationships between cities, their residents, and the visitors they attract – has long remained a paradoxically underdeveloped area of scholarly inquiry relative to its economic and social significance (Ashworth & Page, 2011). While recent scholarship has extensively explored the impact of tourism in well-known tourist metropolises, less attention has been given to citizens' attitudes towards tourism and its development in smaller or mid-sized cities where tourism is actively increasing. By examining citizens' attitudes towards touristification in a city where tourism is widely embraced rather than contested, this article makes two interrelated contributions to urban tourism research. First, it advances the understanding of how residents in mid-sized Eastern European cities perceive and respond to tourism-driven urban development, a perspective that remains underrepresented in a field dominated by case studies from Western and Southern Europe. The overwhelming positivity recorded among Sibiu's residents towards tourism growth – and the relative absence of the anti-tourism mobilisation documented in big tourist cities such as Barcelona, Venice, and Lisbon, as well as in many smaller cities and even villages such as Kinderdijk in the Netherlands, Hallstatt in Austria, and Bourton-on-the-Water in England – suggests that the socio-cultural and post-socialist contexts in which touristification unfolds shape residents' attitudes in ways that existing theoretical frameworks, developed primarily in Western European settings, do not fully capture.

Second, this article contributes to urban tourism scholarship by theorising the *touristifying city*: an urban formation in which municipal authorities actively promote tourism as the primary engine of economic development, private economic actors operate within a permissive and loosely regulated environment, and local residents broadly legitimate this developmental trajectory. Unlike paradigmatic cases of overtourism, where tourism saturation generates visible social conflict and organised resistance, the touristifying city is characterised by a hegemonic pro-tourism consensus that naturalises continued tourist growth and renders its potential social costs largely invisible. Sibiu exemplifies this formation: a post-ECoC city in which the legacy of cultural designation has been institutionalised into a sustained, municipally driven strategy of tourism promotion, operating within a broader neoliberal framework of urban development that prioritises economic gains over the regulation of tourism-related externalities. Understanding this type of city – and the conditions under which resident consent to touristification is produced and maintained – represents an important and underexplored dimension of urban tourism governance.

The following sections outline the theoretical framework of the analysis and provide an overview of touristification, the local resistance movements that have emerged to contest it, and the policy responses developed in tourist locations across Europe, ranging from metropolises to mid-sized and small cities, even villages. The following section then examines Sibiu's transformation into a tourism-driven city and documents the development of an integrated ecology of tourism-related practices since the city held the title of ECoC in 2007. After establishing this socio-historical background, the article sets out the methodological approach underpinning the quantitative analysis, based on original data collected through a large-scale questionnaire survey of the local community. The statistical findings and the

results of the regression model are then presented and discussed, before the article concludes by outlining the policy implications of the study. By examining citizens' attitudes towards touristification in a city where tourism is widely embraced rather than contested, this article contributes to the literature on tourism governance by highlighting how local socio-cultural contexts shape public responses to tourism-driven urban development.

Contested tourism development in Europe

After being brought to an almost complete halt during the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism rebounded strongly in the immediate post-pandemic period, bringing both its positive and negative consequences back into public discussion, media narratives, and academic debates. This section approaches tourism development in Europe from four complementary perspectives. The first characterises touristification as a touristic practice and explores its theoretical articulation within academic scholarship. The second discusses overtourism as an object of contestation by examining the emergence of popular resistance movements across European cities, ranging from major to mid-sized and smaller cities, and even villages. The third reviews studies on the residents' opinions regarding the increase of tourism in mid-sized and small European cities. Finally, the fourth considers how municipalities have responded to growing pressures to regulate the rapid increase of tourism.

The rapid increase in tourism in European cities is a complex phenomenon enabled and accelerated by various recent economic, social, technological, and cultural transformations. European urban tourism has a centuries-long history, which helps explain why many cities with long-standing tourism traditions, such as Venice and Paris, are today experiencing various challenges caused by constantly increasing tourist flows . . . In recent decades, tourism-driven governance has also boosted the attractiveness of several mid-sized and small European cities without historical tourism traditions, such as Tromsø in Norway or Rovaniemi in Finland, leading to similar – though smaller-scale – challenges. Salerno (2022) notes that Venice's current overtourism crisis reflects centuries of urban policies prioritising tourism over local needs. Studies on tourist cities across the globe show that overtourism does not require centuries of pro-tourism urban policies to develop; aggressive tourism campaigns and investments in tourism industries can increase, or even cause tourism flows to explode, within just a few decades (Dioko, 2017; Khiyat & Karimova, 2025).

The increasing tourist flows are often described as touristification, but the concept does not only refer to a sped-up growth in tourism; rather, it comprises the structural and territorial transformation of urban areas or neighbourhoods into spaces that cater to tourists' needs (Ojeda & Kieffer, 2020; Santos-Izquierdo et al., 2025). This transformation has various positive and negative impacts on urban areas, neighbourhoods, and the people who live and work in them. The commonly highlighted positive impacts of touristification include economic growth, job creation through diverse services with multiplier effects on the other sectors of the labour market, and enriched cultural exchanges that benefit cities and their neighbourhoods (Barrera-Fernández et al., 2019). The European Capital of Culture program, with its explicit objective of attracting visitors to designated cities, underlines similar positive economic, social, and cultural impacts achieved through urban development and cultural regeneration (Lähdesmäki, 2014; Liu, 2016; Ooi et al., 2014).

