CONVEYING THE PERCEIVED URBAN SAFETY GEOGRAPHY OF A SMALL TOWN FROM LOCALS TOWARDS THE TOURISTS: EXPERIENCE AND DESTINATION DISCOURSE IN SIGHETU MARMAȚIEI (ROMANIA)

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Abstract: This study explores the geography of the perceived safety in Sighetu Marmației, Romania, a key cross-border hub in the Maramures tourist region, particularly impacted by the ongoing conflict in the neighboring country. As interactions between locals and tourists significantly influence the tourist experience, the research examines how local perceptions of safety shape tourist behavior and the destination's image. Utilizing a multidimensional approach, the study considers socio-demographic factors, neighborhood conditions, and embedded past experiences to analyze the perceived safety. Data collection involved mapping 35 strategically chosen points within a pedestrian city tour that links various tourist attractions. The research design is based on a qualitative analysis tool with the features of a short, structured human-operated interview. The visualization and mapping process is based on spatial analysis. It is argued that positive perceptions of safety, rooted in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, contribute to the overall safety ratings, guiding tourists in their movement and decisions. The findings underscore the critical role of local insights in shaping the safety narrative of the destination, with implications for destination marketing strategies aimed at mitigating the negative impact of external conflicts on tourism development. The data retrieving tool is most effective when applied to small or medium-sized cities, where the city structure and the spatial distribution of institutions and services are common knowledge and allow the locals to express an informed opinion on each point throughout the process. Throughout the spatial analysis results show a good overall level of perceived safety. Discussions focus on the generally perceived safety map of Sighetu Marmatiei municipality, combined with map layers exhibiting detailed insights based on gender, age group, and frequent users of the space highlighted several specific points that need to be addressed. While evaluating the perceived safety of the designated points, the locals formulated advice for tourists along the pedestrian route. The resulting heatmaps, pseudo-relief maps, and other operational representations are specifically tailored for the tourism and urban planning domain. These results will serve as a decision-making tool for the tourism and local safety stakeholders – including the destination management organization (DMO Maramures), as well as the national and border police, to implement communication strategies on safety and labeling.

Keywords: perceived safety, urban tourism, Sighetu Marmației, Maramureș

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INTRODUCTION

Small tourist cities organized around their historical center share the space between locals and tourists, daily interactions or close encounters are significant parts of the tourist experience in the destination (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006; Lewandowska et al., 2019). Locals also communicate with tourists on subjects such as the location of attractions, optimal wayfinding issues, current situations, or common service providers orienting them according to their independent perceived safety. In addition, Sighetu Marmației is the main cross-border hub for Maramures Land, a well-known tourist region

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situated on the border with Ukraine (Bar-Kołelis & Wendt, 2018; Deac et al., 2023; Aisha et al., 2024). That is why the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine impacts tourism in Maramures through the perceived safety of the destination, when dealing with cultural tours, pedestrian or self-guided tours, gastronomic experiences, dark tourism places of interest, etc.

Studies show that actual safety policies and discourse orient the perceived safety of the town involving all regular users of the space: inhabitants, economic operators, and tourists (Lever et al., 2024). The present study examines the geography of perceived safety in Sighetu Marmației, as a decision-making tool for the destination discourse on the safety issues, aiming to overwrite the concerned messages affecting it (Safarov et al., 2023; Ilies et al., 2024; Caciora et al., 2024). Particularly, it argues that if the locals consider an area safe for walking tours and self-planned activities, they would contribute to the generally perceived safety ratings and recommend certain pathways or accommodation units. Data visualization and analysis show features aligned with other domains, such as traffic safety or real estate.

STUDY AREA

Sighetu Marmației is a medium-sized town on the left bank of the Tisza River at the northern border of Romania (Figure 1). It has 40,000 inhabitants and exerts intense polarization on a larger territory comprising around 80,000 inhabitants. From a mental and cultural point of view, the city polarizes the entire space of the Maramureș Land.

As a tourist destination, it has a yearly flow of 250,000 – 300,000 tourists, with an average length of stay of 3-4 nights. According to local statistics, almost every tourist in the region walks the city for several hours (Wendt et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2024; Josan et al., 2024). The tours are predominantly pedestrian, with a 2km range, linking points of interest for cultural and dark tourism in a lively inhabited historical center.

