

## LEGITIMACY, CITY BRANDING AND MIGRATORY TRAJECTORIES: HOW NATIVES AND MIGRANTS CONSTRUCT PERCEPTIONS OF THE CITY

LEGITIMIDADE, CITY BRANDING E TRAJETÓRIAS MIGRATÓRIAS: COMO NATIVOS E  
MIGRANTES CONSTROEM PERCEPÇÕES DA CIDADE

LEGITIMIDAD, CITY BRANDING Y TRAYECTORIAS MIGRATORIAS: CÓMO NATIVOS Y  
MIGRANTES CONSTRUYEN SUS PERCEPCIONES DE LA CIUDAD

**Vinícius Eduardo Ignacio Busnello<sup>1</sup>** ([vbusnello@furb.br](mailto:vbusnello@furb.br)) 

**Fabília Durieux Zucco<sup>1</sup>** ([fabricia@furb.br](mailto:fabricia@furb.br)) 

**Christian Daniel Falaster<sup>1</sup>** ([cfalaster@furb.br](mailto:cfalaster@furb.br)) 

**Thamires Foletto Fiuza<sup>2</sup>** ([thamires.fiuza@upt.pt](mailto:thamires.fiuza@upt.pt)) 

<sup>1</sup>Universidade Regional de Blumenau, Blumenau, SC, Brasil  
<sup>2</sup>Universidade Portucalense Infante D. Henrique – UPT/Portugal

### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** - This study aims to examine how residents with different migratory trajectories, natives and migrants, construct perceptions of a mid-sized Brazilian city in the context of City Branding.

**Design/methodology/approach** - The research adopts a quantitative approach and uses secondary data from the 2024 edition of the Focus Project, comprising a sample of 4,402 residents. Urban attributes were organized into tangible and intangible dimensions, with internal consistency verification. A two-step cluster analysis was then applied to identify distinct perceptual profiles. Independent samples t-tests and ANOVA were employed to compare natives and migrants.

**Findings** - Three clusters were identified: "City Enthusiasts", "Moderately Satisfied", and "Demanding Critics". Across all clusters, migrants evaluated the city more positively than natives. The segmentation reveals that internal audiences hold heterogeneous perceptions and that the migratory condition acts as a transversal explanatory variable.

**Practical implications** - The findings provide insights for urban managers seeking to develop better-targeted City Branding strategies, highlighting the importance of recognizing resident heterogeneity and engaging different profiles to strengthen the city's attractiveness.

**Originality/value** - The study brings originality by demonstrating that the migratory experience functions as a comparative lens that broadens the perception of urban quality, contributing to the construction of place identity and the legitimacy of the city brand.

**Research limitations** - The study relies on secondary data from a specific project (Focus Project) and is restricted to one mid-sized Brazilian city, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other contexts.

**Keywords** - City Branding; Migration; Legitimacy; Place Identity; Resident Segmentation.

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## Resumo:

**Objetivo** - Este estudo tem como objetivo examinar como residentes com diferentes trajetórias migratórias, nativos e migrantes, constroem percepções sobre uma cidade média brasileira no âmbito do City Branding.

**Desenho/metodologia/abordagem** - A pesquisa tem caráter quantitativo e utiliza dados secundários da edição 2024 do Projeto Focus, com uma amostra de 4.402 residentes. Os atributos urbanos foram organizados em dimensões tangíveis e intangíveis, com verificação de consistência interna. Em seguida, aplicou-se análise de clusters em duas etapas para identificar perfis perceptivos distintos. Testes t para amostras independentes e ANOVA foram empregados para comparar nativos e migrantes.

**Resultados** - Três clusters foram identificados: "Entusiastas da Cidade", "Satisfeitos Moderados" e "Críticos Exigentes". Em todos os clusters, os migrantes avaliaram a cidade de forma mais positiva que os nativos. A segmentação demonstra que os públicos internos têm percepções heterogêneas e que a condição migratória atua como variável explicativa transversal.

**Implicações práticas** - Os achados fornecem subsídios para que gestores urbanos desenvolvam estratégias de City Branding mais bem direcionadas, considerando a heterogeneidade dos residentes e a necessidade de engajar diferentes perfis para fortalecer a atratividade da cidade.

**Originalidade/valor** - O estudo traz originalidade ao demonstrar que a experiência migratória opera como uma lente comparativa que amplia a percepção de qualidade urbana, contribuindo assim para a construção da identidade de lugar e para a legitimidade da marca da cidade.

**Limitações da pesquisa** - O estudo se apoia no uso de dados secundários de um projeto específico (Projeto Focus) e restringe-se ao contexto de uma única cidade média brasileira, o que pode limitar a generalização dos resultados para outros contextos.

**Palavras-chave:** City Branding; Migração; Legitimidade; Identidade de lugar; Segmentação de residentes.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Este estudio tiene como objetivo examinar cómo los residentes con diferentes trayectorias migratorias, tanto nativos como migrantes, construyen sus percepciones sobre una ciudad brasileña de tamaño medio en el marco del *City Branding*.

**Diseño/metodología/enfoque:** La investigación es de carácter cuantitativo y utiliza datos secundarios de la edición 2024 del Proyecto Focus, con una muestra de 4402 residentes. Los atributos urbanos se organizaron en dimensiones tangibles e intangibles, verificándose su consistencia interna. A continuación, se aplicó un análisis de clústeres en dos etapas para identificar perfiles perceptivos distintos. Se emplearon pruebas t para muestras independientes y ANOVA para comparar a los nativos y los migrantes.

**Resultados:** Se identificaron tres clústeres: "Entusiastas de la ciudad", "Satisfechos moderados" y "Críticos exigentes". En todos los clústeres, los migrantes valoraron la ciudad de forma más positiva que los nativos. La segmentación demuestra que los públicos internos tienen percepciones heterogéneas y que la condición migratoria actúa como variable explicativa transversal.

**Implicaciones prácticas:** Los resultados proporcionan información útil para que los gestores urbanos desarrollen estrategias de *City Branding* mejor orientadas, teniendo en cuenta la heterogeneidad de los residentes y la necesidad de involucrar a diferentes perfiles para reforzar el atractivo de la ciudad.

**Originalidad/valor:** El estudio aporta originalidad al demostrar que la experiencia migratoria actúa como una lente comparativa que amplía la percepción de la calidad urbana, contribuyendo así a la construcción de la identidad de lugar y a la legitimidad de la marca de la ciudad.

**Limitaciones de la investigación:** El estudio se basa en el uso de datos secundarios de un proyecto específico (Proyecto Focus) y se limita al contexto de una única ciudad brasileña de tamaño medio, lo que puede limitar la generalización de los resultados a otros contextos.

**Palabras clave:** *City Branding*; Migración; Legitimidad; Identidad de Lugar; Segmentación de Residentes.

## INTRODUCTION

City Branding has consolidated in recent decades as a strategic approach that integrates material and symbolic attributes of cities to guide both the externally projected image and the internal interpretations of residents (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Lucarelli, 2012). This perspective conceives the urban brand as an articulated arrangement between tangible dimensions, such as infrastructure, services, economy, and the environment, and intangible dimensions, such as cultural identity, local pride, and a sense of belonging (Braun et al., 2013; Kasapi & Cela, 2017). By organizing these elements into narratives that inform expectations and evaluations, City Branding positions the territory and directly influences how its inhabitants perceive and use the city (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Källström & Siljeklint, 2024).

