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The city branding potential of Sakarya: A tourism-oriented evaluation

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Abstract

With the rise of global competition, developing city branding strategies has become vital for urban centres. The unique features and values of cities, especially their geographical, cultural, and historical traits, play a crucial role in shaping city identity and image during the branding process. This study aims to assess Sakarya's geographical, historical, and cultural tourism assets and their contribution to its potential as a city brand. Additionally, the research examines the impact of tourism-related projects on established city branding criteria. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining both qualitative and quantitative data collected through semi-structured interviews. Experts from various stakeholder institutions within the city participated in the study. Fifteen experts responded to six open-ended questions about Sakarya's tourism potential and branding process. Moreover, participants evaluated the effects of current or upcoming tourism projects on city branding criteria using a matrix-based scoring form. Experts identified natural assets such as Acarlar Floodplain Forest and the Sapanca River, historical and touristic sites including the Çark Watermill, the Justinianus Bridge, and traditional houses in Taraklı, and local gastronomic values as key tools for branding. Matrix analysis results show that projects centred on the city's natural areas, such as coastal recreation initiatives and the restoration of natural and historical sites, make the greatest contribution to city branding. Participants also noted that bicycle-related projects and events have given the city a distinctive identity and improved its international competitiveness.

Keywords: brand city, city branding, Sakarya, tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism, traditionally driven by various travel motives, has evolved into a strategic industry that significantly shapes urban development and growth through economic, social, and cultural effects. Among the strategies used, cities often compete by highlighting their unique tourist attractions. As this approach has become more important, cities have increasingly emphasized branding through tourism.

The tourism sector's interdisciplinary connections enhance its importance in city branding strategies. Simultaneously, a city's status as a "brand city" supports the sector by fostering a positive image through urban identity construction. However, branding processes that depend exclusively on promoting physical and cultural assets are insufficient. Successful city branding requires active participation and collaboration among local governments, tourism enterprises, residents, and other stakeholders (Hryhorieva et al., 2020).

This study examines Sakarya's tourism potential and its contribution to the city's branding process. Two key questions guide the research: (i) What are Sakarya's tourism assets and how do they contribute to city branding? (ii) To what extent do tourism projects in Sakarya align with city branding criteria?

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A mixed-methods approach was used, combining qualitative interviews with local stakeholders to examine the impact of tourism assets on city branding and quantitative analysis to assess the contribution of existing projects to branding potential. Sakarya's natural, cultural, and historical tourism assets were explored, and the effects of both existing and planned projects based on these assets were analyzed in relation to city branding criteria.

Fifteen of the twenty invited experts participated in the study. The majority (80%) reside in Sakarya, hold managerial positions in public institutions, and have postgraduate degrees (93%). Participants come from diverse professional backgrounds, including public administration (20%), urban planning, environmental engineering, economics, civil engineering, landscape architecture, and forest engineering. Expert opinions were used to assess the city's potential, and stakeholder institutions' tourism-oriented projects in Sakarya were scored and analyzed for their contributions to city branding strategies.

2. The City Branding Process

Globalization has shifted economic competition from the national level to urban and regional levels, making the creation of 'brand value' a key policy focus in urban development strategies (Kotler, 2000; Begg, 1999). Since the 1970s, economic transformations in industrialized countries have intensified competition among cities both nationally and internationally to attract investment, tourism, skilled labour, and cultural activities. The emerging 'urban branding' approach during this period conceptualizes cities not merely as geographical locations but as destinations that differentiate themselves through unique cultural, historical, social, and economic characteristics, thereby enhancing their recognition and appeal (Başaran, 2008). From the latter half of the 20th century onwards, city branding has become a prominent component of marketing strategies in American and European cities, serving both regional marketing efforts and as a response to urban development challenges (Hryhorieva et al., 2020).

Keller (2013) defines a city brand as a mental association created by the city's physical, cultural, and social elements. A city brand thus distinguishes itself from competitors by uniquely defining its values, linking them to a strong image in target audiences' minds, and offering a comprehensive experience. These values include geographical location, cultural heritage, historical features, natural beauty, gastronomy, social life, and infrastructure (Yeoman, 2009; Başpınar, 2015). Helmy (2008) further highlights that urban branding involves not only promoting a positive city image but also transforming the entire city into a holistic experience.

However, Anholt (2006) emphasizes that national identities often overshadow perceptions of local identities. The author argues that Australia's strong, positive international reputation supports confidence in Sydney. In contrast, Lagos, like many other African cities, struggles to establish a positive image due to the continent's branding effect, which hinders its international reputation. Consequently, explains that, because city culture is generally difficult to separate from a country's overall culture, the national brand index and the city brand index should comprise distinct components.

In the city branding process, decision-makers aim to develop a strong image and identity by systematically assessing the city's tangible and intangible assets. In this context, Dinnie (2010) highlights that city branding is not only a marketing strategy but also a long-term planning approach that supports sustainable development objectives. Likewise, Ailawadi and Keller (2004) describe city branding as the comprehensive enhancement of a city's social, cultural, and commercial activities to create high value. This approach seeks to transform the city into both a tourist destination and a competitive centre of life, making it a desirable place to live, work, invest, and study. Harvey (2016) further observes that cities pursue such initiatives to attain a high quality of life. Research shows that city branding offers multidimensional benefits, including economic growth, improved quality of life, preservation of cultural heritage, increased investment appeal, and higher tourism revenues (Lever & Turok, 1999; Yeoman, 2009).

Considering the value created by city branding, competitiveness is a crucial factor in shaping a city's brand, as it drives that value. Cities compete at national and international levels by leveraging their distinctive characteristics, including natural advantages such as geography and climate, as well as human-made assets like architectural heritage and cultural events (Başpınar, 2015). Consequently, cities with similar infrastructures can establish their brand identities by emphasizing differences in their histories, cultures, and socio-economic structures. In this regard, Budd and Hirmis (2004) highlight that enhancing city competitiveness requires comprehensive strategic planning, participation from residents and visitors, targeted service development, and effective marketing of tourism and cultural heritage. Furthermore, a city's ability to attract investment, skilled labour, tourists, international events, and public incentives directly strengthens its city brand identity (Lever & Turok, 1999; Harvey, 2016).

The studies also present critical perspectives on this strategy. Simultaneously including multiple cities in the branding process may reduce efficiency in resource use and weaken competitive strength (Tek, 2009). Successful cases often focus on branding one or two cities exclusively. Moreover, Kavaratzis (2004) argues that although city branding initiatives emphasize urban identity and local character, marketing-driven approaches tend to create uniformity across cities, reducing their distinctive identities. The author underscores the importance of involving local stakeholders in the branding process to preserve local distinctiveness and maintain the authenticity of urban identity.

Risitano (2006) identifies six primary components of city branding: brand culture (including historical sites, traditions, and gastronomy), brand character (perceived trustworthiness), brand personality (the city's distinctive features), brand name (unique identifiers), brand logo and symbols, and brand slogan (Risitano, 2006; Kotler & Lee, 2009; Aaker, 1997). Conversely, Zeren (2012) categorizes city brand values into five main groups: physical, socio-cultural, functional, and administrative.