Within this area, we established 35 points for data collection, with different levels of actual safety, spatial relationships to tourist places, and other highly utilized urban infrastructure.
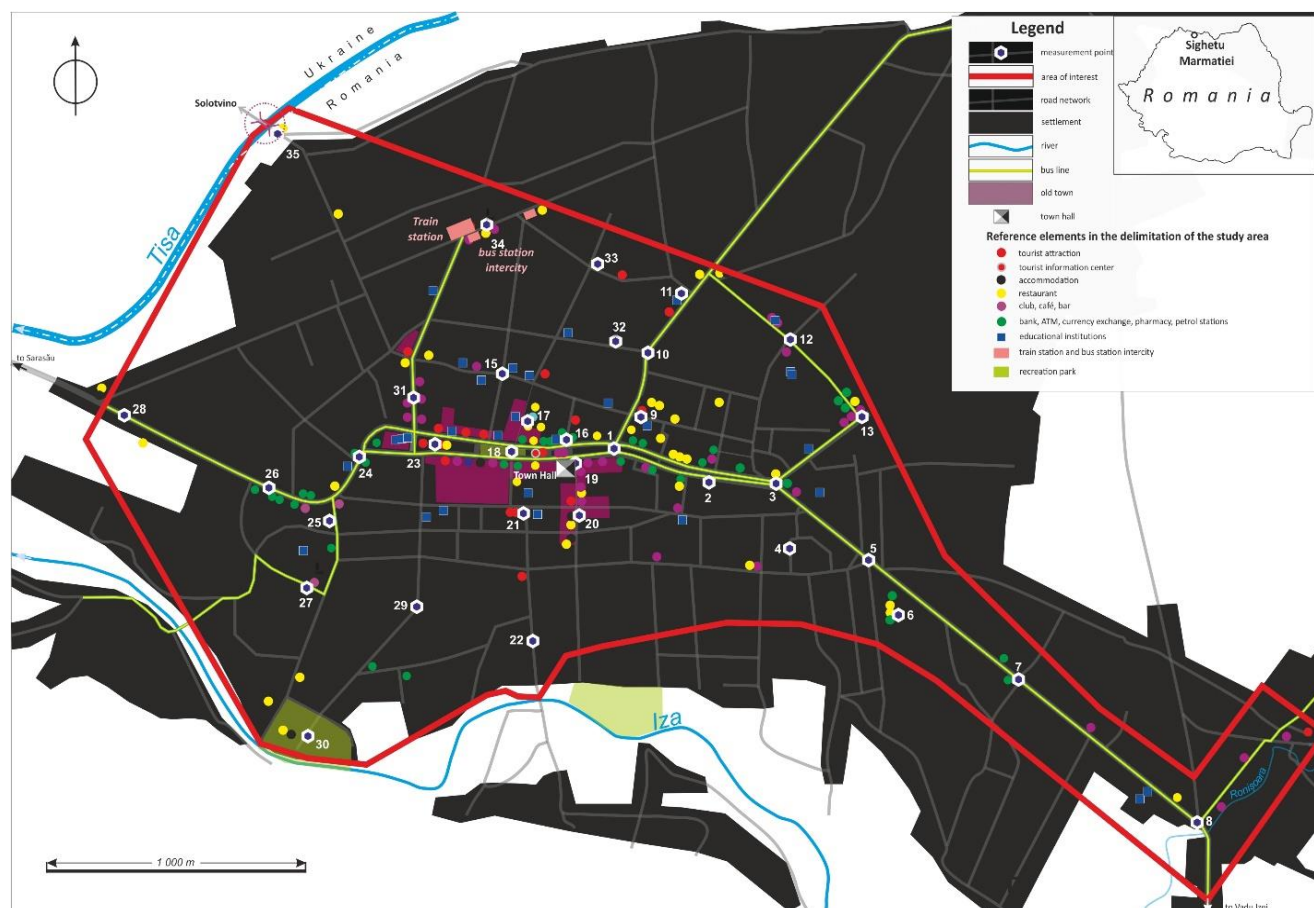

Figure 1. Study area (Source: Authors)

Background and context

Safety is linked to the state of protection against risk, danger, or injury (Yongguang & Qionglei, 2021). Community safety and tourism safety are both parts of a multidimensional social construct influenced by factors such as socio-demographic variables (age, gender, occupation etc), past victimization experiences, and physical factors (neighborhood condition) (Azevedo et al., 2020; Curiel & Bishop, 2016), hence the combined approach, starting with the locals.

First, tourism safety (actual and perceived) has a subjective dimension. It is developed during multiple tourism experiences, operating on three levels: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (Navarrete-Hernandez et al., 2021; Bozogáňová, 2015). The cognitive aspect is typically assimilated with the destinations' features: a positive city image (a

good place-brand) and a safe environment. The emotional level of the construct is linked to a low crime rate and safe-haven discourse internalization, which (1) often forms before the visit, (2) is stronger in close communities and (3) depends on the general atmosphere, like social (un)-rest, war, political stability. The behavioral level is related to preventive behaviors, where ratings and recommendations are included (Ding & Wu, 2022; Curtis et al., 2014; Mansfeld & Pizam, 2006).

Second, cultural walking tours in smaller towns mix the tourists with the locals. This interaction is an important element of the tourist experience. Current literature focuses on the mental space shaped by tourists and locals, in a dissociative manner, leaving good prospects for the intertwined approaches (Lever et al., 2024). This study aims to understand how the locals shape the tourists' safety map at the destination.

The perceived safety literature corpus shows a critical link between tourism, safety, security, and development (UNWTO, 2024; Wendt & Bógdał-Brzezińska, 2024; Safarov et al., 2024). Regarding the development of tourism within a destination, the features of the geo-brand and tourism brand are interlinked (Ilies et al., 2015; Bógdał-Brzezińska et al., 2023), therefore perceived safety in tourism is a crucial part of the destination image and discourse (Yongguang & Qionglei, 2022). Destination Management Organization Maramures (the DMO) is considering several communication strategies to minimize the impact of the war in Ukraine on the tourist brand mainly by conveying messages related to the safe environment.

The retrieving methods for the area-based data are derived from studies on neighborhood safety correlated with other layers: mobility routes, crime maps, environmental risk maps etc. There are also, more segmented studies focusing on gender- safety or age-related safety (Amir et al., 2015).

DATA AND METHODS

Safety evaluation methods often focus on how safe the people feel, rather than how safe a place is. The actual safety of a place is correlated with the levels of security within the built environment, social environment, security enforcement, or risk management (Safe City Index, 2021) while the perceived safety is approached in studies linked to locals' and visitors' perceptions of uncertainty, sense of control, trust, comfort, and experience without intersecting them (Xie et al., 2020).

Therefore, the present study uses a qualitative approach to the general perceived safety of the locals with good spatial knowledge background and frequent interactions with tourists. Regarding the data visualization of safety perception, the study focuses on two mainstream common types: area-based indexes and web tools with heatmaps. Literature shows that these are effective ways to communicate with the tourism stakeholders and local safety stakeholders: the DMO, the local and border police (Zhou et al., 2023; Hardesty, 2013; Cho et al., 2009).