Recent research highlights that the legitimacy of the urban brand depends on the capacity to recognize the diversity of social experiences that make up the urban environment (Henninger, 2016; Boisen et al., 2018; Gilboa & Jaffe, 2021). In contexts marked by population mobility, different life trajectories and forms of interaction with the urban space generate varied

readings of city attributes, which hinders the sustenance of homogeneous narratives (Belabas, 2023; AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2024). Migration, in this scenario, becomes a structuring element: it reorganizes social ties, introduces comparative repertoires, and redefines priorities between functional and symbolic factors (Hernández et al., 2007; Ríos & Moreno-Jiménez, 2012). Despite the relevance of the theme, much of the existing literature focuses on superdiverse cities in the Global North (Brenner & Miodownik, 2025; Desille, 2024; Del Bono, 2022; Pottie-Sherman, 2018), while the dynamics of medium-sized Latin American cities remain less explored.

Empirical evidence shows that the migratory experience conditions urban evaluations in distinct ways: natives tend to anchor perceptions in cultural memories and prolonged socialization, while migrants evaluate the city based on comparative criteria related to economic opportunities, public services, and institutional conditions (Hernández et al., 2007; Ríos & Moreno-Jiménez, 2012; Pedersen, 2018). Research on everyday integration reinforces that migrants construct multiple belongings through local and transnational networks and develop practical competencies that expand their possibilities of using the city (Ehrkamp, 2005; Buhr, 2017). Thus, length of residence and migratory status act as fundamental interpretive axes for both tangible perceptions and symbolic interpretations (Govers & Go, 2016; Jokela, 2020; Zhang & Loo, 2021; Pasquinelli et al., 2022).

Blumenau, a medium-sized city in southern Brazil, offers an opportune case to examine these dynamics. The municipality combines strong symbolic capital linked to Germanic immigration and traditional festivities, while at the same time attracting new residents in search of institutional stability, quality of life, and economic opportunities (Barros, 2023). This composition brings together groups with distinct evaluative repertoires: natives, whose reading of the city tends to be historically rooted, and migrants, who mobilize comparisons based on previous experiences. The literature indicates that engagement with the urban brand depends on the consistency between institutional discourse and residents' everyday experiences (Merrilees et al., 2009; Insch, 2011; Zenker et al., 2017), and that misalignments can generate symbolic distancing or perceptions of inauthenticity (Jokela, 2020; Pasquinelli et al., 2022; Belabas, 2023).

In this context, understanding how different resident profiles evaluate tangible and intangible attributes becomes essential for analyzing the internal legitimacy of City Branding. The segmentation literature demonstrates that residents organize themselves into clusters with distinct levels of attachment, loyalty, and perception of the urban image, frequently influenced by length of residence, migratory trajectories, and life cycle stages (Gilboa & Jaffe, 2021; Schade et al., 2018; Kato et al., 2024; Pedersen, 2018). These profiles directly affect the balance between external reputation and internal loyalty, requiring strategies that address diverse audiences (Hussein, 2020; Ma et al., 2020; Kowaas et al., 2023; Pottie-Sherman, 2018). However, analyses that integrate statistical segmentation and comparisons between natives and migrants in medium-sized cities of the Global South remain scarce.

Therefore, this article aims to analyze how migratory experience structures different profiles of perception regarding the tangible and intangible attributes of Blumenau's City Branding.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### CITY BRANDING IN CONTEXTS OF URBAN PLURALITY

City Branding has been understood, in the last two decades, as a strategy to position cities in competitive environments, articulating material and symbolic attributes to construct a distinctive urban identity (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). This approach, however, is not limited to communication directed at external audiences; its legitimacy depends on how the brand is appropriated, confirmed, or contested by the residents themselves. Insch (2011) emphasizes that residents' involvement is central for the city to be perceived as a desirable place to live, invest, or visit, shifting the focus from an exclusively promotional logic to a relational perspective between the brand and everyday life.

Recent studies reinforce that the urban brand is constantly reinterpreted in contexts of social diversity. Tsavdaroglou and Kaika (2022) show that the legitimacy of City Branding is conditioned by the capacity to engage with multiple social positions and urban experiences. Feng, Berndt, and Ots (2023), analyzing Wuhan during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrate how residents reconfigured the city's image by converting tangible experiences, such as health services, mobility, and security, into symbolic values, such as resilience and solidarity. These findings indicate that urban perception is plural and strongly shaped by situated experiences, rather than by a single official discourse.

Heterogeneous interpretations also emerge in consolidated tourist contexts. Compte-Pujol, de San Eugenio-Vela, and Fri-

gola-Reig (2018), in their study of Barcelona, show that residents attribute distinct meanings to the city based on lifestyles and social trajectories, revealing a mosaic of circulating identities. Complementarily, Källström and Siljeklint (2024) explore internal stakeholders' perceptions and identify paradoxes and tensions in how different actors understand the urban brand. Together, these studies reinforce that city identity cannot be reduced to a cohesive narrative and must reflect the coexistence of multiple perspectives.

This view is consistent with Govers and Go's (2016) discussion of place identities as constructions continuously negotiated by residents, resulting in varied interpretations of what the city "is" and "represents." Pasquinelli et al. (2022), analyzing the pandemic crisis, show that resilient cities were those capable of adjusting their brand attributes to incorporate new urban narratives rather than insisting on static and homogeneous images. The brand is, therefore, less a "label" and more a dynamic process of translating experiences.

In contexts of urban restructuring, however, the articulation between diversity and competitiveness tends to be mediated by an economic grammar. Paganoni (2012) argues that institutional initiatives frequently link inclusion and diversity to development goals, relegating recognition agendas to secondary positions within the brand. Pottie-Sherman (2018), investigating cities in the North American Rust Belt, shows how developmental-inclusive coalitions rebrand territories as immigrant-friendly, connecting welcoming narratives to projects and funding oriented toward economic results. These findings indicate that, beyond rhetoric, the legitimacy of City Branding depends on the alignment between place communication and place offerings effectively directed at diverse audiences (Paganoni, 2012; Pottie-Sherman, 2018).

In medium-sized Brazilian cities, such as Blumenau, this challenge intensifies. The history of immigration and the presence of new migratory flows create a context in which cultural identity, public services, and economic opportunities are evaluated differently by resident segments. Boisen et al. (2018) warn that fragmentation between official discourses and residents' perceptions can compromise brand legitimacy when social plurality is not substantively recognized. In this study, this literature serves as the starting point for conceiving City Branding as an arrangement of tangible and intangible factors whose legitimacy is tested through the evaluations of different resident groups, particularly natives and migrants.

## THE MIGRATORY FACTOR AS A CENTRAL VARIABLE IN BRAND PERCEPTION

Population mobility has transformed the social composition of contemporary cities, making the migratory factor a central variable for understanding the legitimacy of City Branding (Li, 2025). In migratory contexts, accumulated experiences across different places and personal histories of displacement act as filters that guide the evaluation of both functional attributes and symbolic dimensions of the city. Mišič and Podnar (2019) show that perceptions of community (people) and physical evidence (infrastructure) are decisive for residents' identification with place, suggesting that urban attachment is constructed at the intersection of social interactions and environmental quality.