Different researchers emphasize various aspects, but all elements related to a city's unique values critically influence its image and brand strength. A notable example of converting local characteristics into branding elements is Bergen, Norway. The city's unfavorable weather conditions have been reframed as a positive branding asset through events such as the 'Rain Festival', thereby enhancing Bergen's brand value. Another internationally recognized example is New York's 'I♥ NY' campaign. Launched in 1977, this initiative transformed the city's negative economic image through the now-iconic logo, boosting tourism revenues and establishing a globally recognized model of brand identity construction (Ward, 2005).

Apaydın (2011) argues that the city branding process extends beyond promotional activities to include a multidimensional planning approach that strategically shapes urban identity and requires the involvement of all stakeholders. Therefore, city branding is not solely the responsibility of local governments; it is a coordinated process demanding collective action and strategic collaboration (Apaydın, 2011). Successful branding requires that local administrations' initiatives gain support from civil society organizations and city residents (Giritlioğlu & Avcıkurt, 2010; Budd & Hirmis, 2004). Cevher (2012) claims that cities must be selective in their branding efforts and develop strategies tailored to specific target audiences. The primary objective should be to attract qualified tourists, an educated population, and major investors. Furthermore, researchers highlight the importance of generating financial resources to build a sustainable urban image (Jansson & Power, 2006; Emin, 2012).

Culture, creativity, and creative industries have recently become key elements in city branding strategies, aligning with sustainable development goals (Tomaz & Caldeira, 2021; Kasemsarn et al., 2025). Since the 1990s, creativity-based strategies have been central to efforts to diversify economies and revitalize local communities. Culture has been recognized not just as an element of identity but also as a catalyst for economic development and innovation. To stand out in a globally competitive environment, cities have invested in cultural heritage, creative industries, and artistic

activities, thereby fostering entrepreneurial urban identities. Within this framework, the strategic use of cultural planning—including cultural tourism, the development of creative industries, and the conversion of cultural capital into economic value—plays a vital role in sustainable city branding processes (Cudny et al., 2020; Cerisola & Panzera, 2021; Kasemsarn et al., 2025).

According to Kasemsarn et al. (2025), city branding requires an integrated approach that considers economic growth, social progress, infrastructure, architecture, landscape, environment, culture, and history to build a marketable identity. In this way, branding reflects a perspective aligned with local development objectives and the global marketing of cities. Kasemsarn et al. (2025) also note that practices incorporating sustainability goals are emerging as a new trend in city branding. For example, they mention the 'Green Blue Youth Vision 2030' initiative in Southern Italy, which stands as a significant model for the circular economy and youth participation. The authors emphasize that practices strategically combining cultural heritage, creative tourism, creativity, and sustainability can foster the development of distinctive urban brands that attract diverse target groups.

3. The Role of Tourism in City Branding: Research and Strategic Approaches in Turkey

The tourism sector is a critical driver of city branding strategies, influencing both economic and cultural aspects. While tourism supports all three areas of local development, Ashworth and Page (2011) emphasize that its economic impacts more directly influence wider segments of society compared to its socio-cultural and environmental effects. Tourism revenues boost GDP growth and sectoral employment and create added value through multiplier effects, which, in turn, stimulate the development of other economic activities (Archer, 1977; Brown, 2000; Ferreia & Estevao, 2009; Salihoğlu & Gezici, 2018).

The process of urban branding differs from product and service branding due to its multidimensional nature. Branding a tourist destination requires creating a distinctive identity and a positive urban image that differentiates the city from others (Albayrak & Caber, 2008; Şahin, 2010). Gotham (2007) defines tourism-related branding as a process in which local tourism organizations employ place-based imagery, including cultural and arts institutions, museums, and protected heritage sites, to attract consumers and investors to a specific area, thereby promoting differentiation and diversity. Yılmaz and Çizel (2000) identify several advantages of establishing a city brand in tourism, such as increased city recognition, improved product marketing, quality assurance, and the development of emotional connections with tourists. Conversely, Anholt (2010) argues that place image and the marketing practices developed by Kotler, Haider, and Rein are primarily tools for promoting new products, services, and attractions, and criticizes their limited effectiveness in shaping a place's overall image or reputation.

Within the framework of city branding, tourism functions not only as a catalyst for economic growth but also as a strategic instrument for promoting cultural identity, improving quality of life, and enhancing global recognition (Kaypak, 2013). Beyond its economic impact, the tourism sector provides a comprehensive experience that integrates political, legal, natural, cultural, and technological dimensions (Özdemir, 2007). For these reasons, it is emphasized that cities' tourism policies should align with the overall brand vision and be designed to strengthen the destination image.

Although city branding processes are frequently managed by non-profit organizations, effective implementation also requires the involvement of public authorities (Giritlioğlu & Avcıkurt, 2010). In this process, local governments play a pivotal role, as the services they provide directly influence the quality of life of urban residents (Yavuz, 2007). Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) challenge the dominant communication-based understanding of place branding and instead promote an identity-based perspective, arguing that branding and identity are inherently interconnected. Accordingly, they emphasize that place branding should engage a wide range of stakeholders and that the brand vision should be aligned with the principles of corporate branding. In this context, residents'

attitudes toward and satisfaction with the place and its brand identity are also considered significant.

Furthermore, it is emphasized that place branding practices can be advanced by drawing on conceptualizations of place culture—namely, how it is experienced, collectively produced, and shared. Zenker and Braun (2017), who point to the scarcity of research on how tourism and destination branding influence both tourists and residents, demonstrate that brand complexity—understood as multi-layered branding—is perceived more positively by both groups. Accordingly, destination brands characterized by multi-layered, multi-component, and multi-stakeholder structures positively affect satisfaction and exert a stronger influence on the development of identity and place attachment among residents.

Reports by the World Tourism Organization further emphasize that city administrators should develop strategies to manage increasing tourist numbers sustainably, enhance residents' quality of life, and reduce environmental impacts (World Tourism Organization, 2012). Decision-makers frequently prioritize environmental factors, as they serve both as marketing tools and as travel motivations in tourism. Various researchers argue that, in order to build a successful city brand, it is essential to address the city's geopolitical location, image, service quality, and distinctive assets alongside its tourism potential, and to approach the process from a holistic perspective (Lóránt & Tünde, 2010; Kotler & Lee, 2009; Kapferer, 2008).

Recent studies reveal a shift in city branding from market-oriented, competition-based approaches toward more integrated, sustainability-focused frameworks. While Kotler (2000) and Begg (1999) discuss city branding primarily as a tool for intercity competition and attracting investment, more recent research, such as that of Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) and Tomaz and Caldeira (2021), emphasizes identity-based, participatory, and culture-focused perspectives. Although tourism is often a central component of city branding strategies (Budd & Hirmis, 2004; Helmy, 2008; Cevher, 2012), there is ongoing debate regarding the sector's role. It is variously conceptualized as a strategic economic driver (Kotler, 2000; Begg, 1999), a symbolic tool contributing to identity formation (Aaker, 1997; Risitano, 2006; Giritlioğlu & Avcıkurt, 2010; Cudny et al., 2020; Cerisola & Panzera, 2021), and a factor enhancing quality of life and sustainable development (Anholt, 2006, 2010; Keller, 2013; Zenker & Braun, 2017). In this context, the evolving literature increasingly underscores the importance of creative industries, cultural capital, and inter-institutional collaboration in shaping city brands in the context of tourism.