1. Defining the area of interest (AOI)

Sighetu Marmației municipality is stretched over a 111 km^2 area, with a densely built environment in the center, encompassing the majority of tourist attractions, as well as urban infrastructure and services. Due to its features, the mobility between the points of interest is mostly pedestrian. Considering these, the research area was delineated to include points of interest, concentrations of elements, and access routes between them. Figure 1 shows the location and the spatial distribution of the 35 measurement points and the following categories:

• Limits of the old city center
• Tourist attractions (museums, memorial houses, monuments, places of worship, places with special meanings, significant events, etc.) and tourist information center
• The communication network that connects the elements of interest, including the border crossing bridge.
• Railway stations and train stations, bus stations and bus stations for urban public transport, but also for the one that connects the city with the countryside it polarizes
• Accommodation, restaurants, entertainment services
• Public parks and food markets
• Complementary services (banks, ATMs, currency exchange, pharmacies, petrol stations)
• Educational institutions disaggregated on three levels
• Public institutions and security enhancers (city hall, hospital, police, and border police).

2. Defining the measurement system for the perceived safety and tool design

The measurement system for perceived safety is area-based research on a simple question addressed to locals regarding 35 points within the city using a four-degree scale to indicate the general level of perceived safety. The main question was: *In your opinion, are the following places safe for tourists?* The locals were asked to rate the perceived safety level for a list of 35 indicated points, where +2 is very safe, +1 safe, -1 unsafe, and -2 very unsafe. Preliminary research on the subject used to calibrate the tool indicated the utility of a scale without zero. The point grid is conceived considering the place names used by locals - residents or daily commuters, usually pedestrians. The respondents can easily identify the 35 points on the map while expressing an opinion regarding the safety around them.

The research tool has the features of a short, structured human-operated interview. Although it looks like a quantitative analysis, the main question elicits a subjective response based on multi-scale factors. Fixed order of the points of interest and a limited range of response options try to reduce the bias. The attention to the question's phrasing ensured the internal validity, the preliminary tests showed that a more positive approach (on how safe they feel) is more suitable than a negative or neutral one, similar to other neighborhood safety studies (Ciobanu, 2020). Besides the main question, it collected data regarding demographics linked to the type of residence (urban-rural), gender, age group, and education level.

The research was carried out in November-December 2022 by a group of post-graduate students specializing in tourism planning, in person, with prior informed consent, using a mixed sampling method: voluntary response sampling on the public domain, and convenience sampling - friends and family. The average response is 10 minutes and starts with an opening talk regarding the location of the POIs in the interview.

3. Primary data processing methods

The raw data treatment considered the multivariate analysis data visualization and the segmentation algorithm. Table 1 shows the demographics of the study, a total of 491 validated interviews, distributed as evenly as possible by gender, age group, education, and residency. Daily commuters and individuals engaged in urban activities from the settlements around Sighetu Marmației were labeled as rural.

Table 1. Demographics of the respondents

Variable	Frequency	%
Total	500	
Valid	491	98.2
Residence		
Urban	291	59.27
Rural	200	40.73
Gender		
Male	217	44.19
Female	274	55.80
Education		
Higher education	197	40.12
Secondary education	294	59.87
Age group (years old)		
< 20	94	19.14
21-40	221	45.01
41-60	137	27.90
> 60	39	7.94

The retrieved data was then segmented for multivariate analysis into 28 categories (Figure 2), to capture the features of the perceived safety map layers as a socio-demographic construct. Additionally, data was processed according to common statistical methods to ensure relevance for the following spatial analysis (statistical tables and indexes are not shown here).
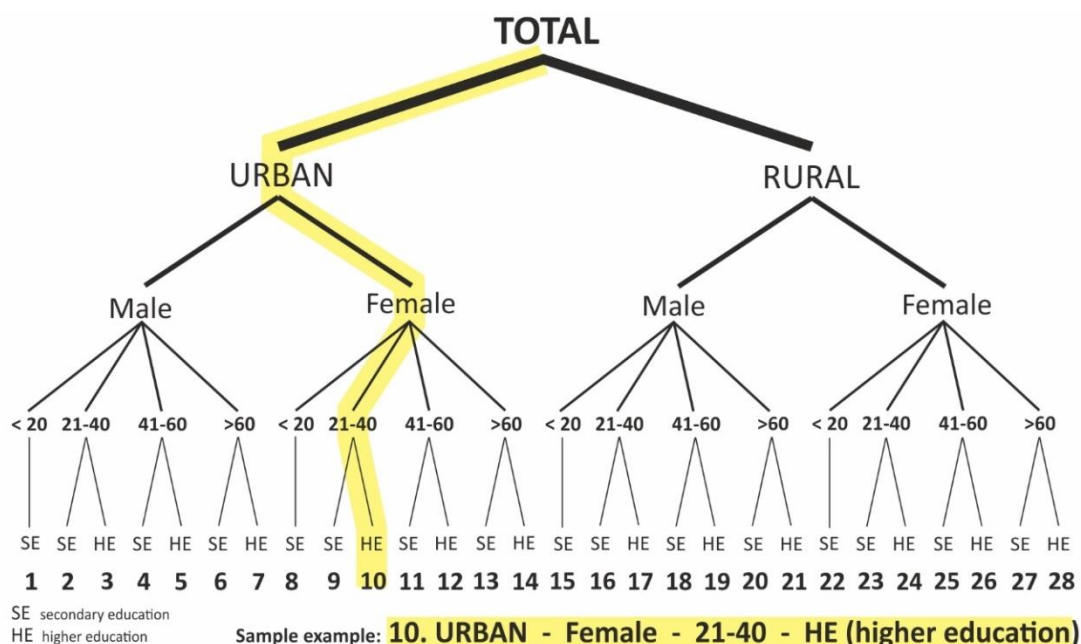

Figure 2. Segmentation design for the multivariate analysis of collected data (Source: Authors)

4. Mapping and data visualization methods

Mapping and visualization of data processed by statistical and spatial analysis were approached as a general perceived safety index, combining the embedded cognitive, emotional, and behavioral layers. The four-degree scale provided a baseline for the heatmaps depicting the level of the average perceived safety, distributed on the base map comprising the relevant landmarks. Besides the general safety map, we provided a pseudo-relief 3D representation for the stakeholders involved in tourism and urban planning, enabling suggestive visualization of different aspects.

