

What Residents Want to Project: Investigating Place Identity in City Branding through Participatory Research – Evidence from Blumenau, Brazil

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Abstract

This study investigates the image that residents of Blumenau (SC, Brazil) project of their city, across five dimensions: Physical Appearance, Community Facilities, Entertainment, Social Environment, and Tourism. The qualitative research was conducted through twenty in-depth semi-structured projective interviews, analyzed according to the combined model of Styliadis, Sit, and Biran (2014) and Chen et al. (2023). The findings reveal Blumenau projected as a European city within Brazil, articulating German heritage, hospitality, and touristic vocation beyond seasonal events. Place Identity Theory explains the formation of the projected image in four of the five dimensions, while Social Exchange Theory evidences the cost-benefit calculation that sustains residents' support for the city's development in Community Facilities. Social Environment emerged as the most connected dimension, confirming that the projected image is essentially social. The study contributes methodologically, by validating projective interviews as a participatory research instrument; geographically, by expanding the place branding literature to a mid-sized Brazilian city; and theoretically, by articulating the two theories to explain residents' projective behavior. Implications for public managers, tourism, and branding professionals are discussed, along with an agenda for future research.

Introduction

Building territorial brands depends on the active engagement of residents as producers of urban narratives, not merely as the target audience of institutional campaigns (Kavaratzis, 2024). This premise remains underused in practice: most strategies are conceived from the outside in, grounded in research with tourists, investors, and external consultants, with little anchoring in what residents themselves want to communicate about the place where they live (Mbinza, 2025). This produces territorial brands that communicate with visual coherence but lack experiential authenticity. Overcoming this gap requires empirical research that systematically and thoroughly captures the image that residents want to project of their city.

Cities, as symbolic, functional, and affective territories, hold images that directly influence their attractiveness, reputation, and relationship with residents (Dinnie, 2011). Urban image is a central element of territorial planning, with direct impact on tourism, the economy, social development, and inhabitants' sense of belonging. This understanding has been slow to translate into practice. Advertising campaigns rarely change a place's image in a lasting way; a better image can only be earned, not constructed or invented (Anholt, 2008).

The literature distinguishes two main types of urban image. Perceived image is associated with residents' everyday experiences and their affective and functional relationship with the territory. Projected image, in turn, refers to the representations that individuals, institutions, and organizations intentionally construct and communicate to influence external audiences' perceptions (Andreu, Bigné, and Cooper, 2000; Cassia et al., 2018; Hunter, 2011). The effectiveness of city branding strategies depends, to a large extent, on the coherence between what residents experience and what is

communicated as territorial identity (Hollinshead, 2009; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). When this coherence fails, tensions arise between the institutional narrative and lived experience, undermining brand credibility and residents' own support for tourism development (Casais and Poço, 2023).

In Brazil, research on urban image is concentrated mainly in major capitals and adopts the tourist's perspective, with scarce qualitative work centered on the resident's voice as an active projector of territorial identity. International studies on residents' perceived image have advanced since Styliadis, Sit, and Biran (2014), but remain concentrated in European contexts and quantitative approaches (Styliadis and Quintero, 2022; Jørgensen and Hannibal, 2022). This gap is more pronounced in mid-sized cities with a strong cultural identity forged by immigrant heritage, such as Blumenau, known for its German heritage, cultural events, and quality of life, attributes that do not fit models developed for metropolises or mass-tourism destinations.

This is the gap this research addresses. Understanding the image a resident projects of their city, that is, the set of attributes they wish to communicate to someone unfamiliar with it, means accessing the legitimate foundations on which any city branding strategy can be built. Residents are not tourists, but they are the destination's first and most constant informal communicators: through their everyday interaction with visitors, they validate or contradict the institutional narrative conveyed by tourism boards (Dinnie, 2011; Gilboa and Herstein, 2012).

Against this backdrop, this research seeks to answer the following question: what image do residents of Blumenau project of their city, and which dimensions structure that projection within the context of city branding? The objective of this study is to identify and analyze this image across five analytical dimensions, physical appearance, community facilities, entertainment, social environment, and tourism, in light of Place Identity Theory and Social Exchange Theory, contributing to more legitimate and participatory city branding and tourism planning strategies. Data were collected through 20 in-depth semi-structured projective interviews with residents, analyzed using the combined model of Styliadis, Sit, and Biran (2014) and Chen et al. (2023). The theoretical framework underpinning this research is presented in the following section.

City Visual Identity and the Role of Residents

City branding can be understood as the strategic application of brand management tools to urban territories, aiming to build a distinct, coherent, and attractive identity capable of influencing how a city is perceived by its multiple publics (Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2006). Unlike conventional product branding, city branding operates on a complex, multidimensional object, referred to as urban experience, which is simultaneously physical, social, symbolic, and affective (Dinnie, 2011).