While recent research on touristification recognises its benefits, it is much more common to highlight its disadvantages. Previous studies exploring the major European tourist cities indicate, for instance, the economic displacement of residents through rising short-term rentals and the restructuring of housing and commercial landscapes, particularly affecting lower-income groups, the elderly, and local businesses and producing social vulnerability (Cocola-Gant, 2023; Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2020; Salerno, 2022; Sequera & Nofre, 2020; Sibrijns & Vanneste, 2021). Many studies show how states and local authorities have promoted touristification – especially after the 2008–2009 economic crisis – intensifying urban restructuring and gentrification (Estevens et al., 2023; Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2020; Sequera & Nofre, 2020; Sibrijns & Vanneste, 2021; Tulumello & Allegratti, 2021). Post-COVID trajectories show comparable patterns (Jover & Barrero-Rescalvo, 2024), and the platform economy has further accelerated touristification and its disadvantages both in major tourist destinations and mid-sized and small cities, with Airbnb-type rentals driving bottom-up transformations (Freytag & Bauder, 2018) enabled by permissive state policies (Estevens et al., 2023), prompting some cities to regulate short-term rentals (Freytag & Bauder, 2018; Milano et al., 2019). Research also highlights intersections between touristification, gentrification, and financialisation, as

shown in Lisbon's Mouraria, where neoliberal policies, speculation, and tourism pressures jointly produce accumulation and displacement (Tulumello & Allegratti, 2021).

Comparable processes of state-driven tourism promotion have been documented in post-communist cities in Central and Eastern Europe, where tourism has served as a key instrument of post-socialist economic restructuring and urban repositioning (Light et al., 2020; Niewiadomski, 2023). For instance, tourism promotion has been perceived to increase gentrification and alter the social structure of residential areas and housing blocks near city centres (Almeida García et al., 2021; Dumbrovská, 2017; Pixová & Sládek, 2016). While ECoCs in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe have benefited in various ways from the programme's emphasis on urban development and cultural regeneration, research has also noted that attempts to generate positive impacts and emulate economically successful Western European cities have, in turn, produced depersonalisation and cultural homogenisation of the urban environment. In these ECoC cities, cultural planners and managers seek to follow recent (Western) regeneration and urban-planning trends, ultimately developing and offering events and cultural spaces that have become common across Europe (Lähdesmäki, 2014).

Numerous studies have explored the above-described negative trajectories and challenges with the concept of overtourism. Research on overtourism describes it as a critical issue in global tourism with effects on urban and rural communities and the natural environment. The concept has become widely used in the media – Koens et al. (2018) even note that it emerged in media debates – and academia, typically referring to an increased tourist presence that leads to negative social, environmental, and economic consequences. Milano et al. (2019, n.p.) define overtourism as 'the excessive growth of visitors leading to overcrowding in areas where residents suffer the consequences of temporary and seasonal tourism peaks'. The various negative consequences explored in tourism research indicate that these studies actually describe what could be called overtourism. Scholars have linked the rise of overtourism to the expansion of low-cost mobility, platform economies, changing travel patterns, and the growing role of destination marketing and social media (Koens et al., 2018; Milano et al., 2019). Cities such as Barcelona, Venice, and Dubrovnik have become emblematic examples of tourism saturation, but the phenomenon is also evident in mid-sized and smaller cities, as well as villages, rural destinations, and remote islands. Comparative analyses and review studies on overtourism underline the situated nature of the phenomenon and the varying contexts in which it occurs (e.g., Alsharif et al., 2025; Koens et al., 2018; Żemła, 2024). Żemła (2024, p. 354) highlights these differences, even noting 'contradictions in how overtourism appears in different destinations and its consequences', and Koens et al. (2018, p. 10) observe that 'the way in which overtourism manifests itself, as well as the possibilities for dealing with the issues, strongly depend on the city context, and solutions need to be made to fit this local context'. An Eastern European location – shaped by post-socialist, post-ECoC, and tourism-driven regeneration trajectories – forms a distinct context for tourism development and for addressing the challenges it may generate.

In recent years, development of tourism and overtourism in several European cities has sparked various forms of resistance among residents frustrated by its negative consequences. These resistance movements seek to counteract rising housing costs, displacement, the commercialisation of culture and identity, and the loss of ownership of public spaces. In major tourism cities such as Barcelona, Málaga, Venice, and Lisbon, grassroots resistance movements have emerged with anti-tourism campaigns, protests, and demonstrations, demanding short-term rental regulations, rent controls, and tourism caps (Barrera-Fernández et al., 2019; Cocola-Gant, 2023; Salerno, 2022; Sequera & Nofre, 2020; Tulumello & Allegratti, 2021). Similar demands have been noted in mid-sized and smaller cities, as well as in villages (Briguglio et al., 2026; Wang, 2022; Zaimakis & Papadaki, 2025). This grassroots resistance to overtourism collides with tourism development policies.