Migratory dynamics, however, evolve over time. De Haas (2010) argues that endogenous and contextual mechanisms can reinforce, weaken, or reverse migratory flows and perceptions associated with destinations. Economic conditions, social networks, and accumulated urban experiences help explain why migrant groups at different stages of the migratory cycle evaluate the city differently. This perspective positions urban perception as the outcome of trajectories rather than isolated situations.

Empirical studies confirm that different audiences prioritize urban attributes in distinct ways. Qiu (2023), analyzing Guangzhou, shows that intangible heritage is valued differently by domestic and foreign tourists, suggesting that cultural origin and personal trajectory influence which aspects of place identity are prioritized. Desille (2024), studying intercultural heritage in Portugal, demonstrates that urban brands must incorporate dialogues of diversity to achieve community acceptance. These results indicate that audiences with distinct histories, such as newly arrived migrants and long-term residents, tend to attribute different weights to functional, cultural, and symbolic attributes.

Del Bono (2022), in an ethnographic study of Prato (Italy), shows that City Branding strategies that frame migrant communities within narratives of creativity and innovation can generate tensions between symbolic visibility and experiences of exclusion. Integration of migrant audiences, therefore, depends not only on welcoming discourses but also on material policies, services, and the recognition of cultural practices and spaces of sociability that structure urban life. Brenner and Miodownik (2025) reinforce that the presence of migrants can strengthen or weaken urban reputation, depending on how this diversity is integrated into the city's identity.

The comparative dimension is particularly relevant. Gilboa and Jaffe (2021), studying populations in Israel, show that involvement with the city varies according to levels of attachment and involvement, generating segments with markedly different perceptions of image and loyalty. In cities seeking to attract immigrants for economic reasons, Clements (2023) argues that positioning strategies must emphasize employment opportunities and affordable costs of living, reinforcing the importance of functional attributes in migration decisions. Pedersen (2018) highlights that educational, occupational, and family transitions reconfigure expectations about what constitutes a “good place to live,” altering the hierarchy of valued attributes and, consequently, place attachment.

Transnational practices and the creation of local community spaces, such as religious centers, associations, ethnic businesses, and social networks, produce bonds and senses of belonging that coexist with references to the country of origin, influencing how migrants read and use the city (Ehrkamp, 2005). These processes help to explain why recent arrivals tend to prioritize functional and comparative attributes when evaluating the city, while natives rely more on memories, inherited identities, and local cultural references (Hernández et al., 2007; Ríos & Moreno-Jiménez, 2012).

At the same time, attributes such as social ties and entrepreneurial creativity contribute to positive attitudes toward the city (Merrilees et al., 2009). Yet in contexts of superdiversity, lived experience is not always reflected in the official brand, generating dissonances that may fuel frustration and feelings of exclusion (Belabas, 2023). Jokela (2020) argues that social plurality requires flexible brand narratives, treating branding as urban policy intertwined with different contexts and ideologies rather than a static communicational product.

Within this framework, the migratory experience can be understood as an interpretive lens: while natives tend to view the city through the perspective of memory and symbolic belonging, migrants evaluate it based on comparative and functional parameters (Ríos & Moreno-Jiménez, 2012). For non-natives, the change of residence immediately affects attachment, whereas identity with the new place is incorporated gradually in a long process of interaction (Hernández et al., 2007). This structural difference must be incorporated into City Branding analyses (Govers & Go, 2016). For the urban brand to be perceived as legitimate in contexts of social diversity, it must reflect the interests of different groups (Zhang & Loo, 2021), understanding place identity as a continuous process of construction and dialogue among urban actors (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

The temporal dimension acts as an evolutionary axis in the consolidation of these perceptions. Initially, arrival in a new location stimulates evaluations based on functional, comparative, and tangible criteria, such as access to services and employment opportunities, central elements in strategies to attract residents (Schade et al., 2018; Clements, 2023). But over time, this pragmatic perception tends to shift. Rootedness in the urban space and continuous engagement in community practices allow migrants to convert the everyday use of infrastructure into intangible bonds of identity and multiple belonging (Ehrkamp, 2005; Hernández et al., 2007). As Ríos and Moreno-Jiménez (2012) demonstrate, disparities in place identification between natives and migrants progressively diminish after the initial years of residence, evidencing that the perception of the city brand is not static, but matures throughout the individual’s cycle of integration into the territory.

In this study, this literature supports the proposition that migratory status (native vs. migrant) and length of residence in Blumenau are structuring variables of perceptions regarding tangible and intangible factors of City Branding, directly influencing the internal legitimacy of the urban brand.

## FROM PERCEPTION TO SEGMENTATION: RESIDENT CLUSTERS

The heterogeneity of urban perceptions indicates that residents do not form a homogeneous block, but are distributed into profiles that attribute distinct meanings to the same place (Pedersen, 2018). In this context, the term cluster refers to statistical groupings of individuals who share high internal similarity in attitudes and evaluations, while remaining substantially distinct from other groups (Hair Jr et al., 2014; Malhotra, 2019). City Branding research employs cluster analysis to map this empirical diversity, enabling precise observation of how the city brand is appropriated by different internal audience segments (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009). Thus, segmentation acknowledges that the city brand must dialogue with different target audiences, both internal and external (Stigel & Frimann, 2006), transforming internal differences into strategic inputs for management (Gilboa & Jaffe, 2021).

For practical application purposes, Schade et al. (2018) show that symbolic benefits associated with the congruity between self-concept and the city brand are robust predictors of favorable attitudes among potential skilled residents, while purely functional factors do not always discriminate groups. In terms of management, this indicates that clusters can be delineated by sociodemographic characteristics and by patterns of identity congruity with the urban brand.

Empirical evidence reinforces the utility of segmentation. Gilboa and Jaffe (2021), in a study of residents of Israeli cities, identify four segments based on place attachment and involvement, ranging from highly loyal groups ("Bonded") to distanced profiles ("Disengaged"), with different image evaluations. Källström and Ripoll González (2025) indicate that place involvement and attachment shape segments with differentiated levels of loyalty and perception of the city's image. Herezniaik and Anders-Morawska (2015) argue that, given this heterogeneity, urban managers need to formulate and implement specific strategies for distinct segments, recognizing that a single brand narrative cannot cater to all audiences.

The temporal dimension consistently appears as an explanatory variable for these profiles. Although moving to a new location has immediate effects on the urban experience, identity with the place only consolidates after prolonged interaction and the production of belonging (Ehrkamp, 2005). Ríos and Moreno-Jiménez (2012) observe that natives tend to exhibit higher levels of place identity than immigrants, although this difference diminishes after approximately five years of residence. Conversely, research on resident attraction shows that newcomers prioritize pragmatic criteria, such as employment opportunities (Schade et al., 2018), in contexts where branding strategies often privilege economic development over social cohesion, relegating diversity to the background (Ma et al., 2020).