The effectiveness of city branding strategies is closely tied to residents' participation as active agents in identity construction. City marketing should be understood as a management process that seeks to align the needs of diverse urban actors, including residents, tourists, investors, and public administrators

(Braun, 2008). The city brand emerges from a continuous process of co-creation between the city and its inhabitants: a brand cannot be imposed on a place without the engagement and identification of those who live and experience it daily (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). Successful city branding strategies require integrating the cultural, experiential, and communicational dimensions into a unified strategy (Asnawi et al., 2018). The place brand functions as a point of synthesis among these dimensions, capable of generating differentiated competitive value when managed coherently. In Kavaratzis's (2009) integrated framework, the local communities component emerges as a structural condition: without residents' involvement, any institutional effort tends toward inconsistency. Cities communicate through everything they do and are, landscape, infrastructure, behavior, opportunities, such that residents, by moving through the city and interacting with visitors, function as unintentional but decisive vectors of the projected image. This perspective supports this study's methodological choice to investigate the image that residents want to communicate: accessing precisely the layer that escapes the control of institutional campaigns.

This logic of balancing distinct publics is closely related to the concept of territorial brand value, according to which the value of a place brand emerges from the articulation of multiple strategic drivers, among them the active participation of internal stakeholders in constructing the territorial narrative (Mariutti and Giraldi, 2021). From this perspective, residents not only legitimize the brand but constitute one of the pillars of value generation for the territory, insofar as their perception and engagement directly affect the strength and authenticity of the projected identity.

The theoretical understanding of residents' involvement in projecting territorial identity is reinforced by Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976), according to which individuals continuously weigh the balance of perceived costs and benefits in a relationship before deciding how many resources, material, symbolic, or affective, to invest in it. Applied to city branding, this logic suggests that residents who perceive concrete gains from tourism development and the strengthening of the territorial brand tend to expand their role as communicators of urban identity, while the perception of costs, such as infrastructure overload or cultural decharacterization, tends to generate reservations or ambivalence in that same role (Ap, 1992; Zenker and Beckmann, 2013). This instrumental calculus provides an interpretive key for accounts in which residents make their support for the territorial brand conditional on perceived economic and social benefits, a pattern especially relevant to the Social Environment dimension.

Place Identity and Projected Image

The concept of place image encompasses the set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that individuals hold about a given territorial space. Applied to cities, this concept is fundamental to understanding how different publics relate to the urban environment and make decisions based on that relationship. The literature recognizes the multidimensional nature of urban image, which encompasses cognitive components, objective knowledge about the city's attributes and services, as well as affective components, emotional associations tied to the place (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999).

The distinction between projected image and perceived image is particularly relevant in the context of city branding. Perceived image refers to the mental representation that external publics, tourists, investors, and prospective residents, form of a given destination based on the information they receive and their prior experiences (Andreu, Bigné, and Cooper, 2000; Hunter, 2011). Projected image, in turn, consists of the representations that individuals and organizations intentionally construct and communicate to influence how a place is seen externally (Chen et al., 2023). When these two images are aligned, brand credibility is strengthened; when they diverge, tensions arise that undermine the brand's legitimacy.

This distinction between projected and perceived image finds structural grounding in the typology of urban communication proposed by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2006), who identify three levels through which a city communicates: primary communication, which emanates unintentionally from the landscape, infrastructure, people's behavior, and urban atmosphere; secondary communication, formed by intentional marketing and advertising actions; and tertiary communication, generated by media and word of mouth. They argue that city branding systematically fails when it concentrates its efforts on the secondary level, campaigns and slogans, while ignoring the primary level, which is simultaneously the most authentic and the most impactful on external perception. The image that residents want to project of their city lies precisely at this primary level: it is not a deliberate institutional message but an identity-based expression that emerges from what the city genuinely is and what its inhabitants spontaneously experience and communicate. Investigating this level therefore means accessing the foundations on which any city branding strategy can be legitimately built.

Understanding the resident as co-producer of the urban brand finds direct theoretical support in Place Identity Theory, formulated by Proshansky (1978) and developed by Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996). According to this perspective, place is not merely the backdrop of everyday life but an active component of personal and collective identity: individuals incorporate attributes of the urban space into their self-image and, for that reason, tend to defend, promote, and project the elements they perceive as representative of who they are. In the context of city branding, this implies that the image residents project of their city is not a voluntary act of communication but an identity-based expression. A study of ten mid-sized European cities demonstrates that territorial identity depends on the continuous interaction between culture, identity, and place image, and that the most valuable contribution to inclusive image planning comes from stakeholders who experience the city as a space of belonging (Lemmetyinen et al., 2025). Although this study focuses on the role of the creative industries, its central conclusion converges with the premise of this research: authentic territorial brands are not designed from the outside in but emerge from what residents perceive, value, and want to project. This principle guides the reading of the Social Environment and Physical Appearance dimensions as identity-based expressions of the relationship between resident and city, rather than merely descriptive ones.

The two theories operate in complementary, non-overlapping registers. Place Identity explains the affective, identity-based dimension of the resident–city relationship, addressing who the resident is in relation to the territory they inhabit. Social Exchange explains the instrumental dimension of that same

relationship, addressing what the resident gains or loses by engaging in the projection of the territorial brand. Combined, these theories support the expectation that the image residents project results both from a process of identity self-affirmation and from a perceived cost-benefit calculation, which guides the interpretive reading presented in the results section.

Analytical Model: The Five Dimensions of Projected Image

The operationalization of projected image in this study is based on a combined instrument built from two complementary sources. The first is the model developed by Stylidis, Sit, and Biran (2014), originally applied in the city of Kavala, Greece, to investigate residents' perceptions of place image across four dimensions: physical appearance, community facilities, entertainment, and social environment. This model was selected for its demonstrated suitability for investigating urban image from the perspective of internal stakeholders and for its application, and validation, in a mid-sized city with a strong local identity, a profile compatible with Blumenau.

