

City Marketing and Youth Retention: Place Attachment in Post-Earthquake Kahramanmaraş

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Abstract

This study examines what determines the intention of young people to stay in the city in Kahramanmaraş, where reconstruction continues after the earthquakes of February 6, 2023. The earthquakes caused great damage to the city's structures and economy. As a result, keeping young people in the city has become an important goal for regional development. The study evaluates the intention to stay as an indicator of the success of city marketing, not the usual result of restructuring. The study model is based on the ideas of place attachment, push-pull in migration, conscious choice to stay, and social change. The direct effect of the perception of economic opportunity on the intention to stay, the mediating role of place attachment, and whether the perception of participation changes this effect are examined. The data were collected through a face to face survey conducted with 439 university students and public/private sector employees between the ages of 18-34. The findings obtained as a result of the study show that the perception of economic opportunity increases place attachment, and it was seen that place attachment is the strongest indicator of intention to stay. When place attachment is

taken into account, the direct effect of economic opportunity weakens and its negative effect is seen. As a result, economic expectations mostly affect the intention to stay through commitment. The study provides important outputs for city marketing, place branding and local government strategies in post-earthquake regions.

Keywords: City Marketing, Perceived Economic Opportunities, Place Attachment, Intention to Remain, Kahramanmaraş.

JEL Codes: M31, R23, R58, Q54

Highlights

- Post-disaster youth stay intention was modeled in Kahramanmaraş.
- Economic opportunities affect stay intention mainly through place attachment.
- Participatory perception provides a direct and independent positive effect.
- Place identity predicts stay intention more strongly than place dependence.

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1. Introduction

Cities today compete for more than tourists and investment. Just as fiercely, they compete to retain their young populations, because students, early-career workers and aspiring entrepreneurs express through their mobility choices whether a city has a future. From this perspective, city marketing is much more than slogans and promotional campaigns. At its core, city marketing is a way of managing places through which a city shapes its identity, services, and relationships with stakeholders. The implementation of strategic governance models has been shown to influence how successfully a municipality delivers on its foundational promises regarding urban quality of life (Kavaratzis, 2004). In this process, emotional responses, psychological tendencies, and feedback from the local population are no longer treated as secondary background data; rather, they become important inputs for key management decisions. This approach highlights that local government policies become particularly effective when they focus on youth retention (Anholt, 2010).

In this case, the question that needs to be answered is how young people decide whether to stay in or leave a city. Job opportunities, career prospects and income levels are important, but the sense of belonging to the city is at least as important as economic factors. Research shows that university students' positive perceptions of the cities in which they study directly increase their desire to continue living in those cities (Lu et al., 2025). It is observed that the psychological bond individuals develop with the places in which they live can influence actual migration decisions, beyond conventional assumptions regarding the role of city image (Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Strandberg, 2023). Participatory governance is an important topic that is frequently emphasized in urban studies. When young people see that their ideas are genuinely valued in the decision making processes of local governments and reflected in practice, a strong bond of trust is established between them and the local authorities. Indeed, previous studies (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Maziashvili et al., 2023) show that community participation, facilitated through both digital platforms and face to face public meetings, is one of the key mechanisms for developing and sustaining city brands. Young people's awareness that they are included in governance processes further strengthens the positive effect of economic opportunities on stay intention

Kahramanmaraş was selected as the research area in this study to evaluate young residents' perceptions of the current situation and to determine their migration intentions. The city in which the research was conducted was largely destroyed by two major earthquakes on 6 February 2023, with moment magnitudes of Mw 7.7 and Mw 7.6, as reported by AFAD

(2023). This disaster destroyed a significant portion of the physical infrastructure of the city and caused serious damage to local economic life (World Bank, 2023). Overcoming these difficult conditions of the city and preventing youth migration have become vital priorities for the future development of the city. Promoting the city to young people as a place of economic opportunity should not remain merely an abstract promotional and branding activity, but must be supported by concrete actions and practices on the ground. Indeed, recent research confirms that the quality of local governance and institutional practices of local governments directly affect individuals confidence in the region's economic growth, an effect that can be statistically measured (Audretsch et al., 2025).

Three primary objectives are emphasized in this study. First, the direct effect of perceived economic opportunities, such as local job opportunities, internship opportunities, and the entrepreneurial environment, on the intention to stay among young people in Kahramanmaraş is examined. Second, the mediating role of place attachment, which consists of the dimensions of "place identity" and "place dependence," in the effect of economic perceptions on the intention to stay is evaluated. Third, it is tested whether perceived participation, which refers to young people's belief that they have a say in local government decisions, has a moderating role in this relationship. Based on the results, the research aims both to contribute to the city marketing literature and to provide concrete and evidence based recommendations for local authorities involved in managing the post-earthquake recovery process.