Since the 1980s, Turkey has become a significant destination in the global tourism market. The idea of city branding started to gain attention in the 1990s, and today the success of the tourism sector is evaluated not only through quantitative indicators but also in terms of destination value and branding efforts. In 2003, the first structured initiatives were launched, focusing on Istanbul, Antalya, and Konya. The Turkey Tourism Strategy 2023 Action Plan, developed by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2006, highlights the goal of transforming cities into tourism development regions, development corridors, main development axes, tourism cities, ecotourism regions, and branded cities by 2023 (Şahin, 2010; Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2007). The purpose of this strategy is to protect, utilize, and promote the country's natural, cultural, historical, and geographical assets, to diversify tourism offerings, and ultimately to increase Turkey's share of tourism-related economic benefits (Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2007).

Within the framework of this strategy, 19 cities were targeted for elevation to brand-city status. The vision adopted in Turkey's urban branding strategy is defined as "transforming our cities, endowed with rich cultural and natural features, into destinations for tourists through branding." Under the plan, the Silk Road Tourism Corridor and the Western Black Sea Coastal Corridor—two of the seven thematic tourism development corridors—include the province of Sakarya. Although Sakarya is not listed among the designated brand cities, its cultural and natural assets nonetheless support the city's branding potential.

National studies enhance the national literature on tourism's role in city branding by highlighting the complex, multidimensional nature of urban branding and the necessity of strategic approaches for successful outcomes. For example, Çetinsöz and Temiz (2018) developed a comprehensive method to identify Anamur's brand identity and personality. Similarly, Cevher (2012) analyzed the city branding process and its regional benefits in Antalya, while Tezcan (2011) assessed intercity competition and the branding process in İzmir from a planning perspective.

Akturan and Oğuztimur (2016) highlight the multidisciplinary nature of urban branding, noting that urban planners, marketers, architects, and tourism professionals approach the issue from distinct paradigms. The authors note that this diversity makes it difficult to develop a holistic theoretical framework. Eraydın (2016), in her study on Ankara, examined the effects of urban branding strategies on urban memory and urban image, highlighting the weak connection between the city's history and its identity. Koç (2018), on the other hand, analyzed the city branding process in the case of Eskişehir, investigating the impact of the strategic approach implemented since 1999 on the city's social, cultural, and physical transformation. The study is significant in that it reveals the crucial role of local government and the process by which public administrators adopt branding strategies.

Furthermore, these studies provide insights that guide practical development by highlighting the importance of stakeholder involvement, preservation of local features, and sustainable planning methods. The next section assesses Sakarya's potential based on its tourism assets and planning strategies and offers related recommendations as another example from Turkey.

4. Case Study and Methodological Approach

Located in northwestern Turkey, the province of Sakarya is a prominent example with the potential to become a city brand, thanks to its geographical location, accessibility, and rich tourism diversity. The city sits at a critical intersection for access to major metropolitan areas such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Bursa, making it easy to access. The TEM and D-100 highways, the high-speed train line, the Northern Marmara Motorway, and port connections make Sakarya an easily accessible destination for both domestic and international visitors (Köseoğlu & Dursun, 2015). This strategic location makes Sakarya an attractive weekend or day-trip destination, particularly for domestic tourists seeking an escape from Istanbul's dense population (Bilgiç, 2007).

Sakarya offers a diverse range of alternative tourism types, including nature, culture, and coastal tourism. Sapanca Lake is one of the leading centres of nature-based tourism, offering opportunities for water sports such as canoeing and sailing, as well as hiking trails around the lake. Acarlar Floodplain Forest, the second-largest of its kind in Turkey, is a significant site for birdwatching and ecotourism (Orman ve Su İşleri Bakanlığı, 2016). Although the Karasu and Kocaali coasts have high potential for summer tourism, this potential has not been fully realized due to the limited scope of current tourism investments (Sakarya Valiliği, 2020).

Sakarya has gained international recognition in cultural tourism as a UNESCO-designated "Learning City," and the Taraklı district has received the "Cittaslow" (Slow City) certification. Cultural heritage assets like the Justinianus Bridge, Ottoman-era mosques and mansions, historic bazaars, and traditional handicrafts significantly strengthen the city's brand identity. Sports and adventure tourism are also developing rapidly. Paragliding in Serdivan, highland tourism in Akyazı and Hendek, the city's status as a bicycle-friendly destination, and its mountain biking trails are notable examples. Outdoor activities such as camping, caravan tourism, and ATV tours further enrich Sakarya's tourism diversity.

Table 1 presents the distribution of visitor arrivals, overnight stays, and average length of stay by district in Sakarya. Adapazarı records the highest number of overnight stays among both domestic and foreign visitors. Regarding arrivals, Adapazarı, Sapanca, and Serdivan report the largest numbers. Sapanca and Kocaali districts have the longest average lengths of stay, with Kocaali at 3 days. The provincial average length of stay is 2.1 days.

Table 1 Tourism Statistics (2021) per District[1]

	Visitor Arrivals			Overnight Stays			Average Length of Stay (day)		
Districts	**Foreign**	**Domestic**	**Total**	**Foreign**	**Domestic**	**Total**	**Foreign**	**Domestic**	**Total**
Adapazarı	7775	96965	104740	13590	163038	176628	1,7	1,7	1,7
Akyazı	878	29159	30037	2377	77291	79668	2,7	2,7	2,7
Erenler	1431	40401	41832	3851	74879	78730	2,7	1,9	1,9
Geyve	6	3276	3282	8	6382	6390	1,3	1,9	1,9
Hendek	312	14824	15136	1059	36630	37689	3,4	2,5	2,5
Karasu	33	5062	5095	44	12329	12373	1,3	2,4	2,4
Kocaali	86	10671	10757	270	32360	32630	3,1	3,0	3,0
Pamukova	134	10833	10967	218	17860	18078	1,6	1,6	1,6
Sapanca	8791	85118	93909	21055	165207	186262	2,4	1,9	2,0
Serdivan	5603	41303	46906	13526	69445	82971	2,4	1,7	1,8
Taraklı	5	1276	1281	12	2525	2537	2,4	2,0	2,0
Ferizli	38	2041	2079	76	3947	4023	2,0	1,9	1,9
Kaynarca	17	1386	1403	49	2740	2789	2,9	2,0	2,0
Arifiye	3090	19278	22368	4301	28068	32369	1,4	1,5	1,4
TOTAL	28199	361593	389792	60436	692701	753137	2,2	2,0	2,1

Data from 2021 indicate that Sakarya contains 118 accommodation facilities, comprising 4030 rooms and 8343 beds. In terms of spatial distribution, Serdivan emerges as the primary center, reflecting significant potential for both nature-based and cultural tourism. Sapanca, Karasu, and Kocaali follow, each providing opportunities for nature and coastal tourism. Figure 1 shows all tourism accommodation facilities in the city, based on 2021 data.