The second source is the model proposed by Chen et al. (2023), developed to analyze destination image from the perspective of projected and perceived communication, covering attributes related to tourism development, places, and events of touristic interest. The Tourism dimension incorporated from this model adds a complementary analytical layer specific to Blumenau's touristic vocation, which the original instrument by Stylidis, Sit, and Biran (2014) does not cover.

Combining these two models addresses a gap identified in the literature. The instrument by Stylidis, Sit, and Biran (2014) was developed and originally validated with residents of Kavala through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis using quantitative data, and its subsequent applications have predominantly followed the same methodological protocol in European contexts (Stylidis and Quintero, 2022). Chen et al.'s (2023) model, in turn, was built for the computational analysis of large volumes of text, focusing on the discrepancy between the image projected by destination marketing organizations and the image perceived by tourists, not by residents. Therefore, neither original source anticipated the investigation of the image residents themselves wish to project through in-depth qualitative techniques, nor had either been applied in combination in a Brazilian tourist destination. A systematic search of the Scopus and Web of Science databases using the descriptors "residents' projected image," "city brand," and "qualitative," restricted to the 2014–2024 period, did not identify a relevant study that simultaneously combined both models within this methodological design. This study therefore occupies that intersection.

Table 1
— Synthesis of the theoretical-analytical model

Dimension	Core Concept	Reference Authors	Analytical Focus in This Study
Physical Appearance	Visual, architectural, and landscape elements that make up the place's visual identity.	Lynch (1960); Stylidis, Sit, and Biran (2014)	Identity landmarks recognized by residents as representative of the city.
Community Facilities	Perception of public services, infrastructure, and urban management efficiency.	Stylidis, Sit, and Biran (2014); Asnawi et al. (2018)	The city's capacity to meet residents' collective needs.
Entertainment	Gastronomy, nightlife, and cultural experiences that translate local identity.	Stylidis, Sit, and Biran (2014); Bramwell and Rawding (1996)	Consumption and leisure attributes projected as attractions.
Social Environment	Coexistence, hospitality, safety, and collective care of the urban space.	Stylidis, Sit, and Biran (2014); Zenker and Beckmann (2013)	Community behavior as an expression of projected identity.
Tourism	Tourism development, and places and events of touristic relevance.	Chen et al. (2023)	Touristic vocation projected beyond the seasonality of major events.

Source: prepared by the authors based on Stylidis, Sit, and Biran (2014) and Chen et al. (2023).

Table 1 synthesizes this theoretical architecture, making explicit that the first four dimensions, physical appearance, community facilities, entertainment, and social environment, derive from the original model by Stylidis, Sit, and Biran (2014), built from a systematic review of residential satisfaction studies, while the fifth dimension, tourism, was incorporated from Chen et al. (2023) to capture Blumenau's specific touristic vocation, absent from the original generic model. This combined visualization makes explicit the logic behind combining the two instruments and guides the reading of the results section, in which each dimension is treated separately before the integrated analysis of their co-occurrences. How this instrument was operationalized through in-depth projective interviews with residents of Blumenau is detailed in the following section.

Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature, adopting exploratory and descriptive approaches as complementary, sequential dimensions of the investigative process. This dual classification is recognized in the methodological literature as appropriate when the object of study presents two distinct movements: exploring a little-investigated phenomenon and systematically characterizing its attributes (Gil, 2002; Sampieri, Collado, and Lucio, 2013). In this study, the exploratory character manifests in

investigating the image residents themselves project, a perspective still little addressed in the Brazilian city branding literature, while the descriptive character operates in the subsequent stage, identifying, recording, and analyzing the attributes that make up this image across each of the five dimensions of the analytical model adopted. The qualitative approach was chosen for its capacity to access the meanings, perceptions, and narratives residents construct about the city (Flick, 2009), dimensions that quantitative research tends not to capture with the same interpretive depth.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured projective interviews. The interview guide was built from the combined model of Stylidis, Sit, and Biran (2014) and Chen et al. (2023), structured around the five dimensions of projected image: physical appearance, community facilities, entertainment, social environment, and tourism. The projective technique was adopted for its capacity to preserve researcher neutrality and encourage interviewees to formulate more spontaneous responses, less conditioned by social desirability (Nunes, Nascimento, and Luz, 2016). Interview questions were designed so that participants would describe the city as if presenting it to someone who had never visited it, operationalizing projection as a deliberate communicative act.

The sample comprises residents of Blumenau aged 20 or older with a minimum of five years of residency, a criterion ensuring sufficient familiarity with the city, its social dynamics, and its image. The sample totaled 20 interviewees, selected by convenience sampling, a method that consists of choosing participants based on accessibility and proximity to the researcher (Sampieri, Collado, and Lucio, 2013).

Ethical procedures were observed at every stage of the research. All participants were informed of the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the guarantee of anonymity before each interview. Free and informed consent was obtained verbally and recorded at the start of each session, with participants expressly aware that the information would be used exclusively for academic purposes. Audio files and transcripts were stored in a digital environment with restricted access to the researchers and will be retained for five years, in accordance with the ethical guidelines applicable to scientific research in Brazil (National Health Council Resolution No. 510/2016). No data that would allow individual identification of participants was used in presenting the results; quotations are identified only as "Interviewee, 2025."