While a broad body of literature on anti-tourism movements and protests in European cities draws a picture of angry and frustrated residents objecting to increased tourism, touristification, or overtourism, these phenomena do not affect all residents. Studies surveying opinions on increasing tourism in mid-sized or small European destinations indicate considerable variation in residents' views. Escudero Gómez's (2019) survey from Toledo, Spain, shows that residents' overall perception of tourism development was more positive than negative, largely due to its economic benefits. Opinions were more positive among residents living farther from the historic city centre, homeowners, and those with higher incomes than among residents living in the centre, renters, and those with lower incomes, who are more likely to face the

negative impacts of tourist flows (see also Larraz & García-Gómez, 2020). Talk et al. (2023) report similar findings from Tallinn, Estonia, demonstrating that residents living in the most touristic areas of the historic centre have lower tourism tolerance than those living elsewhere in the city. The scholars argue that post-socialist neoliberal policies and governance have promoted unrestricted tourism growth in Tallinn while increasing the vulnerability of the local community. Żemła and Szromek's (2021) comparative survey from Kraków and Białka Tatrzańska, Poland, aligns with these results, noting that negative consequences of overtourism are more often experienced by residents of destination centres than by those living farther from tourist flows, and thus these residents are also more irritated by tourists. Żemła and Szromek (2021) further observe that high-income residents hold more moderate views regarding tourism's negative impacts but, contrary to findings from Toledo and other studies (e.g., Vareiro et al., 2013), they are also more sceptical about its positive impacts. Surveys from other mid-sized or small cities reveal different patterns, underlining the absence of any consistent opinion trends. For instance, Miessner's (2026) survey from Trier, Germany, indicates no noticeable differences in residents' views on tourism across different parts of the city.

Although negative effects of tourism are difficult to address, touristic cities of different scales have adopted a variety of strategies, policies, and measures aimed at mitigating the most pressing consequences. These include restrictions on short-term rentals, tourism taxes, visitor-management technologies, limits on cruise tourism, and policies intended to redistribute tourist flows away from overcrowded destinations (Koens et al., 2018; Milano et al., 2019; Sibrijns & Vanneste, 2021). Studies, however, indicate the difficulty of influencing tourist behaviour and redistributing tourism flows (Sibrijns & Vanneste, 2021), or note that attempts to manage overtourism often fail due to cities' profit-driven policies (Jover & Barrero-Rescalvo, 2023; Salerno, 2022). The effectiveness of the strategies, policies, and measures addressing the negative effects of touristification remains contested, reflecting the tensions between tourism-dependent growth models and the social costs they may generate.

Sibiu/Hermannstadt: from ECoC to tourism-driven development

The empirical focus of this study is the city of Sibiu, located in central Romania, in the historical region of Transylvania. Over the past two decades, Sibiu has emerged as one of the most prominent tourist destinations in Romania, gaining national and international recognition for its well-preserved historic architecture, vibrant cultural life, and dense calendar of festivals and public events. Yet this transformation must be understood against a longer historical background. Historically known as Hermannstadt, Sibiu was one of the most important urban centres of the Transylvanian Saxons, whose architectural and cultural legacy continues to shape the city's distinctive identity and tourist appeal. In this context, Sibiu provides an instructive example of a touristifying city, that is, an urban space increasingly structured around the production and consumption of tourism experiences.

A crucial turning point in Sibiu's contemporary trajectory was its designation as European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2007, an event that significantly accelerated the city's cultural and touristic development. Sibiu was the first Romanian city to receive this title, and the moment carried strong symbolic resonance because the ECoC year coincided with Romania's accession to the European Union on 1 January 2007. This temporal convergence amplified public enthusiasm and reinforced the perception that the city's cultural recognition formed part of Romania's broader 'return to Europe'. The ECoC programme, organised jointly with Luxembourg, mobilised major investments in cultural infrastructure, urban restoration, and international promotion. Hundreds of cultural events were organised throughout the year, attracting large numbers of visitors and placing Sibiu prominently on the European cultural map (G. Richards & Rotariu, 2011). Like other cities that have hosted the ECoC title, Sibiu used the programme not only to showcase its cultural assets but also to consolidate a broader strategy of culture-led urban regeneration and tourism promotion, positioning the city as a leading cultural and tourism destination in Romania and the wider region (Liu, 2014; G. Richards & Palmer, 2010).

The European Commission's evaluation (2025) of the ECoC programme, covering cities that held the title between 2013 and 2023, indicates the programme's major impact on host cities' tourism development, both in terms of visitor numbers and international recognition. The scale of impact varies by city size and context, with many smaller cities experiencing a dramatic increase in visitors. Overall, the ECoC title consistently acts as a catalyst for city branding, infrastructure investment, and tourism growth – not only

during the ECoC year but also in the years that follow. However, the evaluation concludes that the legacy and sustainability of these tourism gains depend on continued investment, strategic planning, and balancing the needs of residents and visitors. After Sibiu, another Romanian city, Timișoara, hosted the ECoC in 2023. Timișoara's aims in tourism development aligned with the ECoC programme's general objectives: the city sought to strengthen the tourism sector through various interventions that expanded cultural offerings across the city and its surroundings, focusing on culture and tourism as drivers of local economic growth and social cohesion. The ECoC year resulted in a 25% increase in tourists compared with the previous year (Evaluation Report, 2025). The longer-term legacy of this tourism development remains to be seen.

