

International Journal of Cultural Policy

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Submission ID	262838889
Article Type	Research Article
Keywords	touristification, overtourism, heritage, Eastern Europe, regression analysis
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“You’re All Welcome!”:

Citizens’ Attitudes Towards Touristification in a post-European Capital of Culture

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Abstract

This article analyzes citizens’ attitudes toward touristification by examining how local 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 2023 sociological survey (N = 923), the analysis reveals an overwhelmingly positive view of tourism, which is considered beneficial for the city’s image and the local economy. However, the results also indicate concerns about the rapid increase in tourism and its potential negative effects. Through a multiple linear regression analysis, the article explores the characteristics and social attitudes that shape local residents’ negative assessments of tourist development in their town. The results suggest that negative attitudes toward touristification stem from residents’ dissatisfaction with economic agents’ largely unregulated practices within a state-driven neoliberal model of touristic development that challenges the protection of local cultural heritage.

Keywords: touristification; overtourism; heritage; commodification; Eastern Europe; regression analysis.

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 566,595 in 2023 and consolidating Sibiu’s position as one of Romania’s leading tourist destinations (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 continuous expansion of the tourism sector.

2025 proved to be different in this regard. The newly released statistics broke with the two decades-long pattern of steady growth and reported a slight decline in the number of tourists who visited Sibiu during the previous year. In 2024, the city recorded 562,265 tourists, about 4,300 fewer than in 2023 (Economedica, 2025). Despite retaining its status as one of the most visited destinations in Romania, these figures generated a wave of concern among relevant stakeholders – city officials, public managers of cultural institutions, private owners of tourism-related businesses, as well as ordinary citizens – who sought to explain the setback and identify solutions to what they feared might become a tourism crisis (Bratu, 2025).

Sibiu’s tourism-driven growth model, and the anxiety produced by its recent setback, 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

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4 succumbed to growing influxes of tourists, an increasing number of community-led initiatives
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6 and resistance movements have pressured local authorities to adopt policies aimed at containing
7
8 overtourism. As the widespread concern triggered by even a slight decline in tourist numbers
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10 suggests, Sibiu's case tells a rather different story: here, unlike in many European cities where
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12 overtourism has become a major public issue, tourism does not appear to have a significant
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14 "dark(er) side."
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17 It is precisely this contrasting position within an emerging broader pattern that renders
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19 Sibiu an intriguing case for examining social attitudes toward touristification in a post-ECoC
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21 city that has established itself, both domestically and internationally, as a tourist destination.
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23 Consequently, this article sets out to investigate how ordinary citizens of Sibiu perceive
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25 tourism, including both its positive consequences and its negative effects. By doing so, we seek
26
27 to better understand Sibiu's peculiarity within a wider context of changing attitudes, practices,
28
29 and policies toward (over)tourism.
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32 In the following sections, we begin by outlining the theoretical framework of the analysis
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34 and providing an overview of touristification, the local resistance movements that have
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36 emerged to contest it, and the policy responses developed across European cities. We then
37
38 narrow the geographical scope to examine Sibiu's process of becoming a touristifying city and
39
40 document the development of an integrated ecology of tourism-related practices since the city
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42 held the title of ECoC in 2007. After establishing this socio-historical background, we present
43
44 the methodological approach underpinning our quantitative analysis, which is based on original
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46 data collected through a large-scale questionnaire survey of the local community. We then
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48 present the statistical findings, discuss the results of the regression model, and conclude by
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50 outlining the policy implications of our study. By examining citizens' attitudes toward
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52 touristification in a city where tourism is widely embraced rather than contested, this article
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4 contributes to the literature on tourism governance by highlighting how local socio-cultural
5 contexts shape public responses to tourism-driven urban development.
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10 **(Over)touristifying cities: A European overview**