Interviews were conducted between September and October 2025, averaging one hour each. They were conducted remotely via Google Meet, recorded by the platform itself, and subsequently transcribed with the assistance of Transkriptor, a tool that segments audio by speaker, automatically distinguishing the researcher's speech from the participant's. In accordance with the scientific transparency guidelines currently adopted by journals and research institutions, it is clarified that AI use was restricted to the transcription stage. All transcripts were manually reviewed by the researchers to correct any segmentation or speech-recognition errors prior to analysis.

Data analysis was conducted with the assistance of the qualitative analysis software AtlasTI and followed the five steps proposed by Yin (2016): compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. In the compiling stage, the reviewed transcripts were gathered and organized in the

software. In the disassembling stage, the data were segmented into thematic units coded according to the five dimensions of the analytical model, with initial coding guided by the interview script and open coding for emergent categories. In the reassembling stage, the dimensions were integrated into an articulated view, seeking connections between the findings and Blumenau's sociocultural contexts. In the interpreting stage, underlying meanings were analyzed in light of the theoretical framework of city branding, urban image, Place Identity Theory, and Social Exchange Theory. The synthesis resulted in the formulation of inferences about residents' projected image, presented in the following section.

Results and Discussion

The results are organized across the five analytical dimensions: physical appearance, community facilities, entertainment, social environment, and tourism. The analysis is based on the collective and symbolic content of the responses, prioritizing shared perceptions and the attributes residents want to see associated with Blumenau's image.

Physical Appearance

The physical appearance dimension reveals that the image residents desire combines historical preservation, urban modernization, and integration with nature. City landmarks such as Rua XV de Novembro, the Matriz Church, the City Council building, the Beira-Rio riverfront, Prainha beach, and Vila Germânica communicate organization, German tradition, and quality of life, functioning as collective reference points that structure the urban image (Lynch, 1960).

Rua XV de Novembro occupies a central position in this imaginary, described as a lively space with constant foot traffic and historic buildings that condense the city's visual narrative. City Hall is cited as an architectural symbol, with Germanic façades and sloped roofs: "You just arrive and there are already tourists out front taking pictures. Every day. Doesn't matter if it's summer, winter, or fall, they're always there, enchanted" (Interviewee, 2025).

The Beira-Rio riverfront embodies the city's relationship with the Itajaí-Açu River, admired for its beauty and marked by the memory of the 1983, 2008, and 2011 floods. This duality does not weaken the projected image; on the contrary, it reinforces a narrative of collective resilience. Prainha beach is cited as a symbol of urban renewal: "You can see the city showing that it's adapting to nature, adjusting itself, and respecting the river" (Interviewee, 2025).

Museums such as the Beer Museum, the Colonial Family Museum, the Herring Museum, and the Mausoleum of Dr. Blumenau are mentioned as essential points for conveying the city's historical and industrial evolution. Some interviewees suggest new spaces documenting the floods and local resilience. Tangible and intangible cultural elements, when experienced, reinforce the authenticity of the constructed image (Zucco et al., 2017).

Residents value architectural heritage but want it to coexist with revitalized, contemporary spaces, since brands anchored solely in historical symbols risk becoming rigid (Hunter, 2011). This balance resonates with findings from Verona, a mid-sized European city with strong heritage appeal, where residents tend to be more critical than tourists regarding urban maintenance, owing to their everyday familiarity with the territory (Cassia et al., 2018). In Blumenau, the inverse pattern is observed: interviewees do not criticize existing conservation but express aspirations for modernization in already-revitalized spaces such as Prainha, suggesting that residents' everyday familiarity may operate less as criticism and more as projective aspiration (Cassia et al., 2018).

The centrality of these landmarks in the projected image is grounded in Place Identity Theory (Proshansky, 1978; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). Elements such as Rua XV de Novembro, the Beira-Rio riverfront, and Vila Germânica do not function merely as cognitive orientation points (Lynch, 1960), but as extensions of residents' collective identity, as illustrated by the resilience narrative associated with the river floods. This pattern reinforces, in this dimension, the same mechanism identified in Social Environment, in which territorial attributes are internalized as an extension of who residents are, rather than merely described as external qualities.

Community Facilities

In this dimension, residents project the image of a well-structured city with efficient public management, quality services, and an organized urban environment. Safety is the most frequently mentioned attribute, cited unanimously as a differentiator relative to other Brazilian cities: the ability to walk around, use public spaces at night, and let children move about unaccompanied serves as a concrete indicator of quality of life: "The main highlight is safety. Without it, we can't develop anything else. Whether in health, education, or any other area, everything depends on it" (Interviewee, 2025).

Healthcare is associated with the concept of regional reference, evidenced by hospitals such as Santa Catarina, Santa Isabel, and Santo Antônio, and by specialized centers such as Renal Vida: "We have three major hospitals; many cities in the region don't have any. That's what draws a lot of people here" (Interviewee, 2025). Education is also valued, particularly schools offering bilingual instruction in German and Brazilian Sign Language, and the role of Universidade Regional de Blumenau (FURB) as a university and technology hub. The quality of life offered to residents directly influences territorial attractiveness (Asnawi et al., 2018).