In Sibiu, the legacy of the ECoC programme has proven particularly durable. The city continued to expand its cultural calendar after 2007, while tourism infrastructure grew rapidly in response to increasing visitor numbers. Cultural festivals multiplied, hospitality businesses expanded, and the historic centre became increasingly oriented towards tourism-related activities. These developments consolidated Sibiu's reputation as one of Romania's most important cultural tourism destinations and strengthened the role of tourism as a key driver of local economic development.

Yet Sibiu's successful cultural branding cannot be understood solely through the lens of contemporary cultural policy. Equally significant has been the mobilisation of the city's historical association with the Transylvanian Saxons, whose architectural and symbolic legacy remains highly visible in the urban landscape. Medieval fortifications, Lutheran churches, and Germanic architectural styles contribute to a distinctive historical atmosphere that differentiates Sibiu from many other Romanian cities. In the post-socialist period, this heritage has been actively reinterpreted and mobilised as a symbolic resource for urban identity and tourism promotion. As Cercel (2019) has argued, references to German cultural traditions frequently function in Romanian public discourse as markers of Western modernity, order, and European belonging. Within this broader framework of a 'philo-Germanism without Germans', Sibiu has often been imagined as a model urban enclave associated with European discipline, administrative efficiency, and Central European cultural refinement. This symbolic narrative plays an important role in the city's tourism image. For many Western visitors, particularly tourists from Germany and Austria, Sibiu appears as a familiar Central European urban landscape situated in Eastern Europe. At the same time, the same narrative resonates strongly with domestic tourists, for whom Sibiu often symbolises a form of 'European Romania' – a city perceived as culturally closer to Western Europe than to stereotypical representations of the Balkans (Rusu, 2024).

Seen from this perspective, Sibiu's touristification goes beyond being an economic process and encompasses a strong symbolic dimension, closely tied to narratives of European identity, belonging, and prestige. Following the success of the ECoC program, Sibiu increasingly came to be more than a leading tourist destination in Romania; it emerged as a model of tourism-led urban and community development for other Romanian towns and cities. In a national context in which tourism has long been associated primarily with mass leisure destinations, Sibiu consolidated a different profile centred on heritage and cultural tourism. Its appeal lies in a dense urban ecosystem of attractions combining history, culture, gastronomy, and event-based experiences. This ecology includes internationally visible festivals, most notably the Sibiu International Theatre Festival (FITS) and ASTRA Film Festival; the Sibiu Christmas Market; major museums such as the Brukenthal National Museum and the ASTRA National Museum Complex; and, more recently, an emerging gastronomic profile reinforced by Sibiu's designation as European Region of Gastronomy in 2019. Together, these attractions have been assembled into an increasingly coherent tourism infrastructure through the sustained involvement of local authorities, cultural institutions, and private businesses. In this respect, Sibiu's trajectory exemplifies a broader pattern observable across post-communist cities in Central and Eastern Europe, where the neoliberal restructuring of urban economies following 1989 has been accompanied by deliberate strategies of tourism-oriented identity construction, as cities sought to reposition themselves as competitive, cosmopolitan, and distinctly European destinations (Light et al., 2020).

At the same time, Sibiu's touristification has produced a range of more ambivalent socio-economic effects. As in other cities shaped by the growing centrality of tourism, the expansion of visitor-oriented consumption has contributed to rising living costs, especially in the domains of housing, rents, and leisure-related prices, while the concentration of festivals, concerts, and other events in central urban spaces has periodically generated crowding, disruptions in everyday mobility, and the temporary privatisation of

public space to the detriment of local residents. Tourism growth has also been accompanied by perceptions of increased minor disorder, including forms of opportunistic petty criminality such as pickpocketing and begging, often associated in public discourse with larger visitor flows and the heightened visibility of local prosperity.

Yet these developments have generated only limited public resistance. Unlike the better-known cases of anti-tourism mobilisation in Western and Southern Europe, Sibiu has so far witnessed only scarce and weakly articulated social reactions against touristification. This relative absence of contestation may be explained, at least partly, by the dominance of a developmental narrative in which tourism is framed as a legitimate and desirable engine of local growth, modernisation, and international recognition. It is also sustained by a more affective dimension of local pride: tourism signifies not merely economic success, but also symbolic confirmation of Sibiu's European status. Moreover, the city's tourism infrastructure has not yet reached the level of saturation visible in paradigmatic overtourism cases, meaning that for many residents there still appears to be room for further expansion before tourism is widely perceived as intolerable. It is precisely this combination of broad legitimacy, selective unease, and limited public opposition that makes Sibiu a particularly revealing case for examining citizens' attitudes towards touristification.

Methodology and data

The empirical data used in this article are part of the broader Horizon Europe project (Establishing a Laboratory of Cultural Heritage in Central Romania – ELABCHROM) and were collected through a sociological survey conducted between March and May 2023 among adult residents of Sibiu, Romania. For this purpose, an original questionnaire was constructed, structured in several thematic sections. Questions and items grouped in these sections explored residents' attitudes towards local heritage, festivals and tourism development, while respondents' socio-demographic variables were recorded using standard items. The questionnaire was self-administered via a specialised online platform (QuestionPro) and the informed consent was obtained from all participants through a dedicated question. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no incentives were offered for completing the survey. To maximise reach and broaden participation, the questionnaire was disseminated through multiple distribution channels. These included calls to participate posted on social media from both institutional (university's accounts) and personal profiles (Facebook and LinkedIn), references in local media coverage, and direct invitations distributed using snowball sampling techniques. This strategy made it possible to access the insights of a large and diverse sample of respondents which rendered visible certain important statistical relationships without claiming generalisable results beyond the sampled population.