Heatmaps are set with 12 classes where the positive values suggest a higher level of general perceived safety, while the negatives infer a lower safety degree. Heatmap properties display red areas for the unsafe hotspots.

The pseudo-relief 3D representation is derived from the heatmaps, processed as contour lines, where a higher degree of safety is seen as elevated places and those with a lower degree as depressions and valleys. This is consistent with representations of emotional responses in qualitative studies on cities (with a flat terrain) and other tourist places (Niccoli and Lynch, 2012).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
1.   General perceived safety
The general perceived heatmap uses the data from the multivariate analysis as a general index. Data for each point was computed as a weighted average score. Further, the built environment along the road network oriented the interpolation process. Figure 3 heatmap illustrates an extensive blue area corresponding to a higher level of perceived safety, and a few island areas considered slightly unsafe, with a minimum value of -0.52, corresponding to the central axes in the old center, followed by a gradual decrease towards the peripheries. The general index does not show the areas labeled as "*very unsafe*" by some respondent categories; thus, a more fine-tuned map layer is necessary.
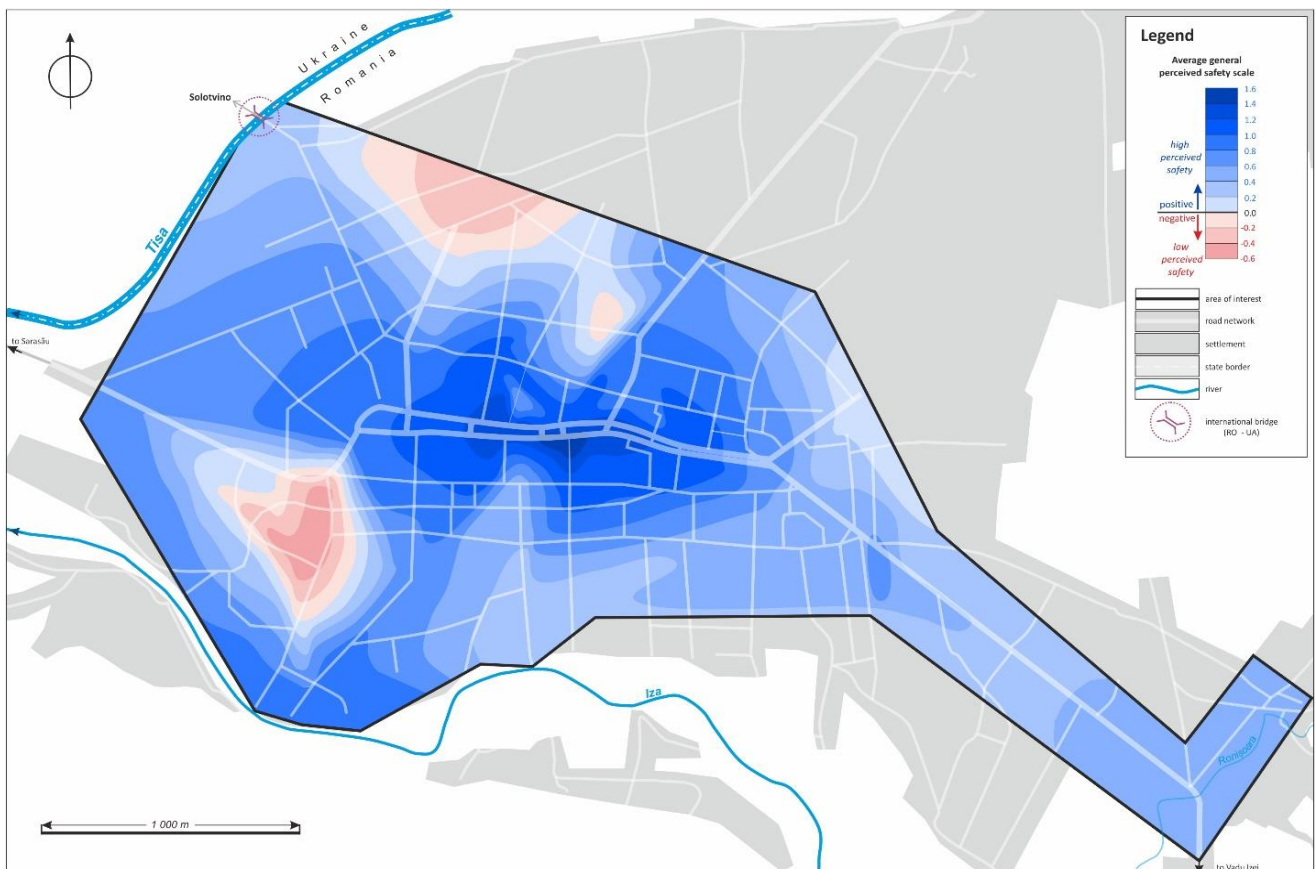

Figure 3. General perceived safety heatmap of Sighetu Marmației municipality (Source: Authors)

1.1. Tourist attractions situated in safe places
The perceived safety index shows that the tourist attractions are located within the safer area: town hall, city center, most frequented museums, and Iza waterfront. Two potentially unsafe places are situated along the side pathway towards the waterfront/stadium and the peasant food market, where safer alternative routes are available and recommended by the locals.

1.2. Transportation hubs are unsafe
The main transport stations - railway and bus main stations are perceived as slightly unsafe. This is a major problem for local tourism, in a region with chronic accessibility issues. That is why, intraregional bus operators prefer to embark travelers around the city center, and these are valuable local tips.