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12 After being brought to an almost complete halt during the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism
13 rebounded strongly in the immediate post-pandemic period. In 2025, according to the UNWTO
14 *World Tourism Barometer*, international tourism reached an all-time high, with approximately
15 1.5 billion arrivals recorded worldwide (Richter, 2025). Against this background, overtourism
16 has emerged as a key concept in academic debates, media narratives, and public discussions.
17 In this section, we examine touristification from four complementary perspectives. First, we
18 characterize it as a touristic practice. Second, we explore its theoretical articulation within
19 academic scholarship. Third, we discuss overtourism as an object of contestation by examining
20 the emergence of popular resistance movements across European cities. Finally, we consider
21 how various municipalities have responded to growing pressures to regulate overtourism.
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34 The rapid increase in tourism in European cities is a complex phenomenon enabled and
35 accelerated by various recent economic, social, technological, and cultural transformations.
36 However, tourism is not only a contemporary phenomenon; it has a centuries-long history that
37 may explain the development of overtourism in today's European cities, such as Venice. As
38 Salerno (2022) notes, Venice's current overtourism crisis reflects centuries of urban policies
39 prioritising tourism over local needs. The increasing tourist flows are often described as
40 touristification, but the concept does not only refer to a sped-up growth in tourism; rather, it
41 comprises the structural transformation of urban areas or neighborhoods into spaces that cater
42 to tourists' needs. This transformation has various positive and negative impacts on urban areas,
43 neighborhoods, and the people who live and work in them.
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4 The positive impacts of touristification include economic growth and job creation in
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6 touristic areas, based on diverse services and their multiplier effect on other sectors of the labor
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8 market (Barrera-Fernández et al. 2019). Furthermore, touristification can foster positive
9
10 cultural exchanges, enriching cities and their neighborhoods (Barrera-Fernández et al. 2019).
11
12 While recent research on touristification recognises its benefits, it is much more common to
13
14 highlight its disadvantages. One such negative impact is the economic displacement of local
15
16 residents in touristic spaces due to an increase in short-term rentals. Touristification reshapes
17
18 the housing market and commercial landscape by bringing bars, restaurants, and shops oriented
19
20 towards tourists to such spaces. These developments particularly impact lower-income
21
22 residents, the elderly, and local (non-franchised) businesses. Studies from Lisbon (Sequera and
23
24 Nofre 2020), Barcelona (Cocola-Gant 2023), Seville (Jover and Díaz-Parra 2020), Venice
25
26 (Salerno 2022), and Amsterdam (Sibrijns and Vanneste 2021) illustrate the various facets of
27
28 touristification-driven urban restructuring. Besides economic displacement, touristification
29
30 may also cause social vulnerability. In a Barcelona case study, Cocola-Gant (2023) introduces
31
32 the concept of “place-based displacement”, referring to residents who remain in these areas and
33
34 consequently feel socially and culturally excluded. As a form of consumption, touristification
35
36 burdens the environment and produces urban depersonalisation based on a commercial
37
38 landscape designed for tourist needs (Cocis and Nicula 2022). A similar depersonalization and
39
40 cultural homogenization have also been noted in ECOC, where cultural planners and managers
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42 seek to follow recent trends, ultimately developing and offering similar events and cultural
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44 spaces for consumers (Lähdesmäki 2014).
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48 States, cities, and local authorities play a key role in promoting touristification, which
49
50 can lead to over-tourism. Several scholars have noted that the 2008–2009 economic crisis
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52 marked a turning point in touristification for many cities, particularly in Southern Europe.
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54 Authorities embraced tourism as a post-crisis recovery strategy, simultaneously increasing
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4 urban restructuring and gentrification (Sibrijns and Vanneste 2021; Sequera and Nofre 2020;
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6 Estevens et al. 2023; Tulumello and Allegretti 2021; Jover and Díaz-Parra 2020). Similar
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8 trajectories have been observed following the COVID-19 crisis. Jover and Barrero-Rescalvo's
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10 (2023) study on Seville shows that the pandemic temporarily disrupted touristification
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12 development in the city, but the government responded to it by prioritising a return to pre-
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14 pandemic touristification models.
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17 Besides urban policies, the recent development of the platform economy and short-term
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19 rental applications, such as Airbnb, Vrbo, and Booking, has accelerated touristification. The
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21 development of such platforms has been identified as a form of bottom-up touristification
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23 (Freytag and Bauder 2018). Along with alternative modes of transportation, such as cycling
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25 and walkable, pedestrian-friendly areas, it drives local-level touristification. However, scholars
26
27 (e.g., Ana Estevens et al. 2023) have also argued that the state plays a crucial role in enabling
28
29 and accelerating these processes. Many scholars (Sequera and Nofre 2020; Tulumello and
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31 Allegretti 2021; Cocola-Gant 2023; Salerno 2022; Estevens et al. 2023; Jover and Díaz-Parra
32
33 2020) have explored the conversion of residential housing into tourist accommodations in
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35 southern European tourist cities such as Lisbon, Seville, Venice, and Barcelona. They have
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37 noted that investors and foreign property buyers dominate the short-term rental market in cities
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39 like Lisbon and Seville (Sequera and Nofre 2020; Jover and Díaz-Parra 2020). Thus, these
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41 forms of tourist accommodation do not necessarily bring economic benefits to touristic areas.
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43 Some cities, such as Paris and Barcelona, have already reacted to this development by
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45 restricting and regulating short-term rentals (Freytag and Bauder 2018; Milano et al. 2019).
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49 As our review of recent research has indicated, the concept of touristification is closely
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51 related to other social and economic concepts. Tulumello and Allegretti (2021) underline the
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53 intersections of touristification, gentrification, and financialisation of historic neighborhoods.
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55 Their study demonstrates how neoliberal urban policies, real estate speculation, and tourism
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4 pressures have transformed the historic neighborhood of Mouraria in Lisbon into a