The final sample consists of 923 participants from diverse gender, age, and professional backgrounds. In line with the broader research agenda of the [project name withheld for peer review] project, the questionnaire was designed to collect insights into local residents' patterns of cultural consumption, their attitudes towards local heritage, its public management and economic commodification through tourism-related practices, as well as their evaluations of how heritage is managed by local authorities. The size and diversity of the sample provide a suitable basis for exploring both descriptive patterns and inferential relationships among the variables examined in this study.

The analytical approach adopted in this study engages with, while also departing from, the dominant theoretical framework in resident attitudes research. Social Exchange Theory (SET) posits that residents' support for or opposition to tourism development is shaped by their assessment of the costs and benefits that tourism generates for their community: those who perceive tourism as economically and socially rewarding tend to support its development, while those who perceive it as generating costs are more likely to oppose it (Nunkoo, 2016). Although SET offers a productive framework for understanding residents' orientations towards tourism, it has been primarily developed and tested in Western and Southern European contexts, and its focus on individual cost-benefit calculations leaves underexplored the role of broader governance attitudes and socio-cultural positioning in shaping residents' perceptions. This study complements the SET tradition by examining how attitudes towards the public regulation of cultural life, the commodification of heritage, and the festivalization of urban space – factors that exceed the individual

exchange logic at the core of SET – shape residents’ negative assessments of touristification in a post-socialist Eastern European city.

This paper pursues three objectives. The first is to understand how local residents in Sibiu experience the ongoing growth of tourism in their city. The second narrows the analytical focus to its perceived negative effects and examines how these vary across social categories within the local community, particularly with regard to age, gender, education, and income. The third explores how residents assess these negative effects in relation to their views on the public governance of heritage protection. The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, no. 21 of 15 February 2023.

Several features of the data used in this article qualify the scope of the findings. The survey relied on a non-probability sample of local residents recruited online, which means the sample cannot be treated as statistically representative of Sibiu’s adult population. Women, residents holding university degrees, and younger residents are overrepresented relative to the city’s demographic composition. The findings should therefore be read as evidence about the relationships between attitudes within a large and diverse group of residents, rather than as estimates of how widely those attitudes are held across the city.

Results

In Sibiu, local residents’ attitudes towards tourism are overwhelmingly positive. Within the overall sample, 94% of respondents express the belief that tourism contributes to creating ‘a positive image of Sibiu’, which they see as fundamental for building a viable city brand at both the domestic and international levels. Moreover, 92.5% agree that the high number of tourists visiting the region – and Sibiu in particular as its main urban attraction – fosters economic development within the community. Together, these responses show that 89.2% of respondents agree with both statements underpinning tourism development, indicating that increased tourist activity and large inflows of visitors contribute both to a positive image of the city and to the economic development of the wider region. By contrast, responses display considerably greater variation when respondents are asked about potential negative effects associated with tourism. The proportion of respondents acknowledging certain negative aspects becomes notable, suggesting that these concerns warrant further statistical exploration. This contrast between the overwhelmingly positive perception of tourism and the more ambivalent views regarding its negative consequences forms the starting point of the statistical analysis that follows.

This study employed three indicators capturing individuals’ negative attitudes towards touristification, focusing on its perceived effects on the ‘crowding of public places’, the ‘rise in living costs’, and ‘increased criminal activity’. These three items were combined into a composite measure – the Negative Effects of Touristification Index (NETI) – which serves as the dependent variable in the statistical models presented in the analysis. In the questionnaire, respondents indicated their level of agreement with three statements reflecting these potential negative effects using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 corresponds to ‘Strongly disagree’ and 5 to ‘Strongly agree’. Accordingly, higher values on the scale indicate stronger negative attitudes towards touristification. Descriptive statistics for these variables are presented in Table 1.

The NETI index has a mean value of 3.25, indicating a moderate level of concern regarding the negative effects of touristification in Sibiu. This stands in contrast to the overwhelming majority of local residents who acknowledge the positive consequences of tourism. Based on the mean values recorded at the sample level, the most salient negative effect associated with the growing number of tourists is the crowding of public areas (mean = 3.88). This is followed by rising living costs and the associated decline in living standards (mean = 3.32), and by increased criminal activity (mean = 2.58), the latter registering a value below the theoretical midpoint of the scale (3). An exploratory factor analysis of the three items yielded

Table 1. Negative effects of touristification index (NETI): variables and descriptives.

Index and components	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Negative effects of touristification index	3.25	0.906	1	5
1. Crowded public areas	3.88	1.118	1	5
2. Rise in living costs	3.32	1.230	1	5
3. Increased criminal activity	2.58	1.215	1	5

Source: ELABCHROM project survey.

a Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy of 0.65, indicating that the items can be reasonably combined into a composite index.

Before turning to the quantitative analysis aimed at identifying the profile of local residents in relation to the perceived consequences of touristification, several descriptive statistics that characterise the sample are presented below (Table 2).