1.3. Emergency service providers' neighborhoods
Safety stakeholders such as the border police, the national police, and the hospital ER are considered safe, even when the actual safety index is lower, due to the vibrant nature of the area. Nevertheless, the unsafe red island corresponds to the area with lower-income housing exhibiting overpopulated flats and a low standard of living or blocks with social safety issues.

2. Age-related perceived safety map
Age-related segmentation allows the observation of differences in perception from one generation to another, not

necessarily linear, but rather determined by certain specificities (Figure 4). The map shows the magnitude of the differences, considering the age group and school location.
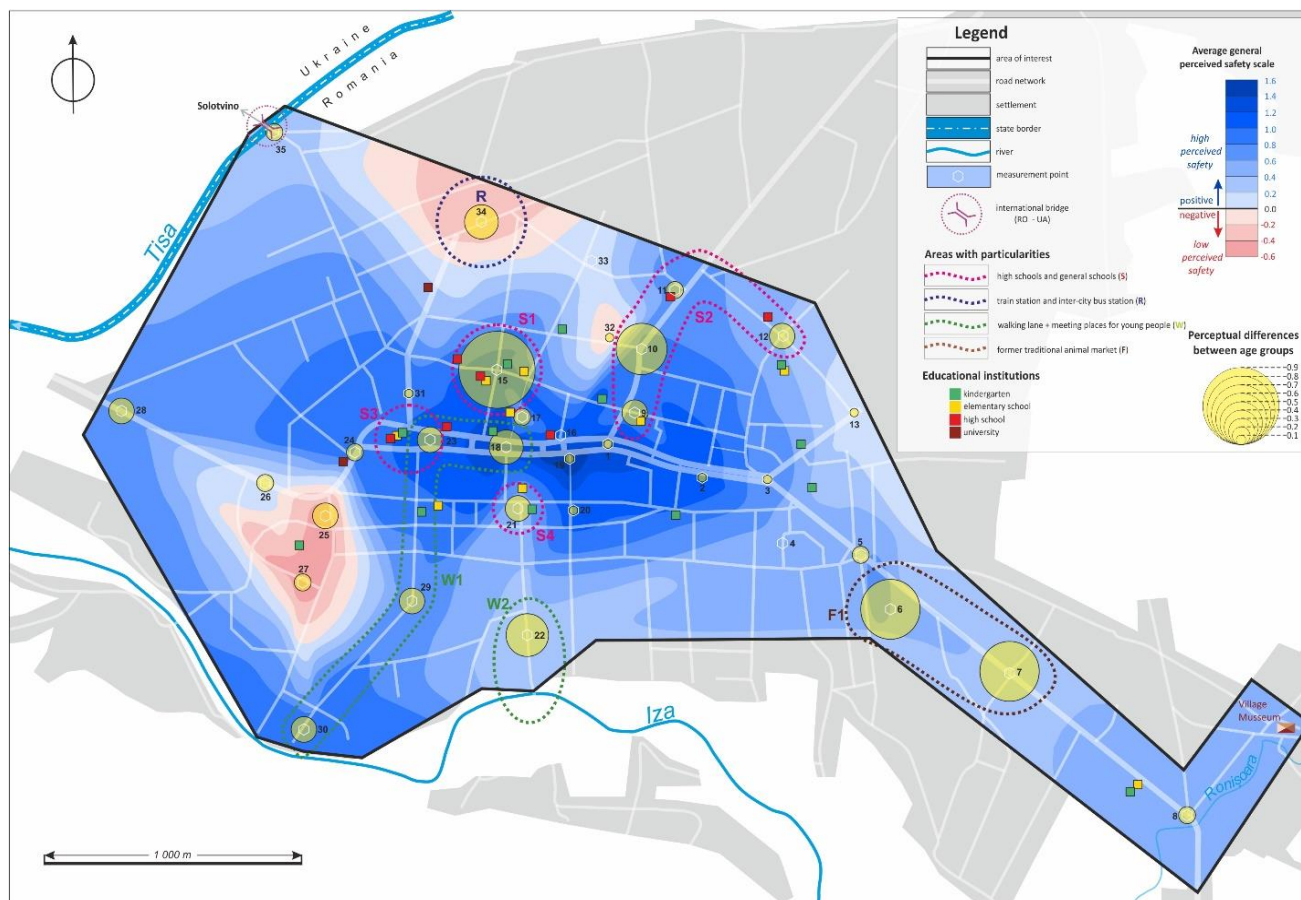

Figure 4. Age group contrast of the perceived safety in Sighetu Marmației (Source: Authors)

2.1. High schools' area is safe for the younger generation

Marked on the map with S, the area exhibits the contrasts in perception between students and parents with school-age children. The first category considers these locations very safe, while the second group considers them with much less confidence. The area with the highest density of youth-frequented restaurants and clubs is situated there.

2.2. Old unsafe places

Older generations (60+ years old) perceive a gentrified neighborhood as unsafe, triggered by a bad collective memory about the livestock fair surroundings (F1). Nowadays, the area is popular among tourists for the supermarket with its parking lot used as a starting point for pedestrian walks.

2.3. Safe or unsafe?

Some nostalgic/ unrealistic elements enhance the perceived safety, by contrast. This draws a dissonant map layer in the area corresponding to the walking lanes described in section 3.1.1., with younger generations feeling safer than the older.

3. Gender and the perceived safety

The perceived safety map comprises two layers based on gender segmentation (Figure 5). The male respondents describe the safety geography as similar to the general index in contrast with the female respondents displaying lower thresholds and a more intricate interpolation. Gender-related maps confirm the existing literature corpus (Qinyu et al., 2023; Bozogáňová, 2015).

3.1. Unsafe areas have different extensions

Unsafe areas have similar positions but wider extensions in the layer connected to female respondents. The opposite differences between men and women are not an issue here.