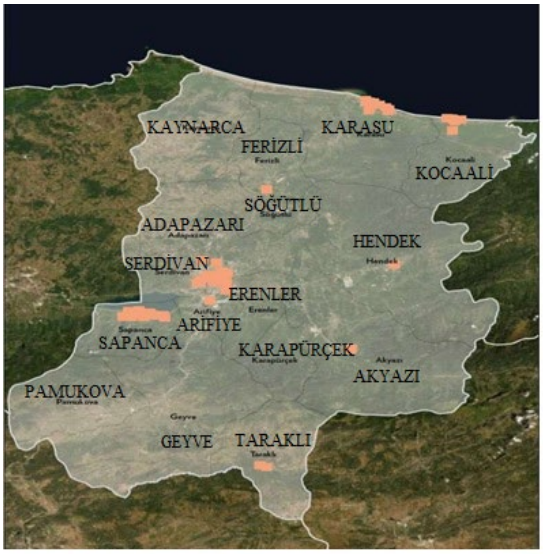


Figure 1 Distribution of accommodation facilities in Sakarya (Parıldı, 2023)

In addition to possessing numerous tourism centres, Sakarya is strategically situated at the intersection of major transportation routes. Its proximity to Istanbul provides a significant advantage for the tourism sector. There is considerable potential for same-day tourism from Istanbul, Ankara, and Kocaeli during weekends (Bilgiç, 2007; Zengin et al., 2023). Consequently, Sakarya's accessibility and closeness to metropolitan centres have facilitated its development as a prominent destination for domestic tourists.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify the city branding potential of Sakarya by evaluating its natural and cultural assets from a tourism perspective. The research specifically seeks to address the following questions:

(i) What are Sakarya's tourism assets, and how do they contribute to the city's branding?

[1] Data were obtained from publicly available official statistics published by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, which report the total number of facilities certified by municipalities and the ministry.

(ii) To what extent do tourism projects in Sakarya align with city branding criteria?

A mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches, was employed. The qualitative approach is frequently utilized in tourism research as it facilitates an in-depth understanding of perceptions, experiences, and contextual conditions. In the city branding literature, local stakeholders' perceptions are recognized as a critical element in constructing urban identity (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Accordingly, this study sought the views of experts from public and private institutions who represent local stakeholders. The qualitative method was used to assess the impact of tourism assets on the city branding process, while the quantitative method evaluated the contribution of existing projects to city branding potential. This approach enabled the findings to be analyzed within a comprehensive framework.

Guest et al. (2006) note that the literature offers varying recommendations on the appropriate sample size for qualitative research. They report that, particularly with homogeneous samples and focused research questions, 12 to 15 interviews are typically sufficient to achieve data saturation. Creswell (2012) recommends conducting 5 to 25 interviews for phenomenological studies. Mason (2010) observes that small sample sizes in qualitative research are often associated with diminishing returns. Consequently, data saturation is regarded as a key criterion; when saturation is reached, the lack of new themes or findings from additional data indicates that the number of interviews is adequate.

Participants were selected from among experts actively engaged in or knowledgeable about Sakarya's tourism policies and city branding processes. Purposive sampling was utilized to ensure the inclusion of individuals with substantial subject-matter expertise, thereby facilitating the collection of informed responses to the research questions. This approach was grounded in the participants' expertise and knowledge base.

The study involved experts and decision-makers who play an active role in developing Sakarya's tourism policies. Participants were selected from various institutions, including municipalities, universities, the Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, the Eastern Marmara Development Agency, and non-governmental organizations. Of the 20 individuals initially invited, 15 consented to participate in interviews, and data collection was completed with these experts. The majority of participants (80%) reside in Sakarya, most occupy managerial roles in public institutions, and 93% hold postgraduate qualifications. Regarding professional backgrounds, the sample comprised public administrators (20%), urban planners (13%), environmental engineers (13%), economists (13%), civil engineers (7%), landscape architects (7%), and forest engineers (7%) (Figure 2).

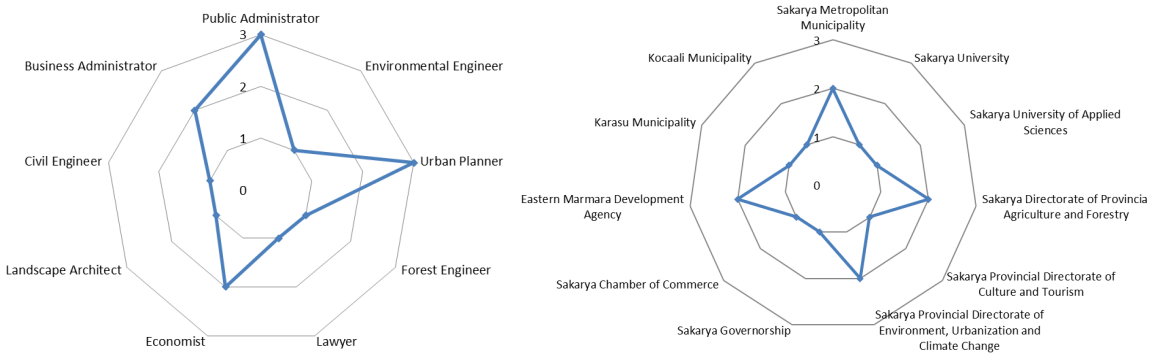


Figure 2 Distribution of professions and institutional affiliations among interviewed experts

A semi-structured interview form was developed as the primary data collection tool. This approach facilitates the systematic exploration of research questions while enabling participants to articulate their perspectives (Merriam, 2013). The interview form was designed with reference to established studies in the literature (Çetinsöz & Temiz, 2018; Cevher, 2012) and subsequently refined after a pilot implementation involving three participants. The finalized form comprised three sections: demographic information, open-ended questions evaluating Sakarya's tourism

potential, and an impact assessment matrix measuring the effects of tourism projects on city branding criteria.

The interview form utilized in this research was organized into two distinct sections. The initial section comprised six open-ended questions intended to investigate the city's brand potential within the tourism sector. Qualitative data obtained from these questions were analyzed using descriptive methods, and expert statements were documented in comprehensive notes during the interviews. The subsequent section required participants to evaluate the influence of selected projects on city branding criteria. A matrix was provided, with rows representing implemented or ongoing projects in Sakarya province and columns corresponding to branding criteria derived from the defining attributes of brand cities. Participants rated each project's impact using a scale from 0 (definitely no impact) to 3 (definitely important impact). Given that the study employed an impact analysis method based on expert opinions, an interval and absolute zero-point ratio scale was applied to convert qualitative assessments into quantitative data. This methodology was designed to streamline the response process for experts and facilitate the analysis of the resulting data using descriptive statistics, including mean, median, and variance.

Participants received project briefings through verbal explanations as well as visual and textual materials, such as photographs, reports, and relevant documents. After data collection, the median and mean impact ratings assigned by each participant were calculated, and an evaluation matrix was constructed. Interviews were scheduled by appointment after obtaining participants' legal permission, and they were informed of the semi-structured interview questions in advance. Direct quotations were used to accurately represent participants' perspectives. To enhance interview validity, summarized data were shared with participants for confirmation.

5. Findings

5.1. An Evaluation of Sakarya's Tourism Potential from a City Branding Perspective

The initial phase of the research analyzed Sakarya's potential to develop as a city brand using a qualitative approach grounded in expert opinions. During this stage, open-ended questions were selected because they facilitate more expressive responses and do not require adherence to a predetermined hypothesis (Karasar, 2004). The responses to the six open-ended questions posed to participants were then categorized thematically and are presented below.