Regarding respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, the mean age of the sample is 35.51 years (SD = 14.95), while women constitute 62.5% of all respondents. In terms of education, a substantial proportion of participants are highly educated: 46.5% have completed tertiary education and hold university degrees, while 53.5% report education below this level. Although this relatively large share of highly educated respondents may overrepresent their proportion in the local population, it also reflects Sibiu's status as an important university centre. Household income was measured using a five-point Likert-type scale based on respondents' self-assessment, where 1 corresponds to very low income and 5 to very high income. The mean score of 3.54 (SD = 0.93) indicates a slightly above-average income level relative to the midpoint of the scale.

Three attitudinal variables were included in the analysis. The first distinguishes respondents who believe that the state should play an important role in regulating the cultural sphere of the community (78.4%) from those who do not. In post-communist societies where the state historically regulated and censored cultural production and the organisation of cultural events, this relatively high level of support for state intervention may reflect either a lingering legacy of the past or a degree of nostalgia for more regulated forms of cultural life (Rusu, 2015). It may also point to a broader pattern of cultural conservatism that has been documented in the region in recent studies (Rusu, 2023; Vlase & Croitoru, 2025). The second captures residents' evaluation of the number of festivals, given that the city's cultural festivals are among the main drivers of local tourism development. The sample is divided into two almost equally sized groups: 48.8% of respondents believe that too many festivals are organised in Sibiu, while the remainder consider that there is still room for increasing their number. The third measures respondents' concerns that the economic commodification of local heritage, both material and immaterial, may cause damage to it. Within the sample, about one fifth of respondents (20.5%) agree that the economic commodification of heritage poses such a risk. These descriptive statistics reveal considerable variation in both socio-demographic and attitudinal characteristics, providing a basis for further analysis of the profile of residents who express negative attitudes towards touristification.

To assess how these factors relate to individuals' attitudes towards touristification in Sibiu, a linear regression model was estimated with NETI as the dependent variable. The independent variables and the standardised regression coefficients (β) are presented in Table 3.

Table 2. The independent variables – measurements and descriptive statistics.

Variables	Statistics
Individuals' characteristics	
Age (no. of years)	Mean = 35.51 Std. deviation = 14.95
Gender (dichotomic)	Female = 62.5% Male = 37.5%
Education (dichotomic)	Below tertiary education = 53.5% Tertiary education = 46.5%
Household's income (self-assessment from 1 to 5)	Very low = 2.6% Low = 8.7% Moderate = 35.6% High = 38% Very high = 15.1%
Individuals' attitudes	
State as cultural regulator Agreement with the statement: "The state or local authorities must intervene to regulate the cultural sphere of the community". (dichotomic)	Disagreed = 21.2% Agreed = 78.4%
Over-festivalization Agreement with the statement: "The number of festivals organized in Sibiu during a year is high". (dichotomic)	Disagreed = 51.2% Agreed = 48.8%
Commodification damages local heritage Agreement with the statement: "Economic commodification damages Sibiu's cultural heritage". (dichotomic)	Disagreed = 79.5% Agreed = 20.5%

Source: ELABCHROM project survey.

Table 3. Linear regression model of negative consequences of tourism.

Variable	Standardized coefficients (Beta)	t-values
Individuals' characteristics		
Age (No. of years)	−0.023	−0.682
Male (Yes = 1)	−0.050	−1.530
Tertiary education (Yes = 1)	−0.072*	−2.152
Income (Scale 1 to 5)	−0.065 ⁺	−1.950
Individuals' attitudes		
State as cultural regulator	0.108***	3.287
Over-festivalization	0.070*	2.140
Commodification damages local heritage	0.149***	4.599
N	923	

⁺ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

The linear regression model indicates how individual NETI scores vary according to the variables included in the analysis, presented here in two groups. The first group captures the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and examines their statistical relationship with the negative effects of touristification index. Two variables display negative and statistically significant associations with NETI. First, education emerges as a significant predictor. Individuals who have completed tertiary education tend to record lower scores on the index of negative attitudes towards tourism development ($p < 0.05$). Second, household income also influences respondents' attitudes towards tourism. Higher levels of self-assessed income (measured on a scale from 1 to 5) are associated with lower values on the index of negative attitudes towards tourism development ($p < 0.1$). This suggests that residents with higher educational attainment and greater economic resources are less likely to perceive tourism development as problematic. By contrast, no statistically significant relationships are observed between respondents' age or gender and their attitudes towards touristification.

Regarding individual attitudes towards the governance framework of cultural life in Sibiu, all three predictors included in the analysis show statistically significant associations with NETI values. Specifically, respondents who believe that the state or local authorities should intervene to regulate the cultural sphere of the community tend to report higher NETI scores ($p < 0.001$). In addition, residents who perceive the number of local festivals held throughout the year as excessive also display higher NETI values ($p < 0.05$). Finally, concerns that the commodification of cultural heritage may damage it are associated with higher scores on the negative attitude index towards tourism. What these results indicate is a strong and statistically significant relationship between residents' expectations regarding the governance of cultural life and their attitudes towards tourism development ($p < 0.001$). In other words, residents who favour stronger public regulation of cultural life and who are more critical of festivalization and heritage commodification are also more likely to perceive tourism development in negative terms. These relationships and their corresponding coefficients are depicted visually in [Figure 1](#).