Segmentation also reveals tensions inherent to the branding process itself. Kato, Ikeda, and Koizumi (2024), in a study of residents across 21 Japanese cities, show that there can be a negative relationship between an outwardly oriented brand image and internal loyalty, suggesting that positioning campaigns can produce undesired side effects among residents. Hussein (2020) points out that the likelihood of remaining in the city is directly linked to place attachment and self-congruity, that is, perceived compatibility between the urban image and personal identity. In contexts of austerity and interurban competition, Pottie-Sherman (2018) demonstrates that immigrant-friendly messages are mobilized on multiple scales to attract resources and reposition cities, reinforcing the need to calibrate brand promises to internal segments to avoid dissonances between external image and resident loyalty.

Overall, the literature indicates that segmentation techniques allow the identification of structural patterns of perception (Gilboa & Jaffe, 2021), frequently associated with length of residence and migratory status (Ríos & Moreno-Jiménez, 2012), with direct implications for City Branding. In this article, this perspective underpins the use of cluster analysis to identify resident profiles in Blumenau based on evaluations of tangible and intangible factors, and to examine how the migratory experience is distributed across these profiles. An urban brand strategy sensitive to social plurality requires this type of segmented reading, as managers must decide whether to prioritize external image or internal loyalty, aware that investing exclusively in one of these dimensions may generate unintended consequences in the other (Kato et al., 2024).

## METHOD

The study adopts a quantitative, descriptive-analytical approach, appropriate for measuring perceptions and comparing resident groups. The design enables observation of population characteristics without manipulating variables, producing a structured portrait of the phenomenon in its context (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Malhotra, 2019).

The methodological strategy combines the construction of composite indices with segmentation and multigroup comparison techniques. Operationally, the study: (i) synthesizes dimensions of perception about the city; (ii) identifies resident groups with similar evaluation profiles; and (iii) compares natives and migrants within and across these groups. This combination is consistent with recommendations for the use of empirical segmentation in City Branding research with population samples (Gilboa & Jaffe, 2021; Hair et al., 2014; Richardson et al., 2017).

## CONTEXT, SAMPLE, AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The research uses secondary data from the Focus Project – Image of Blumenau from a Local Perspective (2024) (Projeto Focus – Imagem de Blumenau na Perspectiva Local), a public opinion survey conducted by the Regional University of Blumenau (FURB) in partnership with the City Hall and the State Government of Santa Catarina.

The database is composed of 4,402 valid interviews with residents of Blumenau, aged 18 or older, conducted between November 9 and December 2, 2024. The sampling was stratified, with sociodemographic parameters derived from IBGE (2022) data, ensuring representativeness by age, gender, length of residence, and residential region.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire with closed items evaluated on a five-point Likert scale, enabling statistical treatment of perceptions and the construction of indices for subsequent analyses (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Malhotra, 2019). The instrument was applied by a trained team from the Focus Project, following a standardized script for approach, reading of questions, and electronic recording of responses.

For this article, the analytical scope includes only Blumenau residents and focuses on the variables of perception of the city and the sociodemographic and migratory variables required for segmentation (birthplace status and length of residence).

## MEASURES: TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE FACTORS AND MIGRATORY STATUS

The perception variables were organized into two major conceptual blocks consistent with the City Branding literature: tangible factors and intangible factors.

Tangible factors encompass functional dimensions associated with territorial attractiveness and objective living conditions, including economy, industry, and employment opportunities; public services (health, education, transport, security); environment, nature, and sustainability; leisure and entertainment; innovation and technology. These dimensions align with studies that highlight the role of functional attributes in city satisfaction and the resident-place relationship (Insch, 2011; Kasapi & Cela, 2017; Merrilees et al., 2009; Mišič & Podnar, 2019).

Intangible factors capture symbolic dimensions of the resident-city relationship, including: historical heritage and cultural identity; culture, events, and quality of life; perceptions of governance, politics, and public well-being; elements of belonging, pride, and community cohesion. These dimensions reflect approaches that treat City Branding as a cultural and relational process, in which urban narratives, place identity, and the everyday experience of residents are combined (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Braun et al., 2013; Govers & Go, 2016; Boisen et al., 2018).

In the Focus Project database, perception items were grouped into these theoretical dimensions to form indicators, enabling data structuring and generating synthetic indices for each dimension, organizing the items coherently with the tangible/intangible model (Hair et al., 2014). The internal reliability of these dimensions was evaluated and confirmed using Cronbach's alpha.

Structuring variables included migratory status (native vs. migrant); and length of residence, categorized into brackets that express the duration of territorial attachment. These variables are treated as theoretical determinants of urban perceptions (Hernández et al., 2007; Ríos & Moreno-Jiménez, 2012) and enable examination of how the migratory experience articulates with the identified evaluation profiles.

## ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The analyses consisted of four steps. First, descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) were produced to characterize sociodemographic profile, migratory status, and length of residence (Hair et al., 2014; Malhotra, 2019).

Next, perception items were aggregated into composite indices representing the dimensions of tangible and intangible attributes. The internal consistency of each dimension was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, ensuring that the grouped items reliably measured the same concept (Hair et al., 2014). This procedure produced the mean scores for each dimension.

In the third step, these scores were entered into a Two-Step Cluster Analysis, enabling the classification of respondents and the segmentation of residents according to evaluation patterns consistent with the City Branding literature (Gilboa & Jaffe, 2021; Schade et al., 2018; Kato, Ikeda, & Koizumi, 2024). A three-cluster solution was selected for reasons of parsimony and interpretability, and the resulting clusters were subsequently characterized based on their dimensional means and sociodemographic composition.

Finally, independent samples t-tests and ANOVA were performed to compare natives and migrants across the tangible and intangible dimensions, both for the total sample and within each cluster. These tests assessed whether migratory status operates as a transversal axis within the identified typologies (Hair et al., 2014). This analytical strategy enabled the articulation of (i) the internal profiles of residents and (ii) the differences between natives and migrants within these profiles, highlighting the role of migratory experience in shaping interpretations of Blumenau's urban brand.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This study draws on anonymized secondary data from the Focus Project, produced under institutional protocols of confidentiality and research ethics, with no direct contact with participants or access to identifiable information.

It is acknowledged that the cross-sectional design limits inferences about changes over time and that perceptual measures may be subject to self-report biases. These limitations are mitigated by the size and representativeness of the sample, the theoretical consistency of the constructs, and the analytical emphasis on comparing groups and identifying perception profiles. Together, these elements establish a consistent methodological context for interpreting resident segmentation and the differences between natives and migrants in evaluating the city.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

GENERAL SYNTHESIS OF THE CLUSTER SOLUTION

In this section, the results are interpreted in light of the literature on city branding, migration, and place attachment, focusing on three axes: (i) the cluster pattern, (ii) the differences between natives and migrants, and (iii) the implications for the legitimacy of the urban brand.

The three-cluster solution, derived from the mean scores of tangible and intangible attributes, demonstrates that Blumenau's residents do not constitute a homogeneous group, but are distributed across distinct profiles of urban perception. This result is consistent with studies that emphasize the plurality of internal perceptions of the urban brand and the contested nature of place identity (Insch, 2011; Compte-Pujol et al., 2018; Källström & Siljeklint, 2024).

Table 1: Cluster Distribution

| Cases per Cluster |   |       | %   |
|-------------------|---|-------|-----|
| Cluster           | 1 | 1.728 | 39% |
|                   | 2 | 2.001 | 45% |
|                   | 3 | 673   | 15% |
| Valid             |   | 4.402 |     |
| Missing data      |   | 0     |     |

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2025).