3.2. Women's avoidant behavior

The features of the built environment such as openness, green park areas, and transport hubs are linked to a lower level of perceived safety in women, triggered by avoidant behavior. Isolines show an abrupt drop in the perceived safety described by women. That is why they point out the unsafe places more intensely.

3.3. Economic development level

Less developed areas are perceived as less safe by women. It is also linked to cognitive and emotional factors, and exposure to information about safety issues. Nevertheless, the map shows an area where the phenomenon is inversed - around the hospital.
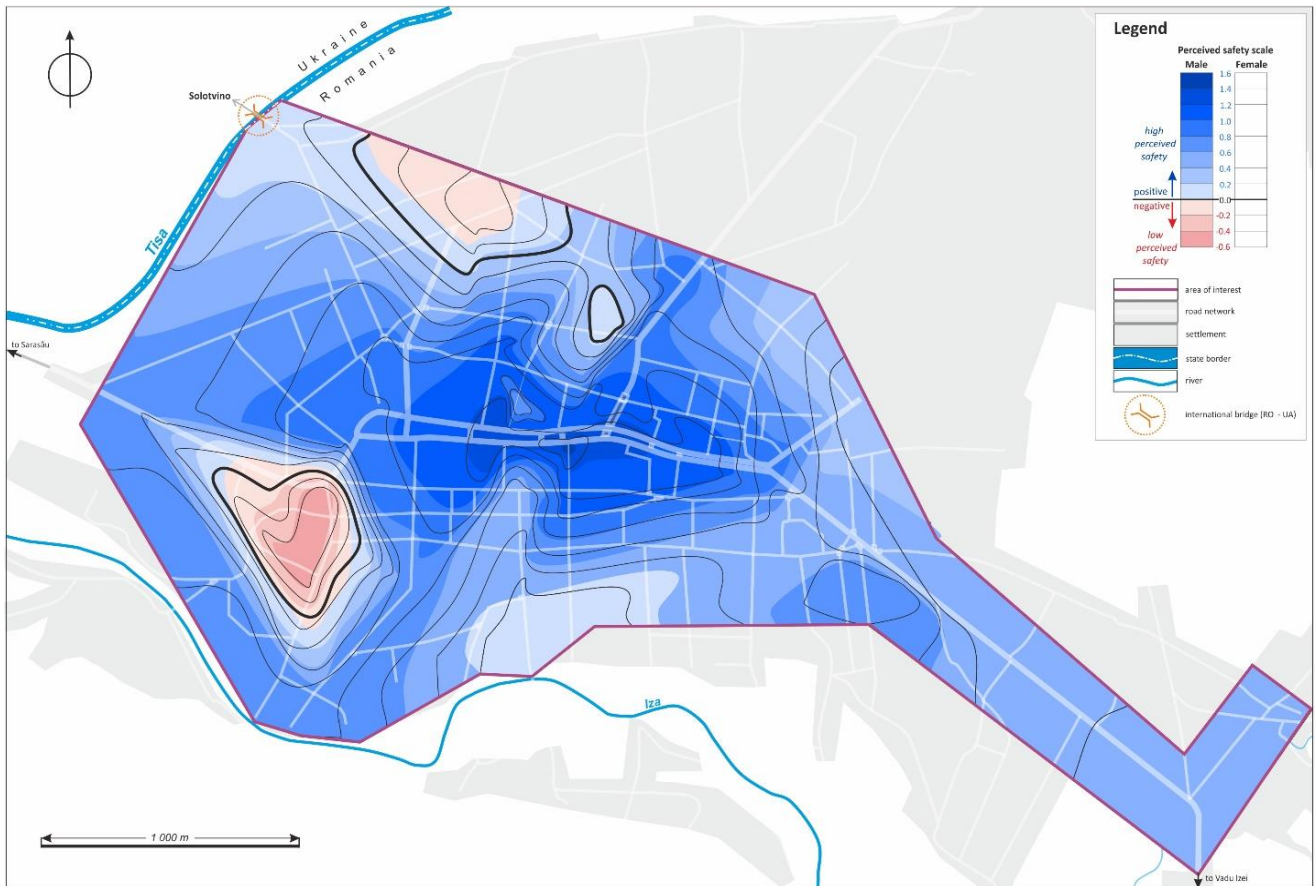
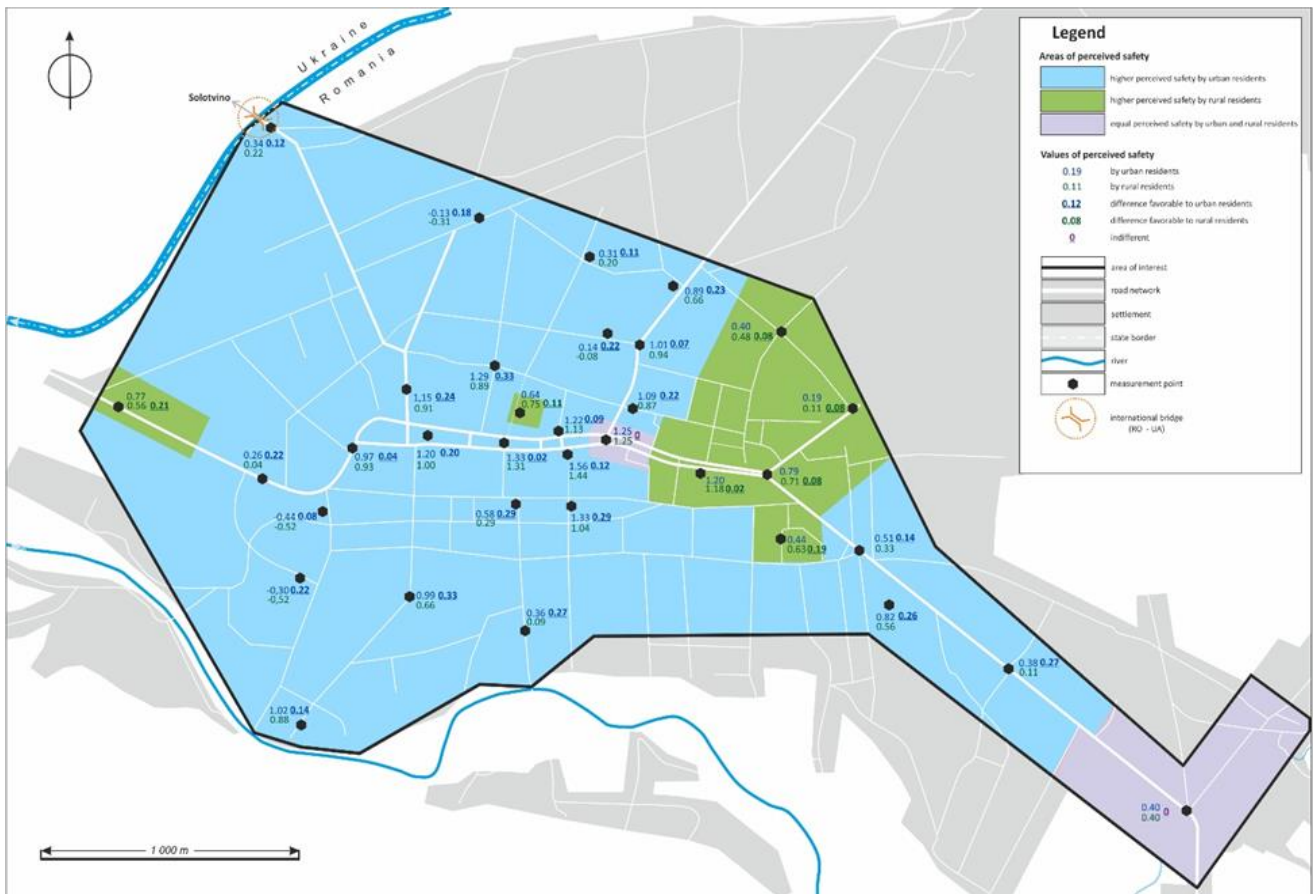Figure 5. Perceived safety differences by gender in Sighetu Marmației (Source: Authors)