Employment opportunities constitute another axis of projection. Blumenau is described as an economically dynamic city, with an industrial tradition and growing involvement in the technology economy, which reinforces its territorial competitiveness (Dinnie, 2011). This desire for growth is accompanied by a recurring concern: the large-scale arrival of new workers could erode local values such as tranquility, discipline, and organization, attributes that residents consider structural to the city's identity.

Public transportation is the greatest gap between the current and the desired city. Interviewees envision more frequent services, extended hours, tourist-optimized routes, and solutions such as rail transit and scenic buses, symbols of planning and management capacity (Dias, 2017). This expectation reinforces the need to align the territorial brand with formal urban planning instruments: an analysis of the convergence between the São Paulo brand and its Strategic Master Plan found that communication is a key element in translating brand pillars into effective governance, although this alignment is rarely made explicit in official documents (Carniello and Santos, 2022). In Blumenau, the attributes residents want to see projected, such as mobility and public service efficiency, depend on this same incorporation into municipal planning instruments.

The Community Facilities dimension demonstrates, more clearly than the others, the mechanism predicted by Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Ap, 1992). Residents recognize concrete benefits of economic dynamism, such as employment and access to regionally significant services, but make their support for this development conditional on preserving the local values they perceive as threatened by it. This pattern constitutes an explicit cost-benefit calculation, confirming the instrumental and evaluative nature of the resident–territory relationship in this dimension.

Entertainment

Residents project Blumenau as a vibrant, culturally active city capable of offering diverse experiences throughout the year. Gastronomy occupies a central place in this imaginary: colonial-style cafés, historic pastry shops, and German-influenced restaurants are described as spaces that embody local identity. The Caféhaus at Hotel Glória is the most frequently cited, appearing in nearly every interview: "It's a place where you can watch the city happen. Sometimes to talk business, sometimes to celebrate a special occasion. That place ends up being a good portrait of the best Blumenau has to offer" (Interviewee, 2025).

Vila Germânica and Moinho do Vale also bring together gastronomy, architecture, and history. Interviewees want Vila Germânica to be seen not merely as the seasonal home of Oktoberfest but as a permanent gastronomic and cultural hub, functioning as a marker of authenticity that strengthens the city's identity in the collective imaginary (Bramwell and Rawding, 1996). Nightlife is also projected, consistently associated with a lively yet safe, organized, and family-friendly city, a strategically relevant attribute for a destination's external perception (Avraham, 2004).

Shopping experiences round out this imaginary. Rua XV de Novembro is projected as an axis of consumption and memory, with potential for more themed and artisanal shops. Hering and Karsten, century-old companies based in the city, connect industrial identity to the visitor experience: "Hering represents the value we place on the simple, the functional, on what's part of daily routine, without needing excess to show importance" (Interviewee, 2025), reinforcing that effective place branding must consider not only products but the cultural narrative surrounding them (Sánchez, 1999).

These elements, German gastronomy, historic spaces, and century-old industrial brands, are grounded in Place Identity Theory (Proshansky, 1978; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). The account of Hering illustrates the mechanism: the resident does not describe the brand by its commercial attributes but by the collective values it represents, projecting onto it a mirror of shared identity, a pattern that recurs in the desire for Vila Germânica to be recognized as a permanent cultural hub. This reinforces the pattern already identified in Physical Appearance: residents tend to project identity-based aspiration onto spaces and brands they already recognize as extensions of themselves, rather than merely as resources for consumption or leisure.

Social Environment

The social environment dimension reveals that residents' projected image is structured around three interdependent pillars: safety, resident behavior, and urban order, composing an imaginary of a harmonious, welcoming, and socially balanced city.

Safety is the most frequently mentioned attribute throughout the research. It goes beyond the absence of crime and manifests in everyday freedom of movement, walking around with a phone in hand, using public spaces at night, letting children move around unaccompanied: "In Blumenau, you can walk around with your phone in your hand without worrying. Children's routine of going to and from school on their own also reinforces this perception. To me, all of this is a very relevant social indicator" (Interviewee, 2025). The projected image is directly shaped by residents' everyday experience, especially in aspects affecting their sense of well-being and stability (Hollinshead, 2009).

Inhabitants' behavior is also projected as an element of identity: polite, helpful, proud of their origins, and welcoming to visitors, associated with German heritage and evoked in images of hospitality, such as inviting a visitor for coffee and explaining the city's history: "When a visitor comes to Blumenau, I want them to feel like they'd one day like to be a resident of Blumenau" (Interviewee, 2025). Residents are not merely the target audience of urban brand strategies but active co-producers of territorial identity (Zenker and Beckmann, 2013), and this study demonstrates how this co-production operates in everyday communicative behavior.

Collective resilience in the face of the 1983, 2008, and 2011 floods emerges as a central symbolic trait, recounted with pride and forming an affective layer of the projected image that institutional communication rarely reaches (Bical and Öztürk, 2021). Cleanliness and urban order round out this picture: litter-free streets, well-maintained sidewalks, and tidy façades are described as expressions of civic responsibility, not merely aesthetic attributes: "Here it's common to see people sweeping their own sidewalks. That care says a lot about the culture we have" (Interviewee, 2025), reinforcing cleanliness as a distinctive feature of the territory (Jannah, Arifin, and Kusumawati, 2021).