As summarized in Table 1, Cluster 1 comprises approximately 39% of the sample, Cluster 2 around 45%, and Cluster 3 around 15% of the cases. Although the three groups present relatively high means across all analyzed dimensions (Table 2), a clear gradient emerges: Cluster 2 concentrates the most positive evaluations, Cluster 3 presents, in general, the lowest means, and Cluster 1 occupies an intermediate position. This pattern is particularly evident in Public Services; Governance, Politics, and Public Well-being; Economy; and Leisure, dimensions in which Cluster 2 systematically outperforms the others, while Cluster 3 tends to register lower values.

This empirical design aligns with the segmentation studies in city branding, which identify resident groups with varying levels of involvement, loyalty, and city evaluation, ranging from highly engaged segments to more distanced or critical ones (Gilboa & Jaffe, 2021; Schade et al., 2018; Kato et al., 2024). In the case of Blumenau, the three-cluster solution suggests gradations of evaluative intensity, rather than a dichotomy between overtly positive and negative perceptions. This reinforces the importance of approaches that treat the internal audience in a segmented manner, rather than as an abstract "average resident."

NAMING AND CHARACTERIZATION OF THE CLUSTERS

Given the pattern of means per dimension (Table 2), it is possible to propose a substantive interpretation for each cluster, ensuring coherence with the data and the theoretical framework used.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

| Dimensions                                      | Clusters | Mean | Std. Deviation | 95% Confidence Interval |       |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------|------|----------------|-------------------------|-------|
|                                                 |          |      |                | Lower                   | Upper |
| Economy, Industry, and Employment Opportunities | 1        | 4,18 | 0,68           | 4,15                    | 4,22  |
|                                                 | 2        | 4,23 | 0,64           | 4,21                    | 4,26  |
|                                                 | 3        | 4,17 | 0,70           | 4,12                    | 4,22  |
|                                                 | Total    | 4,20 | 0,67           | 4,18                    | 4,22  |
| Environment, Nature, and Sustainability         | 1        | 4,97 | 1,13           | 4,92                    | 5,03  |
|                                                 | 2        | 5,01 | 1,11           | 4,96                    | 5,06  |
|                                                 | 3        | 5,00 | 1,14           | 4,91                    | 5,08  |
|                                                 | Total    | 4,99 | 1,12           | 4,96                    | 5,03  |
| Public Services                                 | 1        | 5,33 | 1,30           | 5,26                    | 5,39  |
|                                                 | 2        | 5,39 | 1,24           | 5,34                    | 5,45  |
|                                                 | 3        | 5,27 | 1,28           | 5,18                    | 5,37  |
|                                                 | Total    | 5,35 | 1,27           | 5,31                    | 5,38  |
| Leisure and Entertainment                       | 1        | 4,01 | 0,90           | 3,97                    | 4,05  |
|                                                 | 2        | 4,04 | 0,88           | 4,00                    | 4,07  |
|                                                 | 3        | 4,00 | 0,88           | 3,93                    | 4,07  |
|                                                 | Total    | 4,02 | 0,89           | 3,99                    | 4,05  |
| Innovation and Technology                       | 1        | 3,53 | 0,69           | 3,50                    | 3,57  |
|                                                 | 2        | 3,58 | 0,69           | 3,55                    | 3,61  |
|                                                 | 3        | 3,55 | 0,70           | 3,49                    | 3,60  |
|                                                 | Total    | 3,56 | 0,69           | 3,54                    | 3,58  |
| Historical Heritage and Cultural Identity       | 1        | 3,58 | 0,67           | 3,54                    | 3,61  |
|                                                 | 2        | 3,59 | 0,66           | 3,56                    | 3,62  |
|                                                 | 3        | 3,60 | 0,67           | 3,55                    | 3,65  |
|                                                 | Total    | 3,59 | 0,67           | 3,57                    | 3,61  |
| Governance, Politics, and Public Well-being     | 1        | 5,96 | 1,52           | 5,89                    | 6,03  |
|                                                 | 2        | 6,00 | 1,47           | 5,93                    | 6,06  |
|                                                 | 3        | 5,92 | 1,50           | 5,80                    | 6,03  |
|                                                 | Total    | 5,97 | 1,49           | 5,93                    | 6,02  |
| Culture, Events, and Quality of Life            | 1        | 4,47 | 0,80           | 4,43                    | 4,51  |
|                                                 | 2        | 4,51 | 0,78           | 4,47                    | 4,54  |
|                                                 | 3        | 4,49 | 0,81           | 4,43                    | 4,55  |
|                                                 | Total    | 4,49 | 0,79           | 4,47                    | 4,51  |

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2025).

Cluster 2 – “City Enthusiasts”. Cluster 2 gathers the largest number of respondents and consistently presents the highest means across all the evaluated dimensions, with particularly strong scores in Economy, Industry, and Employment Opportunities; Public Services; Governance, Politics, and Public Well-being; and Culture, Events, and Quality of Life. This profile closely resembles the segments of residents with strong identification and loyalty to the city, sometimes described as “bonded residents” (Gilboa and Jaffe, 2021), as well as groups in which symbolic and functional benefits of the urban brand are mutually reinforcing and aligned (Merrilees et al., 2009; Schade et al., 2018).

Cluster 1 – “Moderate Satisfied”. Cluster 1 presents slightly lower means than Cluster 2, yet still at positive levels in all dimensions. This group recognizes Blumenau’s qualities but expresses a more moderate level of enthusiasm, suggesting a positive, though less expansive bond with the city. This profile aligns with residents who perceive the city as a good place to live but do not translate this perception into strong engagement with the urban brand. In the literature, this corresponds to intermediate levels of place attachment and self-congruity, where identification with the city exists but is not deeply internalised (Mišić & Podnar, 2019; Strandberg, 2023).

Cluster 3 – “Demanding Critics”. Cluster 3 concentrates the lowest relative means in several dimensions, most notably Public Services, Leisure and Entertainment, and Governance, Politics, and Public Well-being, although the evaluations are not overtly negative. The pattern suggests a group that acknowledges positive attributes but is more sensitive to perceived flaws in service provision and institutional performance. This profile approaches segments described as more distanced or skeptical toward official brand narratives (Belabas, 2023; Kato et al., 2024).

The presence of this cluster reinforces the argument that city branding strategies may generate side effects when external communication does not fully correspond to the everyday experiences of residents (Paganoni, 2012; Pottie-Sherman, 2018).

The naming of the clusters does not aim to crystallize fixed identities, but rather to provide an interpretive lens consistent with the empirical segmentation and the literature that highlights gradations of loyalty, attachment, and satisfaction with the city (Gilboa & Jaffe, 2021; Pedersen, 2018).

## EVALUATION PATTERNS OF TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE FACTORS

Regarding the ranking of dimensions, the results show that Public Services and, above all, Governance, Politics, and Public Well-being are among the factors with the highest means in the overall sample, while Innovation and Technology and Historical Heritage and Cultural Identity present relatively lower means. This pattern is reproduced, with slight variations, across the three clusters.