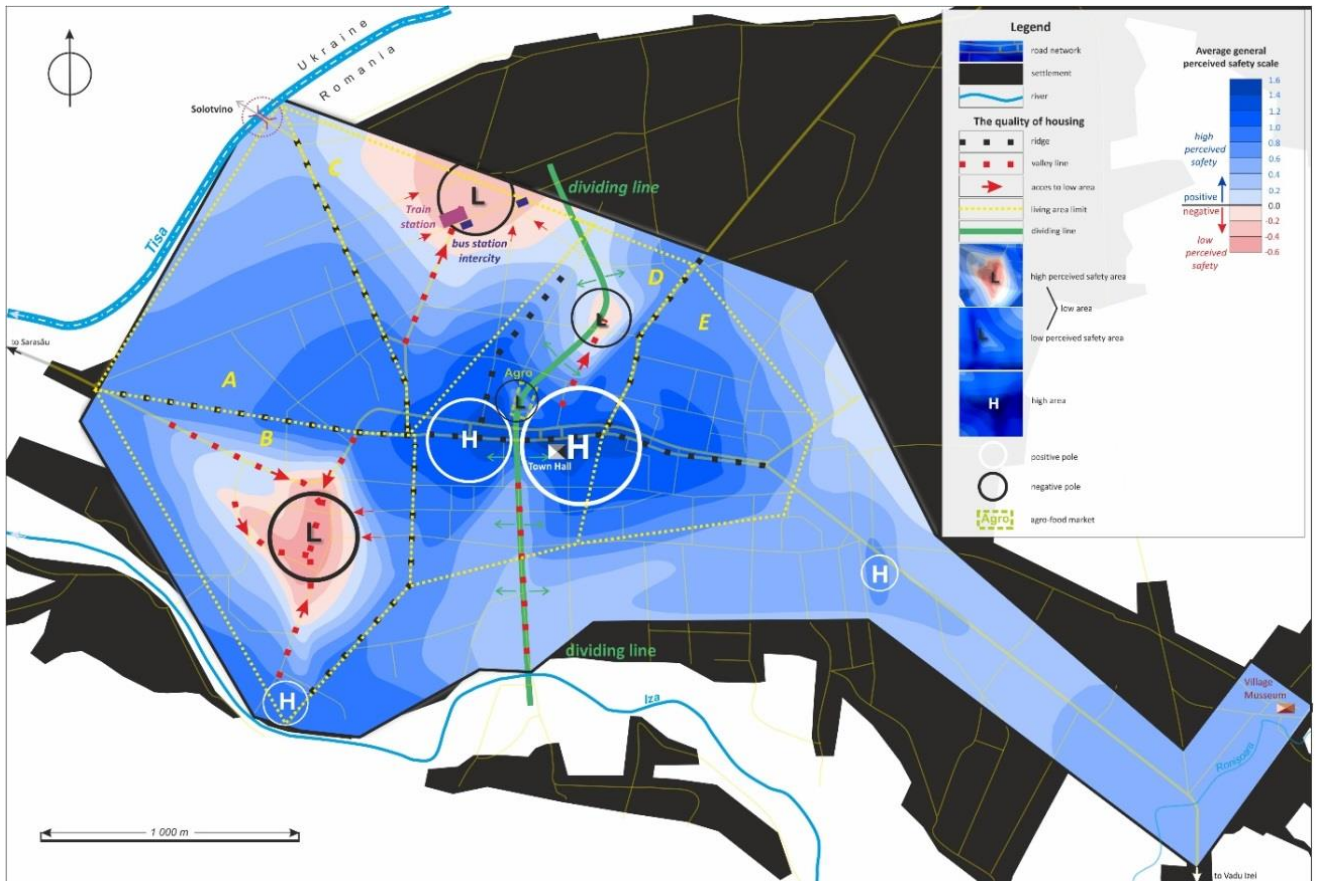Figure 6. Perceived safety differences by residence in Sighetu Marmației (Source: Authors)