This pattern of civic behavior resonates with findings from mid-sized European cities such as Pori (Finland) and Treviso (Italy), where resident behavior, more than infrastructure or institutional

communication, constitutes the most differentiating component of the territorial brand in contexts of strong social cohesion (Lemmetyinen et al., 2025). In Blumenau, civic behavior, cleanliness, German hospitality, and collective resilience serve the same function: they make the projected image be perceived as authentic by those who visit the city.

The centrality of Social Environment in the results is directly grounded in Place Identity Theory (Proshansky, 1978; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996): safety, civic behavior, resilience, and urban order are not perceived by residents as external qualities of the territory but as extensions of who they are as a community, a pattern consistent with findings from Kavala, which associate more positive perceptions of place image with higher levels of place attachment (Stylidis, 2016).

The difference in this study is that this positive perception stems not only from affective attachment but from residents' active willingness to communicate these attributes to others, which brings the analysis closer to Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976): by investing time and personal narrative in promoting the city, such as inviting a visitor to try *cuca* (a traditional German-Brazilian cake) or explaining local history, the resident obtains a symbolic return of recognition and identity reaffirmation. The data evidence the positive face of this exchange, although they do not capture situations in which the calculation results in reservation or resistance. Even so, the pattern confirms that Place Identity and Social Exchange operate jointly, rather than as mutually exclusive, in shaping Social Environment as the central dimension of the projected image.

Tourism

The tourism dimension reveals residents' desire for Blumenau to be seen as a year-round destination, not just during Oktoberfest. While acknowledging the event's importance, interviewees express concern about excessive dependence on this single touristic product. The projected image seeks to establish Blumenau as a destination offering a European experience within Brazil, combining German tradition, architecture, gastronomy, safety, and urban organization, captured in expressions such as "Brazilian Germany," "The Brazil that worked," and "The Switzerland of Brazil." A place can be understood as a product whose identity and value depend on the capacity to communicate distinctive attributes capable of attracting visitors (Kotler and Gertner, 2002).

Future expectations include new museums and cultural facilities, theme parks, cable cars, public markets, and a diversified calendar spreading visitor flows across the year. Events such as Sommerfest, Festitália, the Beer Festival, Christmas, and Easter already make up this calendar but require greater visibility and infrastructure, reflecting the logic that cities use culture, events, and symbolic facilities to renew their projected image (Monclús, 2003).

Blumenau is also projected as a strategic base for exploring the Vale Europeu region and the Santa Catarina coastline. Its proximity to the Beto Carrero World theme park, Pomerode, state beaches, and other natural destinations is seen as a competitive advantage, positioning the city as a regional

integration hub, since urban branding connects a territory's potential to its use for the benefit of the local society (Liouris and Deffner, 2005).

The spaces projected as future postcards of the city include Parque Vila Germânica, Prainha, the revitalized left-bank promenade, the Iron Bridge, City Hall, FURB, and natural areas such as Nova Rússia and Parque das Nascentes. When residents recognize these landmarks as representative of their identity, they anchor the tourism narrative in the community's real experience, lending authenticity to the projected image (Boisen et al., 2018). This authenticity has implications beyond tourism: the more the tourism offer is anchored in attributes validated by residents themselves, the greater the coherence between institutional discourse and lived experience, and the greater the resulting strength of the territorial brand (Mariutti and Giraldi, 2021).

The pursuit of recognition as a year-round destination, combined with the valorization of these identity landmarks, reinforces the role of Place Identity Theory (Proshansky, 1978; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996) in shaping the projected image: residents do not describe Parque Vila Germânica, Prainha, or the Iron Bridge merely as tourist attractions, but as extensions of an identity-based narrative they want recognized by those who visit the city. This mechanism is consistent with the pattern already identified in Physical Appearance and Entertainment: residents tend to project touristic authenticity from spaces already incorporated into their own collective identity. The Tourism dimension therefore functions as a synthesis of the others, consolidating, from the visitor's perspective, the same attributes that structure the resident's self-image.

Integrative Analysis and Co-occurrences Across Dimensions

The integrated analysis of the five dimensions reveals a consistent theoretical pattern in the formation of the image residents of Blumenau project. Place Identity Theory (Proshansky, 1978; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996) operates as the dominant mechanism in four of the five dimensions, Social Environment, Physical Appearance, Entertainment, and Tourism, showing that residents tend to project physical landmarks, collective behaviors, and cultural experiences as extensions of their own identity, rather than as attributes external to the territory. Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976) appears more selectively, but with full evidence of both its faces, perceived benefit and cost, in the Community Facilities dimension, in which residents' support for the city's economic dynamism is conditional on preserving local values they consider structural. This pattern suggests that residents' projected image does not stem from a single psychosocial mechanism but from a selective combination of identity and instrumental calculation, activated according to the nature of the bond each dimension captures: affective, identity-based bonds predominate where the object of projection is already incorporated into the resident's personal narrative, while cost-benefit calculation emerges where the object involves tangible economic exchanges. This finding extends the combined application of the models by Stylidis, Sit, and Biran (2014) and Chen et al. (2023), demonstrating that the dimensional structure of the

projected image is also a differentiated theoretical structure, rather than a homogeneous set of perceived attributes.