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6 paradigmatic example of urban accumulation and displacement. The authors argue that these
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8 urban processes should be analysed not separately, but as interconnected and interrelated
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10 transformations shaped by global and local economic forces. Due to these conceptual
11
12 intersections, some scholars have considered touristification a vague concept. For example,
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14 Ojeda and Kieffer (2020) criticise the ambiguous use of touristification, which conflates it with
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16 gentrification, mass tourism, and overtourism.
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19 Previous research on overtourism describes it as a critical issue in global tourism with
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21 effects on urban and rural communities and the natural environment. The concept has become
22
23 widely used in the media – Koens et al. (2018) even note that the concept emerged in media
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25 debates – and academia, typically referring to an increased tourist presence that leads to
26
27 negative social, environmental, and economic consequences. Milano et al. (2019, n.p.) define
28
29 overtourism as “the excessive growth of visitors leading to overcrowding in areas where
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31 residents suffer the consequences of temporary and seasonal tourism peaks, which have caused
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33 permanent changes to their lifestyles, denied access to amenities, and damaged their general
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35 well-being” The various negative consequences explored in touristification research indicate
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37 that these studies actually describe what could be called overtourism. The development of low-
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39 cost flights (Capocchi et al. 2019; Bertocchi et al. 2020), the growth of the platform and sharing
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41 economies (Koens et al. 2018; Bertocchi et al. 2020), changes in travel behavior toward shorter
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43 but more frequent trips, and the intensification of tourism marketing and the
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45 “Instagrammability” of tourist locations (Perkumienė and Pranskūnienė 2019; Milano et al.
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47 2019) have all contributed to the acceleration of overtourism during the 2000s. Cities like
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49 Barcelona, Venice, and Dubrovnik have become symbols of tourism saturation.
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53 In recent years, overtourism in several European cities has sparked various forms of
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55 resistance among residents frustrated by its negative consequences. These resistance
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4 movements seek to counteract rising housing costs, displacement, the commercialisation of
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6 culture and identity, and the loss of ownership of public spaces. In cities such as Barcelona,
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8 Málaga, Venice, and Lisbon, grassroots resistance movements have emerged with anti-tourism
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10 campaigns, protests, and demonstrations, demanding short-term rental regulations, rent
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12 controls, and tourism caps (Cocola-Gant 2023; Barrera-Fernández et al. 2019; Sequera and
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14 Nofre 2020; Tulumello and Allegretti 2021; Salerno 2022). This grassroots resistance to
15
16 overtourism collides with tourism development policies. Although cities suffering from
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18 overtourism have developed different strategies and policies to address the issue, studies
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20 indicate the difficulty of influencing tourist behavior and redistributing tourism flows (Sibrijns
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22 and Vanneste 2021). Other studies show that attempts to manage overtourism often fail due to
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24 cities' profit-driven policies (Salerno 2022; Jover and Barrero-Rescalvo 2023). Studies
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26 highlight the weakness of policy responses to touristification and the difficulty of enforcing
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28 them.
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32 Although overtourism is difficult to address, touristic cities have taken various small steps
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34 to mitigate its most pressing consequences. Local authorities have implemented a mix of
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36 economic, regulatory, and technological interventions to control overtourism. In Venice, these
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38 measures include a tourist entry fee for day-trippers to control visitor numbers, particularly
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40 those arriving by cruise ship (Bertocchi et al. 2020). AI-powered sensors and cameras track
41
42 visitor numbers, enabling the implementation of real-time crowd control measures (Bertocchi
43
44 et al. 2020). Other measures include banning large cruise ships from entering the historic city
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46 center to prevent environmental damage and congestion (Bertocchi et al. 2020; Salerno 2022)
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48 and limiting where new tourist accommodations can be established to prevent gentrification
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50 (Bertocchi et al. 2020). In Barcelona, a daily tourist tax on hotels and short-term rentals is used
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52 for urban maintenance and tourism management, and some areas are off-limits to tourist
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54 development (Capocchi et al. 2019). In Amsterdam, short-term rentals are regulated to a
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4 maximum of 30 nights per year per property. Bars and clubs in key tourist areas are also subject
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6 to stricter operating hours and noise control policies (Koens et al. 2018). In an effort to divert
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8 tourists from overcrowded cities, governments in several countries have promoted less-visited
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10 towns and rural areas (Capocchi et al. 2019; Sibrijns and Vanneste 2021).
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13 Overtourism creates pressure to develop sustainable tourism and alternative degrowth
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15 solutions (Perkumienė and Pranskūnas 2019). In response to demands for sustainability and in
16
17 an effort to combat touristification intertwined with globalisation, cities such as Málaga have
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19 sought to support local businesses in competing with international hotel chains and increase
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21 ecotourism – responsible travel to areas that conserve the environment, sustain the well-being
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23 of local people, and educate tourists about nature and local cultures (Barrera-Fernández et al.
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25 2019).
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29 **Sibiu/Hermannstadt: A Touristifying City**