Urban Elements Defining Sakarya: Participants most frequently identify Sakarya's natural assets (50%) and historical-cultural heritage as defining features. Notable natural attractions include Sapanca Lake, Acarlar Floodplain Forest, the Sakarya River, and the highlands. Architectural landmarks such as the Taraklı Houses and the Çark Watermill, which retain Ottoman-era features, contribute to the city's historical memory. Collectively, these elements shape Sakarya's identity and strengthen its potential for city branding (Çetinsöz & Temiz, 2018).

Participant U-4 stated: "*In Sakarya, the historical waterwheel mill, Turkish houses, along with Taraklı, have a distinctive beauty. The province of Sakarya is also one of the regions rich in lakes. The most important lake of the province is Sapanca Lake, which is of great significance for water sports, drinking and utility water supply, fisheries, industrial use, and tourism*." In addition, participant U-2 remarked: "*The most decisive features for the city's branding are its nature, culture, history, and gastronomic values. Because of their architectural character, the Taraklı houses were designated a Cittaslow town by UNESCO in 2011. The city also has natural beauties such as the Acarlar Floodplain Forest and the Sakarya River*." Similarly, participant U-10 emphasized the influence of historical and natural assets on the city brand, stating that tourists are drawn to the region for its culture, historical and natural richness, with the Taraklı Houses recognized for their cultural heritage and Sapanca Lake for its natural beauty.

Unique Touristic Values: Analysis of participant responses indicates that 'Natural Assets' represent the most significant differentiating factor for Sakarya as a tourist destination (49%). In contrast, 'Geographical Location Advantage' was the least frequently cited element (7%). The

'Taraklı Houses' and 'Sapanca Lake' emerged as the most distinctive features that contribute to the city's tourist value. The use of the Taraklı Houses in television series and film productions, as well as Sapanca Lake's function as a center for weekend tourism, demonstrates both the diversity of their applications and their tourism potential. Additionally, participants highlighted the city's gastronomic assets, emphasizing their role in distinguishing Sakarya as a destination.

Regarding the city's unique values, participant U-7 remarked: "*The Taraklı Houses, Sapanca Lake, and the Historical Çark Watermill are the most important. The Taraklı Houses, often used in TV series and films, take one on a historical journey with their Ottoman-era architecture. Sapanca Lake is a natural attraction where scenic beauty comes to the fore. With nearby residential centres and easy accessibility, particularly from Istanbul and other major cities, it has become a popular destination for excursions, picnics, and accommodation, especially on weekends.*" Similarly, participant U-4 highlighted Sakarya's significant potentials, including Sapanca Lake, its highlands, the Taraklı Houses, Acarlar Floodplain Forest, and the Karasu-Kocaali coast. U-4 further noted: "*In addition, in gastronomy, specialities such as special meatballs, pumpkin dessert, and various agricultural products stand out… It is a city that experiences all four seasons.*"

Definitions of Brand Image: The influence of Sakarya's tourism potential on the branding process is closely linked to the city's currently perceived brand image. Accordingly, participants were asked to propose definitions or slogans that accurately reflect Sakarya's present image. The most prevalent brand image definition was 'City of Bicycles. 'This perception is reinforced by developments such as the 'Bicycle-Friendly City' designation from the Union Cyclists International (UCI) and infrastructure investments, including the Sunflower Bicycle Valley (Sakarya Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2022). In addition to the 'City of Bicycles' image, other definitions such as 'Green City ', 'Tourism City ', and, less frequently, 'Industrial City 'were also identified (Figure 3). These examples demonstrate the significant variations that underscore Sakarya's capacity to cultivate a multidimensional urban identity.

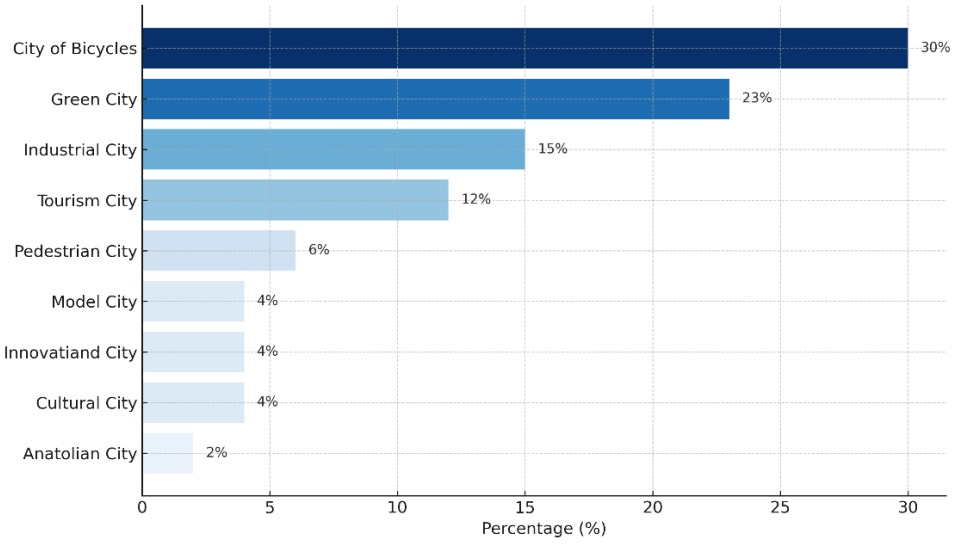


Figure 3 Definitions of perceived brand image for Sakarya

Participant U-15 stated: "Sakarya is the 13th city in the world to receive the title of City of Bicycles. The city is progressing with confident steps toward becoming a branded city in this regard. Our institutional investments are made within this framework." This participant further observed that the Sakarya Metropolitan Municipality has invested in bicycle lanes to foster the city's bicycle culture. In contrast, participant U-8 offered an alternative perspective on the city's brand image: *"Sakarya is a cultural mosaic and a city that hosts various ethnic groups; therefore, we may define it as a City of Culture."* Likewise, participant U-12 addressed the tourism city image, stating: *"Sakarya is a multicultural city where many nations live together. With its greenery, blue spaces,*

sea, lake, floodplain forests, and thermal springs, it is among Turkey's important cities. All these features are significant in terms of being a tourism city."

The Impact of City Image on Tourism: To evaluate Sakarya's potential in the tourism sector from a branding perspective, participants identified key image elements that contribute to the city's tourism appeal. The most significant elements cited were the Taraklı Houses (30%), Acarlar Floodplain Forest (24%), and Sapanca Lake (20%). Respondents further noted that the promotion of these assets remains inadequate and, combined with infrastructural shortcomings, has hindered the full realization of the city's tourism potential. They recommended enhancing not only natural and historical attractions but also expanding social and cultural events.