The analysis further reveals that Blumenau's projected image does not emerge from isolated attributes but from their continuous interaction. Identifying these co-occurrences makes it possible to understand which connections are densest in residents' narratives and, consequently, which combinations of attributes most consistently structure the desired urban identity.

The relationship between social environment and physical appearance is the most recurrent throughout the analysis. Residents systematically associate urban aesthetics with communal life: clean streets, well-maintained façades, and carefully preserved spaces are not mere visual attributes but expressions of collective behavior and local civic spirit. The order observed in the city is inseparable from the order lived within it. Similarly, social environment and tourism form another high-intensity co-occurrence: the hospitality projected toward visitors, cultural events, and perceived safety all have their direct origins in the relationships residents establish among themselves and with the everyday urban space. A destination's projected image is shaped by local experiences and by residents' familiarity with the territory (Hollinshead, 2009), and in Blumenau this logic manifests clearly: the tourism residents desire is an extension of the city's social life.

The heat map, Fig. 1, shows that entertainment and tourism exhibit high co-occurrence, sustained by German gastronomy, cultural events, and sociability spaces that permeate both dimensions. These elements function as bridges between what residents experience and what they want visitors to experience. The co-occurrence between social environment and community facilities reveals that residents understand social cohesion as dependent on efficient public services: safety, health, transportation, and economic opportunities are perceived as structural conditions without which the city's positive image cannot be sustained. This interdependence confirms city branding as a process that articulates material and immaterial elements around a coherent territorial narrative (Dias, 2017).

The more moderate intensity between physical appearance and community facilities does not indicate an absence of relationship, but rather that residents tend to treat urban aesthetics and infrastructure as complementary dimensions, without articulating them together with the same frequency. Overall, the map shows that social environment functions as the most connected dimension in the model, establishing high or very high intensity co-occurrences with all the others.

This centrality of the social environment illuminates, from a theoretical standpoint, how place identity and social exchange operate interdependently in constructing the projected image. If Place Identity Theory explains why residents incorporate attributes of the Social Environment into their own identity, Social Exchange Theory explains why these same residents are willing to communicate those attributes to external publics: the projected image is not merely a reflection of who the resident is, but also the result of a symbolic exchange between the recognition they wish to receive and the identity-based investment they make in presenting the city to those who do not know it. This dual theoretical explanation addresses a gap identified in the city branding literature, which tends to treat resident

participation as a variable of civic engagement (Zenker and Beckmann, 2013) without further examining the psychological and relational mechanisms that sustain that participation.

Figure 2 synthesizes this explanatory architecture. At the base of the model are the five dimensions of projected image, with Social Environment occupying a nuclear position due to its high-intensity co-occurrences with all the others. Operating on this base are the two mechanisms that explain residents' projective behavior: Place Identity Theory clarifies why the city is incorporated into personal and collective identity, while Social Exchange Theory clarifies why that identity is communicated to external publics. The result of this articulation is the image residents project, which constitutes the foundation on which legitimate territorial brand strategies can be built. This confirms that Blumenau's projected image is, in essence, a social image: built from residents' behavior, their relationship with the space, and their capacity to welcome those who arrive.

Conclusions

This study analyzed the image that residents of Blumenau project of their city, identifying the attributes, dimensions, and co-occurrences that structure this collective narrative. The exclusive object of this research was the image projected by residents, not the image perceived by them or by others; both categories were presented in the theoretical framework solely for conceptual context. The qualitative research, conducted through 20 in-depth projective interviews, made it possible to access subjective, symbolic, and affective perceptions that quantitative investigations tend not to capture with the same depth.

Residents project Blumenau as a European city within Brazil: organized, safe, hospitable, and culturally distinctive, whose German identity is lived as an everyday value. The five dimensions analyzed, Physical Appearance, Community Facilities, Entertainment, Social Environment, and Tourism, proved interdependent, structuring an image that is simultaneously affective and strategic. Social Environment proved to be the most connected dimension in the model, confirming that Blumenau's projected image is, in essence, a social image (Zenker and Beckmann, 2013).

This research offers three contributions to the field of city branding and the place branding literature. The first is methodological: the international literature reiterates the need for territorial brands built from residents' perspective (Kavaratzis, 2024; Mbinza, 2025), but lacks studies that operationally demonstrate how to capture that perspective in depth. This research fills that gap by demonstrating that projective interviews constitute an effective participatory research instrument, capable of accessing tacit and affective dimensions that structured quantitative scales rarely reach, responding to an explicit call from the place branding community for methods that capture what residents genuinely experience (Kavaratzis, 2024).

The second contribution is geographic and contextual. Qualitative city branding studies centered on residents are concentrated predominantly in European contexts (Casais and Poço, 2023; Jørgensen and Hannibal, 2022) or in Global South metropolises (Mbinza, 2024). Mid-sized cities with a cultural identity

forged by immigrant heritage in a Latin American context remain underrepresented in the PBPD literature, and the case of Blumenau expands the field's geographic and cultural reach.

The third contribution is theoretical and mechanistic. The novel combination of the models by Stylidis, Sit, and Biran (2014) and Chen et al. (2023) extended the scope of application of both instruments beyond the European and computational contexts in which they were originally developed. More importantly, articulating Place Identity Theory (Proshansky, 1978; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996) with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) offers a mechanistic explanation of residents' projective behavior: residents of Blumenau project the city not merely because they know it, but because it is integral to their identity and because they perceive symbolic and affective value in that projection. This dual grounding addresses a gap in the place branding literature, which tends to treat resident participation as a civic-engagement variable without further examining the mechanisms that sustain it (Zenker and Beckmann, 2013; Kavaratzis, 2024).