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31 The empirical focus of this study is the city of Sibiu, located in central Romania, in the historical
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33 region of Transylvania. Over the past two decades, Sibiu has emerged as one of the most
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35 prominent tourist destinations in Romania, gaining national and international recognition for
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37 its well-preserved historic architecture, vibrant cultural life, and dense calendar of festivals and
38
39 public events. Yet this transformation must be understood against a longer and more turbulent
40
41 historical background. Historically known as Hermannstadt, Sibiu was one of the most
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43 important urban centers of the Transylvanian Saxons, the German-speaking population that
44
45 shaped the city's institutional and architectural development for centuries (Gündisch, 1998).
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49 During the communist period, however, the German minority was subjected to various forms
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51 of collective punishment and political discrimination, including deportations, property
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53 confiscations, and restrictions on cultural institutions. These pressures, combined with the
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55 Romanian state's policy of facilitating the emigration of ethnic Germans to West Germany, led
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4 to the mass migration of the Saxon population, particularly during the 1970s–1990s (Cercel,
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6 2017). As a result, the demographic and social foundations of the historic Saxon town were
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8 profoundly transformed. In the decade following the collapse of communism, Sibiu
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10 experienced a period of urban stagnation and visible decay, with many buildings in the historic
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12 center deteriorating and large parts of the old town appearing underused or partially abandoned.
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14 The city’s later revival did not occur spontaneously but was closely linked to deliberate
15
16 strategies of cultural branding, heritage restoration, and tourism-driven urban development. In
17
18 this context, Sibiu provides an instructive example of a *touristifying city*, that is, an urban space
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20 increasingly structured around the production and consumption of tourism experiences.
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24 A crucial turning point in Sibiu’s contemporary trajectory was its designation as ECoC
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26 in 2007, an event that significantly accelerated the city’s cultural and touristic development
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28 (Palmer and Richards, 2009). Sibiu was the first Romanian city to receive this title, and the
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30 moment carried strong symbolic resonance because the ECoC year coincided with Romania’s
31
32 accession to the European Union on 1 January 2007. This temporal convergence amplified
33
34 public enthusiasm and reinforced the perception that the city’s cultural recognition formed part
35
36 of Romania’s broader “return to Europe.” The ECoC program, organized jointly with
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38 Luxembourg, mobilized major investments in cultural infrastructure, urban restoration, and
39
40 international promotion. Hundreds of cultural events were organized throughout the year,
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42 attracting large numbers of visitors and placing Sibiu prominently on the European cultural
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44 map (Richards and Rotariu, 2011). Like other cities that have hosted the ECoC title, Sibiu used
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46 the program not only to showcase its cultural assets but also to consolidate a broader strategy
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48 of culture-led urban regeneration and tourism promotion, positioning the city as a leading
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50 cultural and tourism destination in Romania and the wider region (Richards and Palmer, 2010).
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54 The ECoC initiative has frequently been associated with the transformation of urban
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56 space into environments designed to attract visitors and capital through cultural spectacle and
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4 entertainment. As Tuuli Lähdesmäki (2014, 76) notes, many ECoC cities have sought to
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6 stimulate tourism by offering visitors diverse cultural events, recreational activities, and
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8 visually appealing urban spaces. In this process, urban environments can be reshaped into forms
9
10 of “citytainment” – spaces organized around the consumption of culture, leisure, and spectacle
11
12 (Habit 2013). In the specific case of Sibiu, Daniel Habit (2013, 134) even describes the
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14 implementation of the ECoC year as resembling a process of “disneyfication,” understood in
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16 David Harvey’s (1989) sense as the transformation of urban environments into sanitized,
17
18 aesthetically appealing spaces designed to attract tourists, investors, and consumers. More
19
20 broadly, the logic of themed entertainment environments has become an influential model for
21
22 urban leisure development across the world (Hannigan 1998). Within this framework, cultural
23
24 programs such as the ECoC initiative may contribute to processes of urban aestheticization and
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26 festivalization, especially when economic development and tourism promotion become central
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28 policy goals.
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32 In Sibiu, the legacy of the ECoC program has been particularly durable (Vasiliu and
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34 Dragoman, 2009). The city continued to expand its cultural calendar after 2007, while tourism
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36 infrastructure grew rapidly in response to increasing visitor numbers. Cultural festivals
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38 multiplied, hospitality businesses expanded, and the historic center became increasingly
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40 oriented toward tourism-related activities. These developments consolidated Sibiu’s reputation
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42 as one of Romania’s most important cultural tourism destinations and strengthened the role of
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44 tourism as a key driver of local economic development.
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47 Yet Sibiu’s successful cultural branding cannot be understood solely through the lens of
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49 contemporary cultural policy. Equally significant has been the mobilization of the city’s
50
51 historical association with the Transylvanian Saxons, whose medieval settlement established
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53 the town of Hermannstadt as one of the most important urban centers of Transylvania. Although
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55 the ethnic German population declined dramatically after the mass emigration of Saxons in the
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4 late twentieth century, the architectural and symbolic legacy of this heritage remains highly
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6 visible in the city's urban landscape. Medieval fortifications, Lutheran churches, and Germanic
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8 architectural styles contribute to a distinctive historical atmosphere that differentiates Sibiu
9
10 from many other Romanian cities.