Participant U-8 emphasized that Sakarya possesses numerous elements conducive to branding. The participant highlighted key attractions, stating: "*Sakarya has many elements that could support branding. In fact, there are places visitors should not leave without seeing: the Taraklı Houses, which reflect Ottoman culture; the Sakarya River, from which the province takes its name; and the Acarlar Floodplain Forest, home to 180 bird species—these are important values in this regard*." Similarly, participant U-3 addressed the significance of city image, noting: "*One should view branding in Sakarya as a living spirit, because the branding of cities and their urban elements is significant. Historical values can advance branding only to a certain extent. By incorporating diverse social or cultural events, branding can gain greater value. …it is not enough to promote only historical and cultural assets… different services and diverse social activities must also be offered so that brand value becomes effective."*

Institutional Contributions and Coordination: As the research involved experts from various institutions, assessing these organizations' roles in enhancing the city's brand value and tourism development was deemed essential for interpreting the findings. To elicit participants' perspectives on potential institutional contributions to the city branding process in Sakarya, the following question was posed: 'What is, or what could be, the contribution of your institution to the tourism branding process of Sakarya?'

Participants identified a lack of cooperation among institutions in the branding process of Sakarya. They highlighted the need to establish structures such as joint tourism action plans and monitoring and evaluation committees. Participant U-11 stated: "*Rather than conducting independent activities, institutions should develop complementary efforts. A long-term tourism action plan should be jointly prepared by the institutions. In line with this plan, thematic working groups, an executive board, a monitoring and evaluation committee for follow-up, and a higher-level board for oversight should be established.*" This perspective was reinforced by participant U-3, who remarked: "*Institutions must act together. In this way, it becomes clear which stakeholders in the sector face which problems. For example, in recent years, there has been a shortage of intermediate staff in tourism, which has become a major problem in the sector.*" Overall, the interviews revealed a consensus on the need to implement joint initiatives at the institutional level, engaging central, local, and civil actors through more comprehensive and effective strategies.

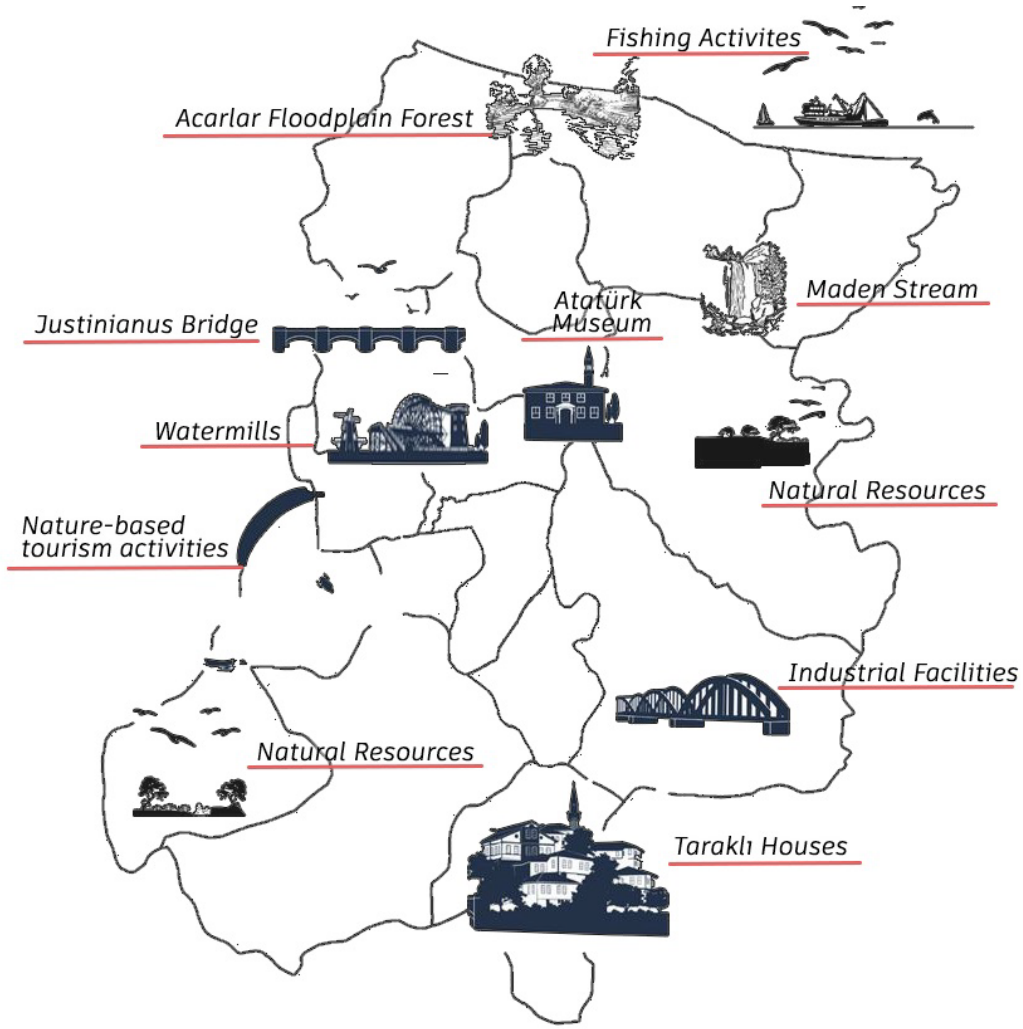


Figure 4 Sakarya's brand values in terms of tourism (Parıldı, 2023)

Logo and Slogan Suggestions: Participants were invited to share perspectives on designing a city logo, emphasizing its role as a key branding element that also reflects Sakarya's tourism potential. Participants recommended that blue and green be featured prominently in the logo to symbolize nature and water resources. Additionally, historical urban landmarks, including the Taraklı Houses, the Sakarya River, and the Çark Watermill, were identified as important visual elements for inclusion. Respondents further suggested integrating various combinations of visual themes, such as Water–Nature–Sports (33.30%), Sea–Nature (33.30%), Sea–Sand–Sun (13.40%), and Nature–Industry (20%), within the logo. For example, participant U-8 stated: *"Our city takes its name from the Sakarya River. I believe the logo should reflect the city's values. Elements such as the Justinianus Bridge, the Sakarya River, the Taraklı Houses, and especially the city's recent identity as a city of bicycles should be reflected in the logo through themes like Water–Sports–Nature."* Similarly, participant U-14 responded: *"If we consider our city and its tourism values, it should include the sea and nature, represented by its shades of blue and green."* Some of the potential brand values are shown in Figure 4.