Discussion and conclusions

The case of Sibiu shows that touristification does not necessarily generate the contestation documented in much of the European literature, and that its reception depends on cultural, social, political, and economic processes specific to the setting in which it unfolds. Contemporary touristification dynamics, which have developed into overtourism in many European cities, stem from broader transformations such as the rise of the creative economy and what has been described as the recreational turn (Stock, 2007). These developments are characterised by increased investments in creative industries, the transformation of former industrial areas into cultural and leisure spaces, the expansion of tourism-oriented urban environments, and various practices aimed at revitalising urban spaces through culture. Such practices emerge at the intersection of processes commonly described in the literature as heritagization (Hanif & Riza, 2025), festivalization (Stock, 2007), and eventification (Jakob, 2013). These closely related concepts refer to neoliberal dynamics through which local, regional, or national cultural heritage, traditions, commemorative dates, and other cultural activities are transformed into cultural commodities and marketed to both residents and tourists. Investment in cultural consumption has also been conceptualised as the experience

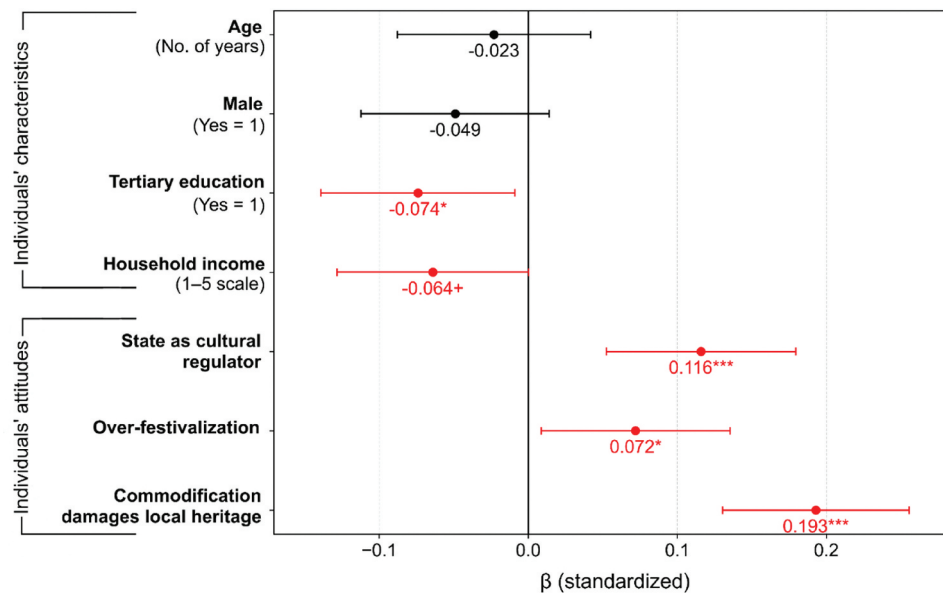


Figure 1. Visual representation of the regression coefficients.

economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), in which politicians, urban managers, and marketing experts increasingly focus on developing spectacular experiences in urban spaces to encourage consumption and capitalise on the growing demand for extraordinary, shareable encounters with place (d’Hauteserre, 2013; Jakob, 2013). These intertwined trajectories have laid the groundwork for the current touristification of European cities, which has led to severe challenges caused by overtourism in many of them.

Implications for urban tourism research

Over the past few decades, policymakers and urban managers have sought to improve the liveability and economic development of cities through various city labels. In 1985, the European Union entered this arena by establishing the ECoC designation. Although increasing tourism has never been the main goal of the ECoC initiative, cities are expected to welcome tourists and provide tourist services. The short-term impact of the ECoC year has commonly been measured by tourist flow to the city (e.g., G. W. Richards & Rotariu, 2009). As the EU and local urban managers expect the ECoC to also have long-term effects, the cities seek to turn their tourism goals into permanent policies that welcome national and, in particular, international tourists. As this study shows, Sibiu has sought to maintain the legacy of its ECoC year and support tourism-driven development as a key driver of economic growth. Sibiu has a rich cultural landscape ranging from museums to festivals, gastronomy, and urban events that enable diverse forms of cultural consumption. The commodification and marketing of such cultural offerings has increased touristification in Sibiu, leading to both positive and negative impacts.

In line with recent research on touristification, the increase in tourism in Sibiu has had a positive economic impact and this survey of Sibiu residents revealed a positive attitude towards touristification. Although the negative effects of touristification are recognised in the city, citizens’ opinions are dominated by the positive effects. These views align with the neoliberal agenda of community development, embracing the profits from tourism and the commodification of culture and urban spaces (Chelcea & Druță, 2016). Furthermore, the views reflect the Romanian historical context as an Eastern European country that has been building connections with Western Europe and becoming increasingly westernised. This shift has been influenced by the influx of Western tourists and the urban transformation that has accompanied the tourism industry. As Light et al. (2020) have shown, this dynamic is characteristic of post-communist cities more broadly: the embrace of tourism-driven development serves simultaneously as an economic strategy and an identity project, through which cities and their residents negotiate their place within a post-socialist European order. The widespread legitimacy that tourism enjoys among Sibiu’s residents is thus better

understood as an expression of a deeper aspiration towards European modernity – one that tourism both symbolises and materially reinforces – than as a straightforward calculation of individual economic advantage.