These three objectives rest on a common theoretical base. Place attachment theory explains why economic perceptions may reach behavior through an emotional and functional bond rather than directly. The push and pull view of migration, together with recent work that treats staying as an active choice, explains why perceived economic opportunities are taken as the starting variable. Social exchange theory explains why perceived participation may act as a signal of fair treatment and therefore carry its own weight. Subsection 2.1 sets out this framework and links each hypothesis to it.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The model of this study is based on three basic theoretical approaches. The first of these and the main approach of the study is place attachment. The push pull approach and the current debates that staying in place is not only a state of nonmigration but also an active choice explain the migration dimension of

the study. Social change theory, on the other hand, deals with the participation of young people in urban life and decision making processes.

These three approaches explain the different parts of the model. It also helps to understand why perceptions of economic conditions, place attachment, and perceived level of participation function differently.

2.1.1. Place attachment as a basic approach

Place attachment refers to the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral bond between an individual and the place they live in. Scannell and Gifford (2010) consider this connection in three basic dimensions: person, psychological process, and place. Accordingly, place attachment does not only consist of the feelings an individual feels towards a place; it also includes their thoughts and behaviors about that place.

In empirical studies, place dependence is generally examined through two basic dimensions. Place identity refers to the extent to which a city or place is a part of an individual's self perception. Place dependence, on the other hand, shows how important a certain place is for an individual to continue their daily life and achieve their goals (Williams & Vaske, 2003).

This two dimensional approach is still widely used today. For example, Qian et al. (2025) discussed place attachment in the long term post disaster recovery process and examined how this attachment regenerates over time. Liu et al. (2025) showed that place attachment plays a significant role in the relationship between neighborhood harmony and life satisfaction, and that place attachment is more pronounced, especially among young people.

This study also deals with place attachment in two dimensions: place identity and place dependence. In this context, place attachment is considered as one of the basic mechanisms explaining the relationship between young people's perceptions of the city and their plans to stay in the city or go elsewhere in the future.

2.1.2. Staying as an active choice: Push, pull and immobility

In classical migration studies often explain people's decision to move with push and pull factors. For example, a weak job market pushes people out of their homes; higher wages and better career opportunities attract them to another city. This perspective is useful for understanding migration; but staying in place often means not moving. Olumba (2025) says that people can consciously choose to stay despite difficult economic conditions. Local resources, social relationships, and community ties provide important

reasons to stay. This perspective is supported by recent reviews of rural and non-metropolitan youth retention, which are discussed in detail in Section 2.4.

This study is also in line with this approach. The intention to stay does not stem from not being able to migrate. It is a positive and conscious choice made by the individual in line with the evaluation of the place he lives and the bonds he establishes.

2.1.3. Social exchange and the position of participation

Social exchange theory explains behavior as a series of changes. People compare what they give to a relationship with what they take from it. When the change feels fair, they connect to the relationship and act in its favor (Ahmad et al., 2023). A city is one side of such change for its young residents. The city offers jobs, services, and a voice in local decisions. Young people, on the other hand, offer their labor, taxes, and long term assets. Participation is a strong signal in this change because it shows young people that the city takes their views seriously. Participatory place branding research supports this reading. Tottenborg et al. (2023) show that place branding works better when public administrators build genuine support among local actors; because this support does not come spontaneously. A review on youth participation in local governance finds that participation increases civic skills and engagement but rarely changes policy outcomes (Ramos et al., 2026). Social exchange theory explains why this type of participation can still be important: even a limited channel signals respect, and respect is part of change. This study therefore expects participation to operate as a driver in its own right, not just as an element that supports economic perceptions.

2.1.4. Considering the three theoretical approaches together

These three theoretical approaches explain different parts of the study. The push-pull approach explains why perceived economic opportunities are considered as the starting variable in the model. The place attachment theory shows why economic perceptions alone are not sufficient to explain an individual's decisions. Economic opportunities gain meaning through the bond that individuals establish with the city in which they live.

Social change theory, on the other hand, explains why perceived participation is considered as an indicator of fair treatment and reciprocity perception. The fact that individuals think that they are involved in decision making and participation processes in the city can affect their relationship with the place they live in and the continuity of this relationship.