5.2. The Role of Urban Projects in Advancing Tourism-Oriented City Branding in Sakarya

To assess the contribution of completed or ongoing projects in Sakarya to the city's branding potential, participants evaluated the impact of implemented or planned tourism-related projects based on city branding criteria. A matrix outlining project themes and city branding criteria was provided to participants for this assessment. Project selection for the study considered their potential to contribute to the tourism sector, their implementation within Sakarya or spatial influence on Sakarya and its surroundings, and the extent to which their effects could be evaluated

across social, cultural, economic, and spatial dimensions. The projects included in the study's scope are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 Urban Projects and Initiatives Related to Tourism in Sakarya

No	Category	Project Title	Institution(s)	Scope / Purpose	Relation to Tourism	Objective	Year
P1	Agricultural Projects	Medicinal and Aromatic Plant Cultivation	Sakarya Metropolitan Municipality	Medicinal plant production, beekeeping, nature walks; rural development	Agro-tourism, gastronomy tourism	Local development, nature-based production, integration with gastronomy	2019–2023 (Completed)
		Sakarya Ornamental Plants and Greenhouse Excellence Center	Sakarya Metropolitan Municipality, Ferizli Municipality	Ornamental plant production, greenhouse, soil-free agriculture, rural support	Rural and agro-tourism	Rural tourism, economic development, eco-compatible production	2016– (Completed)
P2	Coastal Recreation Project	Karasu Coast Park and Recreation Project	Sakarya Metropolitan Municipality	Recreational use of coastal areas	Coastal tourism, day tourism	Enhancing social life quality, contributing to coastal tourism	2017– (Ongoing)
P3	Blue Flag Beach Project	Karasu-Kocaali Blue Flag Project	Sakarya Metropolitan Municipality	Obtaining blue flag certification for Sakarya's coastline	Marine tourism, ecotourism	Gaining international environmental and tourism certifications	2021– (Completed)
P4	Stream Recreation Project	Maden Stream Recreation Project	Sakarya Metropolitan Municipality	Converting the natural area into a tourism zone	Nature walks, nature tourism	Tourism safety, recreational area development	2021–2024 (Completed)
P5	Historical Structure Restoration Project	Restoration of Justinianus Bridge	Serdivan Municipality	Restoring historical and cultural heritage for tourism	Cultural tourism	Heritage conservation, creating tourism resources, identity building	2021– (Ongoing)
P6	Natural Area Restoration Project	Restoration of Acarlar Floodplain	Sakarya Metropolitan Municipality, Ministry of Agriculture and	Conservation of natural areas, strengthening ecotourism infrastructure	Ecotourism, nature tourism	Ecological awareness, nature-based tourism, enhanced visitor experience	2022– (Ongoing)
P7	Projects for Sports Activities	Sunflower Valley and UCI MTB World Championship	Sakarya Metropolitan Municipality	Improving sports infrastructure, hosting international cycling events	Sports tourism, integrated recreation	Increasing sports tourism potential, creating brand image	2018– (Completed)
P8	Digitizing Tourism	SATBIS – Digital Tourism Guide	Sakarya Governorship	Digitization of tourism, providing smart tourism guides	Digital tourism, knowledge sharing	Easy access to information, promotion of tourism potential	2018– (Completed)
P9	Lakeside Recreation Project	Sapanca Lake–Çark Stream Walking & Cycling Path	Sakarya Metropolitan Municipality	Cycling infrastructure and access improvement, increasing quality of life	Nature tourism, cycling tourism	Sustainable mobility, eco-city identity, promoting sports tourism	2020 – (Ongoing)

A set of city branding criteria (Table 3) was compiled to evaluate the contributions of the identified projects to city branding. These criteria were developed through a literature review and applied throughout the research process. In the provided matrix, participants were asked to rate each project received a score of 0-3 based on its alignment with the criteria. Specifically, a score of 0 indicates definitely no impact, 1 indicates neither important nor unimportant, 2 indicates important impact, and 3 indicates definitely important impact.

Table 3 Defined City Branding Criteria

	Criteria	References
K1	Improvement of environmental quality	Frey and George (2010), Lóránt and Tünde (2010), Mihalic et al. (2021)
K2	Impact of the competitiveness	Alpar and Erdem (2005), Anholt(2006), Ashworth and Page (2011), Huovari et al. (2001), Ceran (2013), Kasapi and Cela (2017), Seisdedos and Vaggione (2005), Scoffham and Vale (1996), Zeren (2012)
K3	Impact on the improvement of the quality of life	Dinnie (2010), Özsöz (2018), Kasapi and Cela (2017), Zeren (2012), Deffner and Liourius (2005), Lever and Turok (1999), Harvey (2016)
K4	Impact on the improvement of the city's economic structure	Çetinsöz and Temiz (2018), Özsöz (2018), Özdemir (2007), Oppermann(2000)
K5	Impact of the promotion of the city	Ceran (2013), Cevher (2012), Sarı and Kozak (2005), Saran (2005), Risitano (2006), Hillel et al. (2013), Hashimoto and Telfer (2006)
K6	Contribution to the city's sports activities	Kurtzman (2007), Heidary et al. (2016), Gammon and Robinson (2003)
K7	Contribution to the city's cultural and artistic life	Cevher (2012), Başpınar (2015), Saveriades (2000), Morgan et al. (2003)

Among all evaluated projects, P4 (Stream Recreation Project) is expected to have the most significant positive impact on city branding criteria, both in total and average scores, achieving a total of 19 (Table 4). Located in the northern part of the city within the Maden Stream Recreation Area, which is designated as a 'Natural Site' due to historical mining activities from the Ottoman period, the project benefits from a rich natural environment. The area features a living tree museum, a diverse array of bird species, and caves within the rocks, creating an integrated natural landscape. The project provides recreational opportunities, including hiking trails, fountains, resting areas, mountaineering, trekking, and camping. These attributes have enhanced Sakarya's regional ecotourism potential. Consequently, participants evaluated the project favourably.

Table 4 Project Scores by City Branding Criteria

Projects		Criteria K1	K2	K3	K4	K5	K6	K7	Total	Average	Std. Dev.	Varia.
P1	Agricultural Projects	2	2	3	3	3	0	1	14	2,00	1,15	1,33
P2	Coastal Recreation Project	3	2	2	2	3	2	1	15	2,14	0,69	0,48
P3	Blue Flag Project	3	3	2	2	3	2	1	16	2,29	0,76	0,57
P4	Stream Recreation Project	3	3	2	3	3	3	2	19	2,71	0,49	0,24
P5	Historical Heritage Restoration Project	3	2	1	2	3	1	3	15	2,14	0,90	0,81
P6	Natural Area Restoration Project	3	3	2	3	3	2	2	18	2,57	0,53	0,29
P7	Projects for Sport Activites	2	3	2	2	3	3	2	17	2,43	0,53	0,29
P8	Digitalization in Tourism Sector	0	1	1	1	2	2	1	8	1,14	0,69	0,48
P9	Lakeside Recreation Project	3	2	2	2	2	3	1	15	2,14	0,69	0,48
	Total	22	21	17	20	25	18	14				
	Mean	2,44	2,33	1,89	2,22	2,78	2,00	1,56				

K1: Improvement of environmental quality, K2: Impact of competitiveness, K3: Impact on the improvement of quality of life, K4: Impact on the improvement of the city's economic structure, K5: Impact of the promotion of the city, K6: Contribution to the city's sports activities, K7: Contribution to the city's cultural and artistic life.

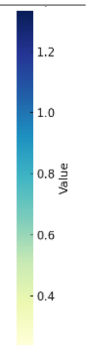
Evaluation of city branding criteria across the projects indicates that all projects, collectively scoring 25 points, have the greatest influence on the 'impact of the promotion of the city' criterion (K5). Projects P1 through P7 are identified as the most effective in promoting the city and are considered to contribute significantly to the city's tourism branding. Expert assessments of projects P8 and P9 highlight the importance of conducting promotional activities not only at local and regional levels but also on national and international platforms, particularly through electronic media such as the internet. Furthermore, expert evaluations suggest that natural and agricultural factors contribute additional value to the city and enhance its recognition.