This research presents limitations that open pathways for future studies. The convenience sample, although it allowed thematic saturation from the fifteenth participant onward, introduces possible selection bias and does not allow for statistical generalization. The research did not include new residents or external visitors, nor did it address perceived image, which limits inferences about the coherence between projection and external perception; application in a single city precludes generalization to other urban contexts.

Complementary quantitative research could measure the intensity of the perceptions identified here on a broader scale. Comparative studies with other cities of German immigration in southern Brazil, such as Joinville and Pomerode, would allow for understanding regional patterns of urban image. A subsequent study contrasting perceived image with the projected image mapped here would constitute a natural extension of this research. Future studies could also investigate situations in which residents perceive costs, not only benefits, of tourism development on the social environment, testing the negative face of Social Exchange Theory not captured in this dataset.

Declarations

Author Contribution

L.R. and R.B. wrote the main manuscript text. C.K. conducted the interviews and performed the data analysis. C.K. and J.D. conducted the theoretical review. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

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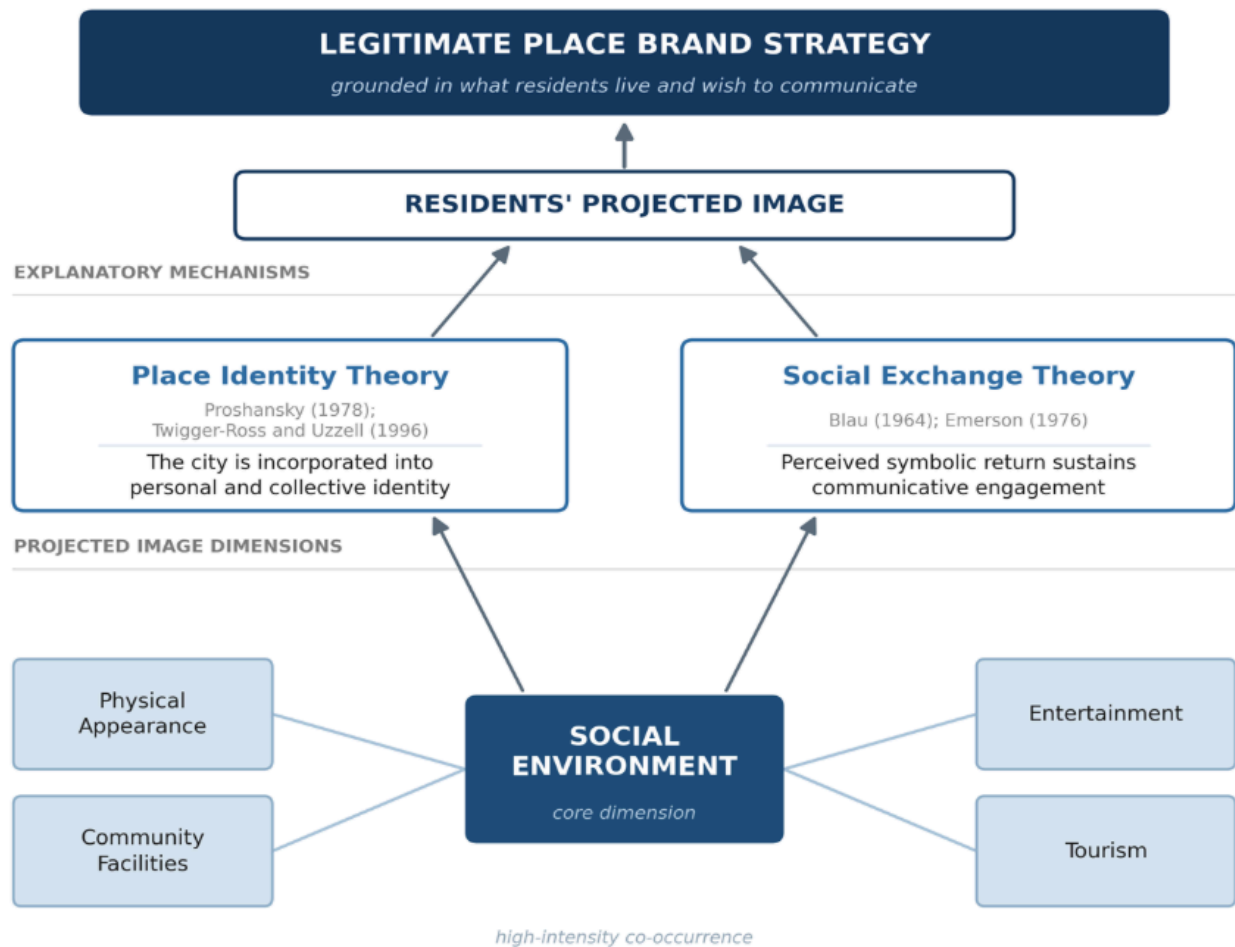
Figures



Figure 1

Heat map of co-occurrences among projected image dimensions

Source: research data (2025)



Source: elaborated by the authors.

Figure 2

Conceptual model of residents' projected image formation

Source: prepared by the authors (2026)