11
12 In the post-socialist period, this Saxon heritage has been actively reinterpreted and
13
14 mobilized as a symbolic resource for urban identity and tourism promotion. Scholars have
15
16 noted that references to German cultural traditions often function in Romanian public discourse
17
18 as markers of Western modernity, order, and European belonging (Cercel 2014; Cercel 2023).
19
20 Within this broader framework of a "philo-Germanism without Germans," Sibiu has frequently
21
22 been imagined as a kind of "German city" within Romania – a model urban enclave associated
23
24 with European discipline, German ethos, and administrative efficiency – in stark contrast to a
25
26 "balkanized" Bucharest. This symbolic narrative plays an important role in the city's tourism
27
28 image. For many Western visitors, particularly tourists from Germany and Austria, Sibiu
29
30 appears as a familiar Central European urban landscape situated in Eastern Europe. At the same
31
32 time, the same narrative resonates strongly with domestic tourists, for whom Sibiu often
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34 symbolizes a form of "European Romania" – a city perceived as culturally closer to Western
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36 Europe than to stereotypical representations of the Balkans (Rusu, 2024).
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41 Seen from this perspective, Sibiu's tourism development can also be interpreted as part
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43 of a broader process of *selective Europeanization*, in which specific historical and cultural
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45 elements are emphasized in order to align the city symbolically with Western Europe. The
46
47 celebration of Saxon heritage, the success of the ECoC program, and the city's broader cultural
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49 branding strategies have collectively contributed to positioning Sibiu as a model of European
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51 urbanity within Romania. In this sense, the city's touristification is not only an economic
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53 process but also a symbolic one, closely tied to narratives of European identity, civilizational
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55 belonging, and regional prestige.
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4 Following the success of the ECoC programme, Sibiu increasingly came to be seen not
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6 only as a leading tourist destination in Romania, but also as a model of tourism-led urban and
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8 community development for other Romanian towns and cities. In a national context in which
9
10 tourism has long been associated primarily with mass leisure destinations – especially the Black
11
12 Sea coast and mountain resorts oriented toward skiing, spa tourism, and seasonal recreation –
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14 Sibiu consolidated a somewhat different profile, centered on heritage and cultural tourism. Its
15
16 appeal lies less in standardized leisure consumption than in a dense and diversified urban
17
18 ecosystem of attractions combining history, culture, gastronomy, and event-based experiences.
19
20 This ecology includes internationally visible festivals, most notably the Sibiu International
21
22 Theatre Festival (FITS) and ASTRA Film Festival, as well as other recurrent cultural events
23
24 that animate the city throughout the year; the Sibiu Christmas Market, which has become one
25
26 of the most recognizable seasonal attractions in Romania; major museums such as the
27
28 Brukenthal National Museum, associated more strongly with high culture and elite
29
30 consumption, and the ASTRA National Museum Complex, whose large-scale open-air
31
32 ethnographic format appeals to broader publics; and, more recently, an emerging gastronomic
33
34 profile reinforced by Sibiu’s designation as European Region of Gastronomy in 2019. These
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36 attractions have not functioned in isolation. Rather, they have been assembled into an
37
38 increasingly coherent tourism infrastructure through the sustained involvement of local
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40 authorities, cultural institutions, and private businesses, as well as through successful efforts to
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42 position Sibiu within the travel circuits promoted by international tourism agencies and
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44 destination-marketing networks.
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48 At the same time, Sibiu’s touristification has produced a range of more ambivalent socio-
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50 economic effects. As in other cities shaped by the growing centrality of tourism, the expansion
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52 of visitor-oriented consumption has contributed to rising living costs, especially in the domains
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54 of housing, rents, and leisure-related prices, while the concentration of festivals, concerts, and
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4 other events in central urban spaces has periodically generated crowding, disruptions in
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6 everyday mobility, and a partial temporary privatization of public space to the detriment of
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8 local residents. Tourism growth has also been accompanied by perceptions of increased minor
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10 disorder, including forms of opportunistic petty criminality such as pickpocketing and begging,
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12 often associated in public discourse with larger visitor flows and the heightened visibility of
13
14 local prosperity. Yet these developments have generated only limited public resistance. Unlike
15
16 the better-known cases of anti-tourism mobilization in Western and Southern Europe, Sibiu has
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18 so far witnessed only scarce and weakly articulated social reactions against touristification.
19
20 This relative absence of contestation may be explained, at least partly, by the dominance of a
21
22 neoliberal developmental narrative in which tourism is framed as a legitimate and desirable
23
24 engine of local growth, modernization, and international recognition. It is also sustained by a
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26 more affective dimension of local pride: tourism signifies not merely economic success, but
27
28 also symbolic confirmation of Sibiu's European status, a form of urban self-validation that may
29
30 be read in terms of auto-colonial desire – the celebratory sense that “we, too, are Europe.”
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32 Moreover, the city's tourism infrastructure has not yet reached the level of saturation visible in
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34 paradigmatic overtourism cases, meaning that for many residents there still appears to be room
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36 for further expansion before tourism is widely perceived as intolerable. It is precisely this
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38 combination of broad legitimacy, selective unease, and limited public opposition that makes
39
40 Sibiu a particularly revealing case for examining citizens' attitudes toward touristification. The
41
42 following analysis explores how local residents evaluate the benefits and costs of tourism, and
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44 which factors are associated with more critical perceptions of the city's tourism-led
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46 transformation.
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Methodology and data