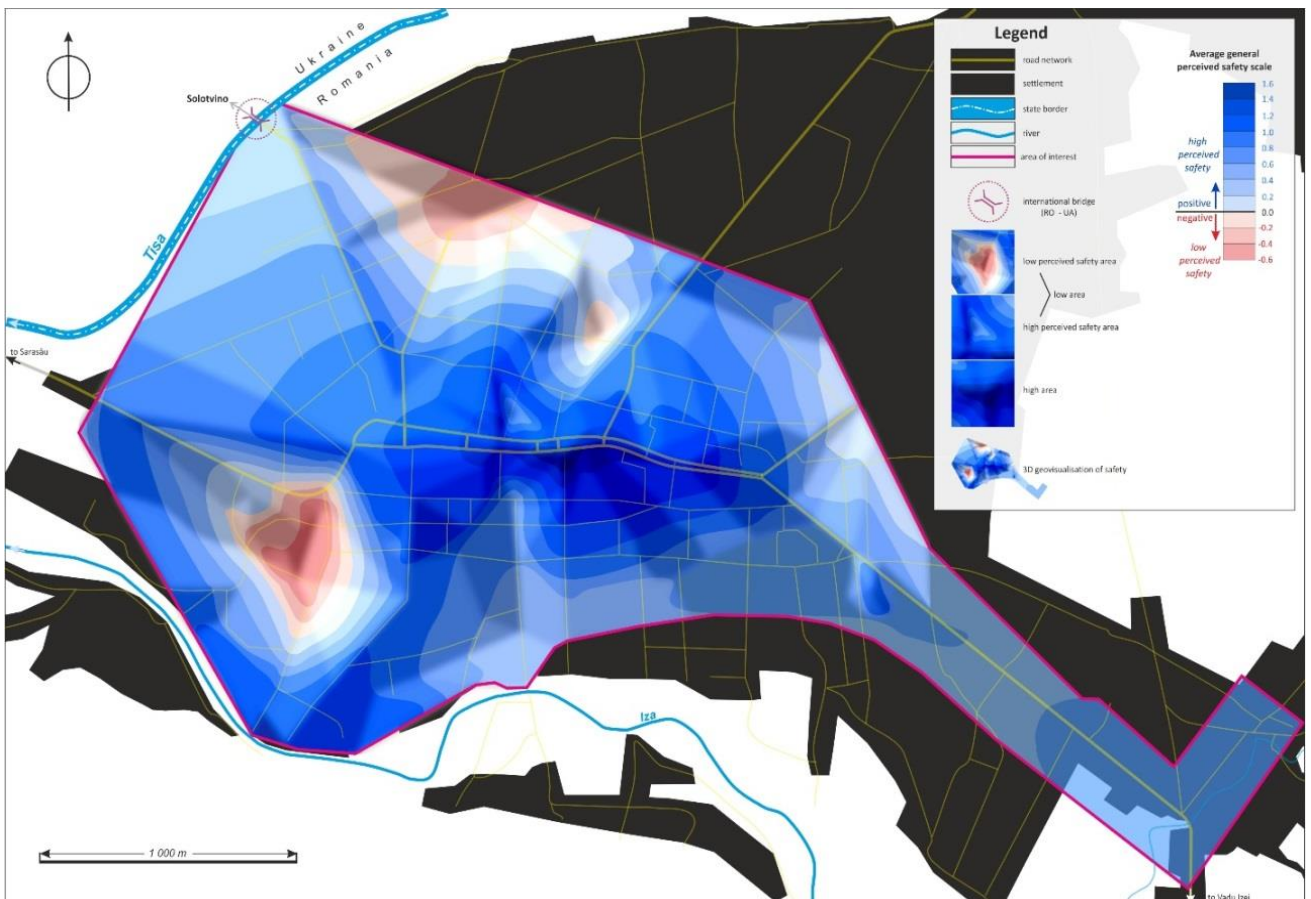Figure 7. Annotated perceived safety zoning of Sighetu Marmației (Source: Authors)

Figure 8. Pseudo-relief 3D representation of the general perceived safety in Sighetu Marmației (Source: Authors)

4. Frequent non-resident urban space user

Newer inhabitants feel the place is safer; this follows the literature corpus on community-perceived safety (Zeng et al., 2023). The map layers with non-residents' responses show a higher degree of perceived safety in the peripheric neighborhoods, contrasting with the locals' perception. This corresponds with their typical activity space and environment, as well as the more affordable decent housing area.

5. Integrated maps

Tourism and safety stakeholders in Sighetu Marmației municipality were provided with two maps aiding in conceiving the discourse on the destination. First, an annotated heatmap (Figure 7) highlights the main perceived safety areas concerning the city center, the tourist attractions, and the most frequented access points. Second, the pseudo-relief 3D representation renders a more intuitive image of the phenomenon, with ridges and valleys similar to the real landforms depicting the safer areas as positive relief and the less safe as lowlands (Figure 8).

CONCLUSIONS

The perceived tourism safety map is drawn according to the locals' view, revealing a slightly different representation than the actual safety map. The heatmaps illustrate the safer areas according to a multicriterial analysis, where the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral exert the strongest impact. Consequently, this study will be used as a decision-making tool for the tourism and local safety stakeholders (the DMO, the national and border police) to implement communication strategies on safety and labeling. The data retrieving tool is most effective when applied to small or medium-sized cities (with population under 50,000), where the city structure and the spatial distribution of institutions and services are common knowledge and allow the locals to express an informed opinion on each point throughout the process. Additionally, the research will be complemented by an in-depth study of the tourists' perspective, before and after the visit.

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