However, a substantial share of respondents endorsed statements about the negative effects of touristification, particularly the crowding of public spaces. Recent research highlights that the growth of the platform economy has exacerbated the negative effects of touristification, including diminished housing availability and increased living costs in areas with short-term rental apartments. Similar effects can also be recognised in Sibiu. Additionally, the downsides of the city's touristification include overcrowding of public spaces and increased criminal activity. Several European cities suffering from the negative effects of touristification have experienced anti-tourism protests and activism by residents seeking to 'reclaim' public spaces and combat overtourism. Sibiu has not yet reached this point, so the city's policymakers and urban managers must make wise policy decisions regarding the future development of the tourism industry. These decisions cannot be made without considering citizens' views on touristification and understanding the complex factors impacting these views. As previous studies have shown, European cities are culturally specific, and their residents' views are impacted by complex historical, political, and societal factors (Croitoru & Vlase, 2025; Croitoru et al., 2025). Therefore, policymakers need contextualised and situated knowledge from the city and citizens that they seek to govern.

Multiple linear regression analysis of the survey responses revealed nuanced results regarding citizens' views on the negative effects of touristification in Sibiu, such as overcrowded public spaces, increased living costs, and heightened criminal activity. These effects were combined into a negative effects of touristification index (NETI) in the analysis. Analysis of the NETI and various sociodemographic characteristics revealed significant and non-significant relationships. Unlike many other studies on citizens' opinions of culture and cultural heritage (e.g., Croitoru et al., 2025; Lähdesmäki et al., 2021), age and gender were not significantly related to the NETI. Instead, education and income levels impacted the NETI, but with opposing trends. The results show that less-educated residents in Sibiu are more likely to be dissatisfied with the negative consequences of touristification. This can be explained by the large number of university students and graduates, who appreciate, participate in, and benefit from Sibiu's vibrant cultural life, which is heavily influenced by tourism. Additionally, less educated residents may harbour unwelcoming attitudes towards strangers, including foreign visitors and domestic tourists, due to regional stereotypes and prejudices. At the same time, residents with higher earnings are less likely to be bothered by the negative consequences of touristification. This can be explained by their economic ability to participate in the consumption of the city, i.e., a city reshaped by touristification, and to support the increased prices implied.

Implications for practice in the management of tourism cities

This study highlights the challenges of mitigating the negative effects of touristification in neoliberal economies. In Romania, as in many other European countries, the current neoliberal governmental ethos promotes the touristification of cities, favouring the deregulation of private touristic activities. This creates an imbalance of power between economic actors and citizens, as touristification processes are impacted by private companies rather than democratically elected public government bodies. In Sibiu, defined as a *touristifying city*, the local authorities' neoliberal policy framework promotes the city as a tourist destination in international markets and seeks to raise tourist interest in cultural activities, such as festivals co-funded by the public budget. Within this framework, private economic agents operate in a highly permissive and loosely regulated environment. Residents dissatisfied with the touristification of Sibiu tend to advocate for stricter regulation of tourist-related economic activities carried out by private actors.

Sibiu has not yet reached the critical threshold of overtourism and remains in the relatively early stages of touristification. This helps explain why the increase in tourist numbers is not widely perceived as problematic by local residents. However, this moment represents an important window of opportunity for local decision-makers and urban managers to anticipate the potential negative effects of touristification and to develop sustainable responses to emerging challenges. Drawing on these findings, as well as on previous research, this article argues that the negative consequences of touristification

should be addressed through more effective regulation of tourism-related economic activities by local authorities.

Three directions follow from the patterns identified in this analysis. The first concerns the spatial distribution of tourism: since crowding emerged as the most salient of the negative effects reported by residents, and since nearly half of them consider the city's festival calendar already too dense, a more even dispersal of events and visitor flows beyond the historic core would reduce pressure on the areas where residents and tourists compete for the same spaces. The second concerns the historic centre itself: given that concern over the commodification of heritage proved the strongest predictor of negative attitudes, local authorities could establish stricter rules on the commercial use of central public and heritage spaces. The third concerns knowledge: cities in the early stages of touristification – such as Sibiu at present – rarely monitor residents' experience of this process, typically beginning to do so only after dissatisfaction has become vocal. Establishing a regular mechanism for gauging local attitudes before that critical point would provide urban managers with early indicators of community sentiment in a city that has built its development strategy around tourism.

Beyond such context-specific interventions, the case of Sibiu also speaks to a set of broader considerations for the governance of tourism cities. Municipalities should promote more sustainable models of tourism development, including forms of urban ecotourism, in line with broader frameworks for sustainable urban tourism governance (Morrison & Coca-Stefaniak, 2021). Without abandoning the principle of hospitality, cities should reconsider whether it is desirable to welcome tourism growth under all circumstances, given the potential social and cultural costs for local communities. Tourism development governance should therefore make better use of participatory principles, acknowledging residents' varying opinions and views on the effects of touristification on their living and working environments, and on their social relations in the city.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Mihai S. Rusu**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Alin Croitoru**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Tuuli Lähdesmäki**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Andrei Terian**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Valer Simion Cosma**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Daniela Stanciu-Păscărița**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Ethics and consent statement

The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, no. 21 of 15 February 2023.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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