The empirical data used in this article are part of the broader Horizon Europe [project name withheld for peer review] project and were collected through a sociological survey conducted in 2023 among adult residents of Sibiu, Romania. The questionnaire was self-administered via a specialised online platform (QuestionPro). Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no incentives were offered for completing the survey. To maximize reach and broaden participation, the questionnaire was disseminated through multiple distribution channels. These included calls to participate posted on social media from both individual and institutional profiles, references in local media coverage, and direct invitations distributed using snowball sampling techniques. This strategy enabled us to obtain a large and diverse sample of respondents.

Proceeding in this multi-directional manner, we aimed to obtain a diverse sample that would allow statistical comparisons across different demographic groups, as well as the testing of relationships between variables using inferential statistical models. The final sample consists of 932 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 toward 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 objectives of this paper are threefold. First, we aim to understand how local residents in Sibiu experience the ongoing touristification of their city. Second, we narrow the analytical focus to the negative aspects of touristification and examine how these perceived consequences

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4 vary across different social categories within the local community, particularly with regard to
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6 age, gender, education, and income. Finally, we explore how residents assess the negative
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8 effects of tourism in relation to their views on the public governance of heritage protection. The
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10 study received ethical approval from the ethics committee of the [university name withheld for
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12 peer review].
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15 16 17 **Results**

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19 In Sibiu, local residents' attitudes toward tourism are overwhelmingly positive. Within the
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21 overall sample, 94% of respondents express the belief that tourism contributes to creating "a
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23 positive image of Sibiu," which they see as fundamental for building a viable city brand at both
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25 the domestic and international levels. Moreover, 92.5% agree that the high number of tourists
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27 visiting the region – and Sibiu in particular as its main urban attraction – fosters economic
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29 development within the community. Taken together, these responses show that 89.2% of
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31 respondents agree with both statements underpinning tourism development, indicating that
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33 increased tourist activity and large inflows of visitors contribute both to a positive image of the
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35 city and to the economic development of the wider region. By contrast, responses display
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37 considerably greater variation when respondents are asked about potential negative effects
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39 associated with tourism. The proportion of respondents acknowledging certain negative aspects
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41 becomes notable, suggesting that these concerns warrant further statistical exploration. This
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43 contrast between the overwhelmingly positive perception of tourism and the more ambivalent
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45 views regarding its negative consequences forms the starting point of our subsequent statistical
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47 analysis.
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51 This study employed three indicators capturing individuals' negative attitudes toward
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53 touristification, focusing on its perceived effects on the "crowding of public places," the "rise
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55 in living costs," and "increased criminal activity." These three items were combined into a
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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 toward touristification. Descriptive statistics for these variables are presented in Table 1.

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: Project’s survey [name will be added after peer-review]

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

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, we first present several descriptive statistics that characterize the sample (Table 2).

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	Disagreed = 21.2% Agreed = 78.4%
Agreement with the statement: "The state or local authorities must intervene to regulate the	

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4 cultural sphere of the community.”

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6 (dichotomic)

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9 **Over-festivalization**

Disagreed = 51.2%

10 Agreement with the statement: “The number of
11 festivals organized in Sibiu during a year is
12 high.” (dichotomic)

Agreed = 48.8%

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17 **Commodification damages local heritage**

Disagreed = 79.5%

18 Agreement with the statement: “Economic
19 commodification damages Sibiu’s cultural
20 heritage.” (dichotomic)

Agreed = 20.5%

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Source: Project’s survey [name will be added after peer-review]

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 center. 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. First, we differentiate between respondents who believe that the state should play an important role in regulating the cultural sphere of the community (78.4%) and those who do not. In post-communist societies where the

state historically regulated and censored cultural production and the organization 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 and Croitoru, 2025). Second, given that cultural festivals organized in the city are among the main drivers of local touristification, we include a variable capturing residents' evaluation of the number of festivals. The sample is divided into two almost equally sized groups: 48.8% of respondents believe that too many festivals are organized in Sibiu, while the remainder consider that there is still room for increasing their number. Third, we introduce a variable measuring respondents' concerns that the commodification of local heritage – both material and immaterial – may damage 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 toward touristification.

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

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

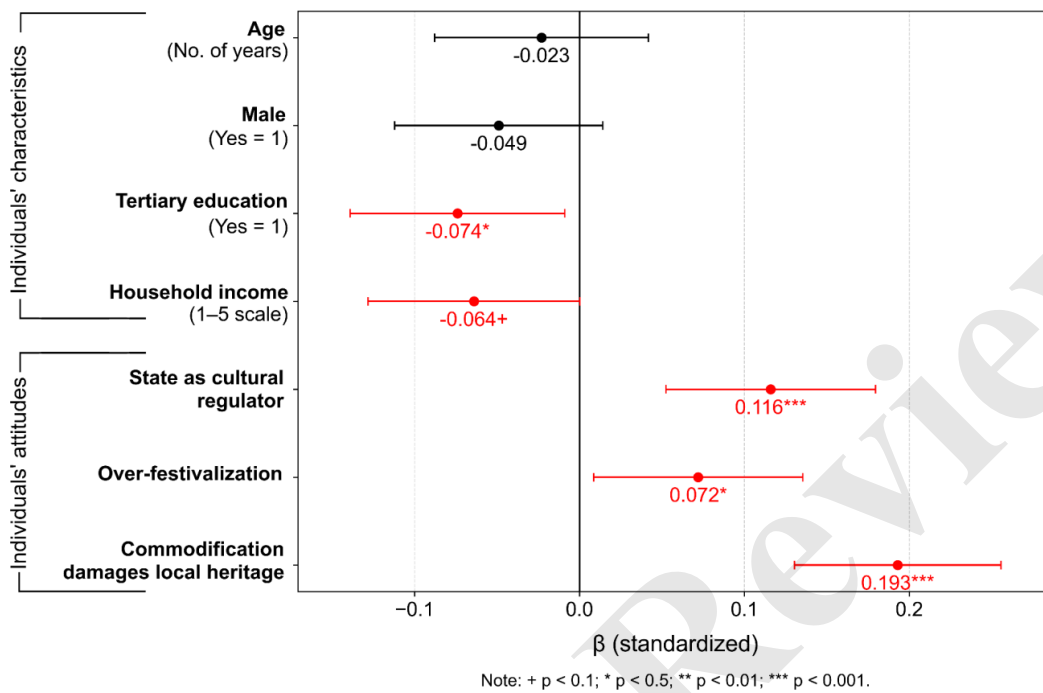
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Note: ⁺ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