The predominance of positive evaluations in functional factors, such as services, security, health, and education, is consistent with the literature highlighting the importance of tangible attributes in city satisfaction and resident bonding, especially in contexts where infrastructure and public policies form the basis of the “contract” between residents and urban management (Insch, 2011; Mišič & Podnar, 2019; Feng et al., 2023). At the same time, the relatively lower position of Innovation and Technology suggests that, for part of the residents, this axis has not yet become a central component of Blumenau’s everyday image. This finding is consistent with studies noting the challenges medium-sized cities face in establishing themselves as innovation hubs widely recognized by the population (Ma et al., 2020; Rinaldi et al., 2021).

In the intangible domain, Culture, Events, and Quality of Life present intermediate means, while Historical Heritage and Cultural Identity occupy a slightly lower, albeit still positive, position. Given Blumenau’s strong symbolic capital associated with immigration and traditional festivals, this result is noteworthy: it indicates that, although culture and events are perceived as important components of quality of life, the patrimonial and identity dimension is not evaluated as highly as might be expected in a narrative centred on the “city of Germanic heritage”. This finding aligns with studies showing that intangible and intercultural heritage is appropriated differently by distinct groups, and that the folklorization of traditions does not always produce a deep sense of recognition among all residents (Qiu, 2023; Desille, 2024).

Taken together, the combination of high evaluations in functional factors and more moderate values in identity-related dimensions confirms Govers and Go’s (2016) thesis that place identity is constructed at the intersection of material and symbolic attributes. It also reinforces Boisen et al.’s (2018) caution regarding the limits of homogeneous identity narratives in socially diverse contexts.

## MIGRATORY STATUS AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NATIVES AND MIGRANTS

The comparison between natives and migrants, summarized in Tables 3 and 4, reveals a consistent pattern: across all analyzed dimensions, migrants evaluate the city more positively than natives, both in the overall sample and within each cluster. The mean differences are statistically significant for all factors ( $p < 0.001$ ), with particularly notable differences in Public Services; Environment, Nature, and Sustainability; and Governance, Politics, and Public Well-being.

Table 3: Comparison of natives and non-natives in cluster formation

| Dimensions                                      | Cluster | Were you born in Blumenau? | Mean | Std. Deviation | N    |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------|----------------------------|------|----------------|------|
| Economy, Industry, and Employment Opportunities | 1       | 0                          | 4,28 | 0,72           | 737  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 4,11 | 0,65           | 991  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 4,18 | 0,68           | 1728 |
|                                                 | 2       | 0                          | 4,32 | 0,66           | 757  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 4,18 | 0,63           | 1244 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 4,23 | 0,64           | 2001 |
|                                                 | 3       | 0                          | 4,26 | 0,69           | 289  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 4,10 | 0,70           | 384  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 4,17 | 0,70           | 673  |
|                                                 | Total   | 0                          | 4,29 | 0,69           | 1783 |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 4,14 | 0,65           | 2619 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 4,20 | 0,67           | 4402 |
| Culture, Events, and Quality of Life            | 1       | 0                          | 4,59 | 0,86           | 737  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 4,38 | 0,74           | 991  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 4,47 | 0,80           | 1728 |
|                                                 | 2       | 0                          | 4,64 | 0,75           | 757  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 4,43 | 0,79           | 1244 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 4,51 | 0,78           | 2001 |
|                                                 | 3       | 0                          | 4,61 | 0,84           | 289  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 4,40 | 0,78           | 384  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 4,49 | 0,81           | 673  |
|                                                 | Total   | 0                          | 4,61 | 0,81           | 1783 |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 4,40 | 0,77           | 2619 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 4,49 | 0,79           | 4402 |
| Environment, Nature, and Sustainability         | 1       | 0                          | 5,16 | 1,21           | 737  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 4,83 | 1,05           | 991  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 4,97 | 1,13           | 1728 |
|                                                 | 2       | 0                          | 5,19 | 1,16           | 757  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 4,91 | 1,07           | 1244 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 5,01 | 1,11           | 2001 |
|                                                 | 3       | 0                          | 5,17 | 1,15           | 289  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 4,87 | 1,11           | 384  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 5,00 | 1,14           | 673  |
|                                                 | Total   | 0                          | 5,17 | 1,18           | 1783 |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 4,87 | 1,07           | 2619 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 4,99 | 1,12           | 4402 |
| Public Services                                 | 1       | 0                          | 5,59 | 1,37           | 737  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 5,13 | 1,22           | 991  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 5,33 | 1,30           | 1728 |
|                                                 | 2       | 0                          | 5,65 | 1,24           | 757  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 5,23 | 1,20           | 1244 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 5,39 | 1,24           | 2001 |
|                                                 | 3       | 0                          | 5,57 | 1,27           | 289  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 5,05 | 1,24           | 384  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 5,27 | 1,28           | 673  |
|                                                 | Total   | 0                          | 5,61 | 1,30           | 1783 |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 5,17 | 1,22           | 2619 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 5,35 | 1,27           | 4402 |
| Leisure and Entertainment                       | 1       | 0                          | 4,15 | 0,92           | 737  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 3,91 | 0,87           | 991  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 4,01 | 0,90           | 1728 |
|                                                 | 2       | 0                          | 4,16 | 0,86           | 757  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 3,96 | 0,87           | 1244 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 4,04 | 0,88           | 2001 |
|                                                 | 3       | 0                          | 4,14 | 0,89           | 289  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 3,89 | 0,87           | 384  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 4,00 | 0,88           | 673  |
|                                                 | Total   | 0                          | 4,15 | 0,89           | 1783 |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 3,93 | 0,87           | 2619 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 4,02 | 0,89           | 4402 |
| Innovation and Technology                       | 1       | 0                          | 3,65 | 0,72           | 737  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 3,45 | 0,66           | 991  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 3,53 | 0,69           | 1728 |
|                                                 | 2       | 0                          | 3,68 | 0,70           | 757  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 3,52 | 0,68           | 1244 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 3,58 | 0,69           | 2001 |
|                                                 | 3       | 0                          | 3,66 | 0,70           | 289  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 3,46 | 0,69           | 384  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 3,55 | 0,70           | 673  |
|                                                 | Total   | 0                          | 3,66 | 0,71           | 1783 |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 3,48 | 0,67           | 2619 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 3,56 | 0,69           | 4402 |
| Historical Heritage and Cultural Identity       | 1       | 0                          | 3,68 | 0,71           | 737  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 3,49 | 0,63           | 991  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 3,58 | 0,67           | 1728 |
|                                                 | 2       | 0                          | 3,71 | 0,65           | 757  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 3,53 | 0,66           | 1244 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 3,69 | 0,66           | 2001 |
|                                                 | 3       | 0                          | 3,71 | 0,65           | 289  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 3,52 | 0,67           | 384  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 3,60 | 0,67           | 673  |
|                                                 | Total   | 0                          | 3,70 | 0,67           | 1783 |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 3,51 | 0,65           | 2619 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 3,59 | 0,67           | 4402 |
| Governance, Politics. and Public Well-being     | 1       | 0                          | 6,31 | 1,59           | 737  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 5,70 | 1,41           | 991  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 5,96 | 1,52           | 1728 |
|                                                 | 2       | 0                          | 6,30 | 1,49           | 757  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 5,82 | 1,43           | 1244 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 6,00 | 1,47           | 2001 |
|                                                 | 3       | 0                          | 6,19 | 1,53           | 289  |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 5,71 | 1,45           | 384  |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 5,92 | 1,50           | 673  |
|                                                 | Total   | 0                          | 6,28 | 1,54           | 1783 |
|                                                 |         | 1                          | 5,76 | 1,42           | 2619 |
|                                                 |         | Total                      | 5,97 | 1,49           | 4402 |

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2025).