Analysis of the total criteria scores indicates that the projects are perceived as positively influencing the 'improvement of environmental quality positively' (K1). In cities with significant natural assets, such projects are expected to substantially enhance the city's branding potential. However, regarding the criterion of contribution to the city's cultural and artistic life (K7), all projects received the lowest scores in both total and average evaluations. The Justinianus Bridge, which is included in the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List, is identified as the project most likely to significantly affect the city's cultural and artistic life through its restoration initiative (P5). Expert evaluations of Project P5 demonstrate consensus that cultural heritage is essential for city branding in tourism, as it ensures preservation for future generations and strengthens urban and regional identity. Additionally, Projects P4, P6, and P7 are considered to have a notable impact on enhancing the city's cultural and artistic life.

According to the criterion of 'the impact on the improvement of the city's economic structure' (K4), projects P2, P3, P5, P7, and P9 are expected to make significant contributions to the development of the city's touristic brand image. Regarding 'the impact on the improvement of quality of life' (K3), agricultural projects (P1) have been identified as the most influential. Project P1 is assessed as having the greatest positive effect on the city's quality of life and, consequently, on the branding process. The anticipated benefits of this project, such as enhanced food security and support for local entrepreneurship, are expected to improve the overall quality of life.

Table 5 Heatmap of the Projects' Score

		Std. Dev.	Varia.
P1	Agricultural Projects	1,15	1,33
P2	Coastal Recreation Project	0,69	0,48
P3	Blue Flag Project	0,76	0,57
P4	Stream Recreation Project	0,49	0,24
P5	Historical Heritage Restoration Project	0,90	0,81
P6	Natural Area Restoration Project	0,53	0,29
P7	Projects for Sport Activites	0,53	0,29
P8	Digitalization in Tourism Sector	0,69	0,48
P9	Lakeside Recreation Project	0,69	0,48



An analysis of standard deviation and variance values across the evaluated projects reveals that P1, P3, and P5 generated the least consensus among experts regarding their contributions to city branding criteria (Table 5). This divergence indicates that, within Sakarya, expert opinions vary significantly concerning the roles of agricultural initiatives, cultural heritage preservation, and Blue Flag-related projects in enhancing the city's brand identity. In contrast, P4 and P6 were associated with the highest level of expert agreement regarding their perceived positive impact on branding. This outcome suggests a prevailing perspective that interventions focused on natural environments and river-based recreation have substantial potential to strengthen the city's brand value. Additionally, these two projects were identified as the most influential in promoting city branding based on their total and average impact scores. Conversely, P8, which received the lowest impact score, is notable for being among the few projects to achieve a strong expert consensus, as indicated by its low standard deviation and variance.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

City branding is widely recognized as a key objective that aligns with broader development strategies. The tourism potential of cities is increasingly conceptualized as a brand, similar to commercial products. Cities can leverage their distinctive resources to enhance their appeal to visitors with varied interests. This study investigates the city branding capacity of Sakarya, a city with considerable potential for urban branding.

Expert assessments indicate that Sakarya's most influential assets in the city branding process are its natural, historical, and cultural values. Previous research demonstrates that cities emphasizing distinctive environmental and cultural characteristics are more likely to establish authentic and competitive brand images, especially within tourism-oriented branding strategies (Başpınar, 2015; Dinnie, 2010). Accordingly, Sakarya's branding potential is consistent with international cases in which place identity is shaped by unique natural landscapes and heritage assets.

City branding relies not only on the existence of urban values but also on effective promotion and institutional collaboration. Accordingly, this study investigates the types of projects that align with the city's tourism values and assesses the extent to which these initiatives meet the criteria for city branding. As highlighted by Dinnie (2010) and Apaydın (2011), city branding is a long-term, multidimensional planning process that necessitates systematic evaluation of urban interventions. The matrix-based evaluation framework utilized in this research reflects multi-criteria assessment methods commonly applied in urban development and branding studies, allowing decision-makers to prioritize projects that most closely align with branding objectives. The results suggest that this approach can serve as a decision-support tool for selecting or comparing alternative projects.

The matrix findings indicate that projects focused on the city's natural areas contribute most significantly to the city's branding process. These projects also excel in criteria that reinforce the city's brand image, including city promotion, environmental quality improvement, enhanced

competitiveness, and the strengthening of the city's economic structure. Consistent with the arguments of Cudny et al. (2020), the results suggest that integrating natural resources into urban branding enhances environmental perception, competitiveness, and long-term brand resilience. Evaluation of the overall impact across all project areas demonstrates that the objective of becoming a branded city aligns with local development strategies for cities and regions.

A key development in Sakarya's city branding process is the municipality's prioritization of bicycle infrastructure, alongside recreational and sports facilities. After receiving the "Bicycle-Friendly City" designation in 2021, the Sakarya Metropolitan Municipality increased investments in this sector and established a continuous bicycle and pedestrian path. This initiative improved sustainable mobility and created new public spaces integrated with nature, thereby enhancing the city's image. Hosting international events such as the UCI Mountain Bike Marathon World Championship has further elevated Sakarya's profile in global sports tourism, promoted healthy lifestyles, and showcased its natural resources. Interviews indicated that most participants associated Sakarya's brand image with the slogan "Bicycle City," underscoring the city's identity. This observation is consistent with research highlighting the importance of creative, lifestyle-oriented, and sustainability-driven urban initiatives in modern city branding strategies (Tomaz & Caldeira, 2021; Kasemsarn et al., 2025).

In this context, Sakarya has significant potential to become a branded city. Accordingly, future objectives for decision-makers and implementing stakeholders should include prioritizing collaboration and coordination within the framework of city branding strategies, leveraging the city's spatial proximity to a global metropolis such as Istanbul by targeting improvements in transportation and infrastructure, developing and implementing region-specific service standards, formulating a city-specific branding vision and executing it through comprehensive spatial planning, and enhancing the promotion of all initiatives through digital and social media tools. The study further demonstrates that Sakarya's brand-building process should adopt a hybrid model that integrates natural landscapes, sports tourism, and short-term tourism flows, rather than relying on a single dominant tourism theme as exemplified by Bergen. Moreover, a context-specific branding process is required, distinct from mass tourism or culture-focused brand-building models.

While this study incorporates an empirical evaluation, its impact assessment relies primarily on estimates and the perspectives of a small group of experts. Subsequent research on tourism-focused city branding could enhance analytical rigor by focusing on specific sub-areas or thematic clusters within cities and by integrating viewpoints from a broader range of stakeholders, including residents, tourists, and local entrepreneurs. Such approaches would facilitate a more thorough identification of target groups, competitive positioning, and branding themes, and would also enable the validation of expert-based assessments through supplementary empirical and spatial data.

CRediT Authorship Contribution Statement

Esra Parıldı: Conception, findings, materials, data collection and processing, analysis, literature review, writing. Güliz Öztürk: Conception, design, supervision, findings, materials, data processing, analysis, literature review, writing, and critical review.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgement

The present study is based on a master's thesis registered with the Council of Higher Education Thesis Centre under registration number 826904.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

Ethics Committee Approval

No ethics committee approval was required for this study, as all datasets and survey instruments used are from a master's thesis and are properly cited in the references.

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Resume

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