The linear regression model indicates how individual NETI scores vary according to the variables included in the analysis. We present the results by distinguishing between two groups of independent variables used in the model. 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 toward tourism development ($p < 0.05$). Second, household income also influences respondents' attitudes toward 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 toward 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 toward touristification.

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4 Regarding individual attitudes toward the governance framework of cultural life in Sibiu,
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6 all three predictors included in the analysis show statistically significant associations with NETI
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8 values. Specifically, respondents who believe that the state or local authorities should intervene
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10 to regulate the cultural sphere of the community tend to report higher NETI scores ($p < 0.001$).
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12 In addition, residents who perceive the number of local festivals held throughout the year as
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14 excessive also display higher NETI values ($p < 0.05$). Finally, concerns that the
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16 commodification of cultural heritage may damage it are associated with higher scores on the
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18 negative attitude index toward tourism. What these results indicate is a strong and statistically
19
20 significant relationship between residents' expectations regarding the governance of cultural
21
22 life and their attitudes toward tourism development ($p < 0.001$). In other words, residents who
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24 favor stronger public regulation of cultural life and who are more critical of festivalization and
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26 heritage commodification are also more likely to perceive tourism development in negative
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28 terms. These relationships and their corresponding coefficients are depicted visually in Figure
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Figure 1. Visual representation of the regression coefficients



Discussion and conclusions

Our study highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of touristification, which both shapes and is shaped by a range of intertwined cultural, social, political, and economic processes. 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 characterized 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 revitalizing urban spaces through culture. Such practices emerge at the intersection of processes commonly described in the literature as heritagization (Hanif and Riza 2025), festivalization (Stock 2007), and eventification (Jakob 2013). These closely related concepts refer to neoliberal dynamics through which local,