This result is consistent with the literature on place attachment and identity. Hernández et al. (2007) argue that, for non-natives, the construction of identity with the new place is gradual, but attachment can be immediately influenced by comparison with previous contexts. Ríos and Moreno-Jiménez (2012) show that migrants tend to evaluate the city based on functional criteria such as economic opportunities, infrastructure, and housing conditions, which strongly shape residential satisfaction. In the case of Blumenau, the fact that migrants assign higher scores to tangible and institutional factors suggests that the city is perceived as relatively advantageous when contrasted with previous experiences, reinforcing the comparative dimension highlighted by Clements (2023) and Li (2025) in studies on migration oriented by economic opportunities and urban quality of life.

**Table 4: Independent samples test natives vs. non-natives**

| Levene's Test                                   |        |       | t-test for Equality of Means |          |                  |                 |                       |                                           |       |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------|-------|------------------------------|----------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------|
| Dimensions                                      | F      | Sig.  | t                            | df       | Sig. (2- tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference |       |
|                                                 |        |       |                              |          |                  |                 |                       | Lower                                     | Upper |
| Economy, Industry, and Employment Opportunities | 2,171  | 0,141 | 7,385                        | 4400     | 0                | 0,151           | 0,02                  | 0,111                                     | 0,191 |
|                                                 |        |       | 7,294                        | 3657,011 | 0                | 0,151           | 0,021                 | 0,11                                      | 0,191 |
| Culture, Events, and Quality of Life            | 2,343  | 0,126 | 8,715                        | 4400     | 0                | 0,21            | 0,024                 | 0,163                                     | 0,257 |
|                                                 |        |       | 8,621                        | 3679,446 | 0                | 0,21            | 0,024                 | 0,162                                     | 0,258 |
| Environment, Nature, and Sustainability         | 19,418 | 0     | 8,817                        | 4400     | 0                | 0,301           | 0,034                 | 0,234                                     | 0,368 |
|                                                 |        |       | 8,661                        | 3582,044 | 0                | 0,301           | 0,035                 | 0,233                                     | 0,37  |
| Public Services                                 | 7,211  | 0,007 | 11,53                        | 4400     | 0                | 0,443           | 0,038                 | 0,368                                     | 0,518 |
|                                                 |        |       | 11,386                       | 3655,925 | 0                | 0,443           | 0,039                 | 0,367                                     | 0,519 |
| Leisure and Entertainment                       | 1,012  | 0,314 | 8,27                         | 4400     | 0                | 0,223           | 0,027                 | 0,17                                      | 0,276 |
|                                                 |        |       | 8,242                        | 3780,666 | 0                | 0,223           | 0,027                 | 0,17                                      | 0,276 |
| Innovation and Technology                       | 0,528  | 0,468 | 8,393                        | 4400     | 0                | 0,177           | 0,021                 | 0,136                                     | 0,219 |
|                                                 |        |       | 8,313                        | 3697,545 | 0                | 0,177           | 0,021                 | 0,136                                     | 0,219 |
| Historical Heritage and Cultural Identity       | 0,012  | 0,913 | 9,04                         | 4400     | 0                | 0,183           | 0,02                  | 0,144                                     | 0,223 |
|                                                 |        |       | 8,985                        | 3744,969 | 0                | 0,183           | 0,02                  | 0,143                                     | 0,224 |
| Governance, Politics, and Public Well-being     | 14,105 | 0     | 11,581                       | 4400     | 0                | 0,523           | 0,045                 | 0,435                                     | 0,612 |
|                                                 |        |       | 11,409                       | 3622,492 | 0                | 0,523           | 0,046                 | 0,433                                     | 0,613 |

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2025). Equal variances assumed in the first row of each test and not assumed in the second.

The distribution of migrants among the three clusters is relatively balanced, with similar proportions in each group. This indicates that migratory status is not concentrated within a specific profile but acts as a transversal axis that raises the mean scores across all clusters. Even within the “demanding critics” segment, migrants evaluate the city more positively than natives in every dimension, reinforcing the argument that migratory experience functions as a distinct interpretive lens (Ríos & Moreno-Jiménez, 2012; Dean & Edge, 2024).

This pattern is compatible with the literature on everyday urban integration. Buhr (2017) shows that migrants learn to “use the city” through practical knowledge that expands their possibilities for circulation and daily activities. Ehrkamp (2005) similarly demonstrates how transnational practices and the creation of local community spaces, such as ethnic businesses, religious centers, and social networks, produce multiple forms of belonging. In Blumenau, the more positive evaluation of services and governance by migrants may reflect precisely the perception that the urban environment offers resources and opportunities that expand their capacity for action, echoing the role attributed to urban image in skilled migration decisions described by Li (2025).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR CITY BRANDING IN A CONTEXT OF PLURALITY

The segmentation results and the comparisons between natives and migrants reinforce the central argument of the theoretical framework: Blumenau’s brand is appropriated differently by internal groups, and migratory status is a relevant variable for explaining this heterogeneity. The coexistence of an enthusiastic cluster, a moderately satisfied group, and a segment of demanding critics highlights the need to approach city branding as an urban policy attentive to diverse audiences, rather than as a single narrative directed at an abstract “average resident” (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015).

The fact that migrants evaluate almost all factors more positively situates Blumenau within debates on superdiverse cities and diversity branding. Recent studies show that welcoming and creative narratives often coexist with experiences of exclusion and identity tensions (Brenner & Miodownik, 2025; Del Bono, 2022; Belabas, 2023). In the present study, however, the data suggest that, at least regarding services, governance, and opportunities, migrants do not perceive themselves at a disadvantage compared to natives and, in many cases, evaluate the city more favorably. This does not eliminate potential symbolic tensions associated with Blumenau’s cultural identity, but it indicates that functional place offerings constitute an important basis of legitimacy for the urban brand (Suchman, 1995; Govers & Go, 2016).

At the same time, the existence of a “demanding critics” cluster, combined with relatively lower means in Innovation and Technology and in Historical Heritage and Cultural Identity, signals specific challenges for the city’s repositioning. Innovation and creativity narratives require concrete experiences that residents can perceive and validate (Ma et al., 2020; Jokela, 2020). On the other hand, the intensive use of Germanic heritage symbols, if not accompanied by inclusive practices and broader representations of social diversity, may reinforce perceptions of a brand that does not fully reflect the lived plurality (Desille, 2024; Del Bono, 2022).

Overall, the empirical results point to three main messages: (i) resident segmentation is a suitable approach for understanding the internal legitimacy of the urban brand (Gilboa & Jaffe, 2021; Sadeque et al., 2022); (ii) migratory status acts as a structuring variable of perceptions, in line with the literature linking mobility, life course, and place attachment (Hernández et al., 2007; Ríos & Moreno-Jiménez, 2012; Pedersen, 2018); and (iii) coherence between discourse and urban offerings remains a central condition for city branding to be perceived as authentic and representative in contexts of social diversity (Pasquinelli et al., 2022; Kowaas et al., 2023).

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

### Theoretical Implications

The results obtained in a medium-sized South American city broaden the field of City Branding by integrating internal migration, place attachment, and urban evaluation by residents. Identifying three distinct perception profiles reinforces arguments about the internal heterogeneity of the urban brand and the need to abandon the notion of an “average resident”. This finding aligns with approaches that advocate for segmented analyses to understand the internal legitimacy of urban narratives (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Gilboa & Jaffe, 2021). The gradual distribution of perceptions, rather than a polarized divide between positive and negative evaluations, helps refine models that traditionally distinguish residents in binary terms.

Migratory status played a transversal role, with migrants evaluating the city more positively across all dimensions and profiles. This pattern broadens discussions on mobility and urban identity by showing that residential trajectories influence how tangible and intangible attributes are perceived, confirming comparative interpretations suggested by the place-attachment literature (Hernández et al., 2007; Ríos & Moreno-Jiménez, 2012). The consistency of this behavior across the three clusters suggests that mobility acts as an interpretive mechanism that enhances the positive perception of services, infrastructure, and institutional conditions.

Another notable finding concerns the dimensions of Innovation and Technology and Historical Heritage and Cultural Identity, which presented lower evaluations. This phenomenon dialogues with debates on urban identity, authenticity, and institutional narrative (Boisen et al., 2018; Govers & Go, 2016). The case of Blumenau illustrates that cities with strong symbolic capital linked to ancestry may present gaps between historical narratives and everyday perceptions. This disconnection reinforces the need for theories that consider how different groups appropriate cultural symbols over time.

By bringing together functional dimensions, symbolic attributes, and migratory status within a single analytical framework, the study broadens the theoretical scope of City Branding. The internal legitimacy of the urban brand appears as a result of interactions among infrastructure, services, cultural identity, and mobility trajectories, shifting debates away from a pre-dominant focus on visitors, investors, or external audiences.

### Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings offer practical guidelines for public managers, institutional communication teams, and agents involved in urban planning. The segmentation into three distinct profiles shows that communication strategies should be tailored to specific audiences. “City enthusiasts” can be mobilized as spontaneous brand advocates, while “demanding critics” highlight sensitive areas requiring targeted responses, especially in public services, leisure, and governance.

The consistently more positive evaluations provided by migrants reveal a strategic opportunity for welcoming and integration policies. This group can be actively incorporated into institutional campaigns and participatory initiatives, contributing to narratives of an open, welcoming, and dynamic city. Acknowledging these perceptions can strengthen diversity discourses and reinforce community engagement practices.

The lowest-rated dimensions - Innovation and Technology and Historical Heritage and Cultural Identity - provide clear guidance for adjustments in communication and urban planning. Initiatives that translate innovation narratives into accessible everyday experiences, as well as efforts to broaden cultural references beyond the Germanic heritage, may foster stronger connections with different segments of the population.

The segmentation presented here can be applied in municipal diagnostics, public consultations, and participatory strategies. Integrating residents' perception indicators into decision-making cycles strengthens the administrative capacity to monitor the legitimacy of urban policies and adjust narratives in response to territorial changes and evolving social expectations.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study analyzed how native and migrant residents of Blumenau evaluate the city's tangible and intangible attributes, identifying distinct perception profiles and examining the role of migratory status. Three clusters emerged: city enthusiasts, moderately satisfied, and demanding critics. Across all dimensions, migrants consistently reported higher evaluations than natives, reinforcing debates on mobility and comparative evaluations in the field of place attachment.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating, with statistical evidence, that migratory experience operates as a transversal explanatory variable that challenges the notion of a homogeneous "average resident". It addresses an empirical gap by showing that, in medium-sized Latin American cities, the internal legitimacy of City Branding is not sustained solely by identity narratives rooted in the past; it depends on the ongoing interaction between tangible urban offerings and resident's mobility trajectories. The results also reveal that cities with strong identity capital may present misalignments between official narratives and everyday perceptions, especially in themes related to innovation and cultural identity.

From a practical perspective, the results indicate that territorial communication strategies should adopt internal segmentation, recognize migrants as a strategic group, and diversify identity narratives to reflect the territory's social composition. Blumenau emerges as a South American case with potential relevance for international debates on medium-sized cities marked by migratory trajectories and hybrid identities. Nonetheless, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits the ability to observe temporal changes or establish strict causal relationships between perceptions and sociodemographic variables. Although the sample is large and the statistical modeling robust, the analysis of a single urban context with very specific historical-cultural characteristics requires caution when generalizing the findings to other territories.

To address these limitations and advance theoretical and practical developments in City Branding, more proactive research agendas are needed. Longitudinal studies should investigate how migrants' perceptions evolve over time, assessing whether initial positive evaluations persist or whether migrants gradually shift toward the "demanding critics" profile as they become rooted in the city.

The use of qualitative approaches, such as ethnography, is also recommended to explore everyday urban experiences and propose strategies to reduce the perceived disconnect between the historical-cultural heritage and the everyday lives of new residents. Finally, future research should test institutional communication interventions, using structural equation modeling (such as PLS-SEM) to evaluate which public management actions most effectively engage less satisfied residents and strengthen perceptions of the city brand as authentic and representative of its social plurality.

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## CONTRIBUIÇÃO DOS AUTORES

Vinicius Eduardo Ignacio Busnello: Conceitualização (Formulação e evolução dos objetivos gerais da pesquisa); Metodologia (Desenvolvimento e design da metodologia); Pesquisa (Condução do processo de investigação e coleta de dados); Curadoria de dados (Atividades de gestão para anotar e manter os dados da pesquisa para uso); Análise de dados (Aplicação de técnicas estatísticas ou matemáticas para analisar os dados); Design da apresentação de dados (Preparação, criação e/ou apresentação do trabalho publicado, especificamente visualização/apresentação de dados e tabelas); Redação do manuscrito original (Preparação, criação e/ou apresentação do trabalho publicado, especificamente a redação do rascunho inicial); Redação – revisão e edição (Preparação, criação e/ou apresentação do trabalho publicado por membros do grupo de pesquisa original).

Fabricia Durieux Zucco: Supervisão (Responsabilidade de supervisão e liderança no planejamento e execução da atividade de pesquisa); Conceitualização (Formulação e evolução dos objetivos gerais da pesquisa e revisão do modelo de estudo); Metodologia (Apoio no desenvolvimento e design da metodologia); Redação – revisão e edição (Preparação,

criação e/ou apresentação do trabalho publicado por membros do grupo de pesquisa original, especificamente revisão crítica, comentário ou revisão).

Christian Daniel Falaster: Validação de dados e experimentos (Verificação, seja como parte da atividade ou de forma separada, da replicação/reprodutibilidade geral dos resultados e metodologias); Redação – revisão e edição (Revisão crítica e recomendações de melhoria para o manuscrito durante a fase de avaliação do estudo).

Thamires Foletto Fiuza: Validação de dados e experimentos (Verificação, seja como parte da atividade ou de forma separada, da replicação/reprodutibilidade geral dos resultados e metodologias); Redação – revisão e edição (Revisão crítica e recomendações de melhoria para o manuscrito durante a fase de avaliação do estudo).