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4 regional, or national cultural heritage, traditions, commemorative dates, and other cultural
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6 activities are transformed into cultural commodities and marketed to both residents and tourists.
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9 Over the past few decades, this trend has led to a surge in new cultural attractions,
10 festivals, and events in European cities, which seek to stimulate economic development,
11 investment, and urban regeneration amid intensifying competition with other cities (Richards
12 2000; Prentice and Andersen 2003; Quinn 2005; Fjell 2007). Investment in cultural
13 consumption has also been conceptualized in previous research as the experience economy
14 (Pine and Gilmore 1999). In this economy, politicians, urban managers, and marketing experts
15 increasingly focus on developing experiences in urban spaces to encourage consumption (Jakob
16 2013). Consequently, cities have started seeking ways to provide people with spectacular urban
17 environments and spaces for extraordinary experiences to capitalize on people's desire for new
18 experiences (d'Hautesserre 2013). This phenomenon aligns with the role social media plays in
19 the lives of today's consumers. The experience economy creates Instagram-worthy sites and
20 events that locals and tourists want to experience and share on social media. These intertwined
21 trajectories have laid the groundwork for the current touristification of European cities, which
22 has led to severe challenges caused by overtourism in many of them.
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38 Over the past few decades, policymakers and urban managers have sought to improve the
39 livability and economic development of cities through various city labels. In 1985, the
40 European Union entered this arena by establishing the ECoC designation. Although increasing
41 tourism has never been the main goal of the ECoC initiative, cities are expected to welcome
42 tourists and provide tourist services. The short-term impact of the ECoC year have commonly
43 been measured by tourist flow to the city (e.g., Richards and Rotariu 2009). As the EU and
44 local urban managers expect the ECoC to also have long-term effects, the cities seek to turn
45 their tourism goals into permanent policies that welcome national and, in particular,
46 international tourists. As our study shows, Sibiu has sought to maintain the legacy of its ECoC
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4 year and support tourism-driven development as a key driver of economic growth. Sibiu has a
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6 rich cultural landscape ranging from museums to festivals, gastronomy, and urban events that
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8 enable diverse forms of cultural consumption. The commodification and marketing of such
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10 cultural offerings has increased touristification in Sibiu, leading to both positive and negative
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12 impacts.
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15 In line with recent research on touristification, the increase in tourism in Sibiu has had a
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17 positive economic impact. However, many citizens have also noted negative effects. Recent
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19 research highlights that the growth of the platform economy has exacerbated the negative
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21 effects of touristification, including diminished housing availability and increased living costs
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23 in areas with short-term rental apartments. Similar effects can also be recognized in Sibiu.
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25 Additionally, the downsides of the city's touristification include overcrowding of public spaces
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27 and increased criminal activity. Several European cities suffering from the negative effects of
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29 touristification have experienced anti-tourism protests and activism by residents seeking to
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31 "reclaim" public spaces and combat overtourism. Sibiu has not yet reached this point, so the
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33 city's policymakers and urban managers must make wise policy decisions regarding the future
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35 development of the tourism industry. These decisions cannot be made without considering
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37 citizens' views on touristification and understanding the complex factors impacting these
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39 views. As previous studies have shown, European cities are culturally specific, and their
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41 residents' views are impacted by complex historical, political, and societal factors (Croitoru,
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43 Lähdesmäki, and Tudorie 2025; Coitoru and Vlase 2025). Therefore, policymakers need
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45 contextualized and situated knowledge from the city and citizens that they seek to govern.
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49 Our survey of Sibiu residents revealed a positive attitude toward touristification.
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51 Although the negative effects of touristification are recognized in the city, citizens' opinions
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53 are dominated by the positive effects. These views align with the neoliberal agenda of
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55 community development, embracing the profits from tourism and the commodification of
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4 culture and urban spaces (Chelcea and Druță, 2016). Furthermore, the views reflect the
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6 Romanian historical context as an Eastern European country that has been building connections
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8 with Western Europe and becoming increasingly westernized. This shift has been influenced
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10 by the influx of Western tourists and the urban transformation that has accompanied the tourism
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12 industry.
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15 Multiple linear regression analysis of the survey responses revealed more nuanced results
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17 regarding citizens' views on the negative effects of touristification in Sibiu, such as
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19 overcrowded public spaces, increased living costs, and heightened criminal activity. These
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21 effects were combined into a negative effects of touristification index (NETI) in the analysis.
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23 Analysis of the NETI and various sociodemographic characteristics revealed significant and
24
25 non-significant relationships. Unlike many other studies on citizens' opinions of culture and
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27 cultural heritage (e.g., Croitoru, Lähdesmäki, and Tudorie 2025; Lähdesmäki et al. 2021), age
28
29 and gender were not significantly related to the NETI. Instead, education and income levels
30
31 impacted the NETI, but with opposing trends. The results show that less-educated residents in
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33 Sibiu are more likely to be dissatisfied with the negative consequences of touristification. This
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35 can be explained by the large number of university students and graduates, who appreciate,
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37 participate in, and benefit from Sibiu's vibrant cultural life, which is heavily influenced by
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39 tourism. Additionally, less educated residents may harbor unwelcoming attitudes toward
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41 strangers, including foreign visitors and domestic tourists, due to regional stereotypes and
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43 prejudices. At the same time, residents with higher earnings are less likely to be bothered by
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45 the negative consequences of touristification. This can be explained by their economic ability
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47 to participate in the consumption of the city, i.e., a city reshaped by touristification, and to
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49 support the increased prices implied.
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53 Our study highlights the challenges of mitigating the negative effects of touristification
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55 in neoliberal economies. In Romania, as in many other European countries, the current
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4 neoliberal governmental ethos promotes the touristification of cities, favoring the deregulation
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6 of private touristic activities. This creates an imbalance of power between economic actors and
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8 citizens, as touristification processes are impacted by private companies rather than
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10 democratically elected public government bodies. In Sibiu, the local authorities' neoliberal
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12 policy framework promotes the city as a tourist destination in international markets and seeks
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14 to raise tourist interest in cultural activities, such as festivals co-funded by the public budget.
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16 Within this framework, private economic agents operate in a highly permissive and loosely
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18 regulated environment. Residents dissatisfied with the touristification of Sibiu tend to advocate
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20 for stricter regulation of tourist-related economic activities carried out by private actors.
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24 Sibiu has not yet reached the critical threshold of overtourism and remains in the
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26 relatively early stages of touristification. This helps explain why the increase in tourist numbers
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28 is not widely perceived as problematic by local residents in our survey. However, this moment
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30 represents an important window of opportunity for local decision-makers and urban managers
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32 to anticipate the potential negative effects of touristification and to develop sustainable
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34 responses to emerging challenges. Based on our findings, as well as previous research, we argue
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36 that the negative consequences of touristification should be addressed through more effective
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38 regulation of tourism-related economic activities by local authorities. At the same time,
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40 municipalities should promote more sustainable models of tourism development, including
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42 forms of urban ecotourism. Without abandoning the principle of hospitality, cities should
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44 reconsider whether it is desirable to welcome tourism growth under all circumstances, given
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46 the potential social and cultural costs for local communities.
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51 **Acknowledgements**

52
53 The authors gratefully acknowledge [anonymized] for her contribution to the development of
54
55 the questionnaire that served as the basis for this study. This work was funded by the European
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4 Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant [anonymized].
5
6 Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the authors only and do not necessarily
7
8 reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the
9
10 European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.
11

12 13 14 15 **Declaration of interest statement**

16
17 The authors declare no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have
18
19 appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.
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