These three approaches also form the basis for the

formulation of the hypotheses of the study. H1 is based on the push-pull approach. H2, H3 and H4 are related to the place attachment theory. H5 is based on the social exchange theory and tests whether perceived participation strengthens the influence of economic factors or is also effective independently of these factors.

2.2. Residents as the Internal Audience of Place Branding

City marketing develops as a result of the need of cities to attract investors, tourists and qualified workforce. Its scope evolves from external promotion to local government. Current city branding studies focus on local governments to offer sustainable living opportunities to the public; not only logos or slogans are produced (Kavaratzis, 2004). Since the daily experiences and perceptions of city residents form the center of the city brand, city management is shaped accordingly. Young people are a priority group as they represent a qualified workforce that supports economic production and development (Anholt, 2010). Thus, keeping young residents in the city is accepted as a concrete criterion of city marketing success.

Insch and Florek (2008) argue that local people are the most valuable goal of city marketing and emphasize that improving residents' quality of life and city satisfaction should be the main goal of local governments. This study brings together psychology, sociology, and marketing to examine resident satisfaction and states that this satisfaction should be monitored as a measure of success. Similarly, in our study, the intention to stay in the city is considered the main indicator of city marketing success; however, not only satisfaction, but also perceived economic opportunities and place attachment were included and measured in the model.

Zenker and Rütter (2014), in their study of 765 participants in Germany, found that people who were happy to live in the city were more connected, had a positive view of the city brand, and were less willing to leave. While the place of birth or the number of years lived did not alone determine the decision to stay, perceptions about the city were found to be more determinant. This outcome aligns with our approach in the study. Our research focuses on perceived economic opportunities rather than time or demographic characteristics and examines place attachment. The main difference is spatial situation. While Zenker and Rütter worked in a city where daily life was normal, this research was conducted in a city trying to recover from a major natural disaster.

Using city branding solely for outward promotion carries risks. Casais and Monteiro (2019) examine Porto. It is shown that residents are not fully included in the promotion. Although locals accept the

brand identity, criticisms have focused on targeting only tourists and not strengthening residents' place loyalty. This can be considered a failure of inward looking place marketing. The success of city marketing in Kahramanmaraş has been measured by the intention of young residents to stay, not by external visitors.

A recent systematic review on urban branding shows that the majority of studies still focus on visitors and investors. However, urban dwellers are less frequently addressed in research despite their direct encounter with urban branding in their daily lives (Swain et al., 2024). Styven et al. (2020) showed that place attachment and the alignment between the individual and the urban brand influence residents' behavior of sharing urban brand related messages online. Zhao (2024), on the other hand, found that urban attachment plays a mediating role in the relationship between the harmony between the individual and the urban brand and the behavior of being a brand ambassador for the city. Shen et al. (2019) also revealed that place image and place attachment together shape residents' behaviors towards their cities.

The common point of these studies is that they show that the bond that residents establish with the city is not a secondary issue in urban branding. Residents' perceptions of the city and the bond they establish with the city are one of the important results of urban branding. This study adopts a similar approach and deals with the intention of young residents to stay in the city in the context of urban marketing and urban branding.

2.3. Youth Stay Intention And The Talent Retention Challenge

Youth staying in cities is strategically important for cities to sustain their economic development. This population includes higher education students and young professionals at the beginning of their careers. Past research using structural equation modelling reveals that students' positive perceptions of city characteristics and city image directly influence their short and long term intentions to stay (Lu et al., 2025). These studies indicate that migration preferences are not solely dependent on financial conditions or demographics.

Research conducted in different countries shows that young people's decision to stay in a city cannot be explained solely by financial conditions. Jin et al. (2022) examined the intention to stay in big cities in their research on university students in China. In the study, it was stated that previous research focused more on demographic and economic variables, ignoring psychological factors. In the data obtained, it is seen that job opportunities and salary level play an important role in changing students' attitudes. However, while economic expectations do not dire-

ctly affect the intention to stay, it has been determined that they are indirectly reflected through attitude and perceived behavior control. This situation fully coincides with the findings of our study. In our research, it was determined that the perception of economic opportunity affects the intention to stay through place attachment, not directly. The main difference between the two studies is the mediator variable used. While Jin et al. preferred a cognitive and behavioral agent, our study is based on the place attachment variable, which emphasizes belonging and emotional connection.

Wut et al. (2022) examine the intention of university students studying in Hong Kong to stay in the city after graduation within the concept of social capital. The research reveals that structural and relational social capital significantly affects the intention to stay, while cognitive capital has a non-linear effect. The study is important in terms of showing that the decision to stay depends on the level of social relations the individual establishes with the city. Similarly, the effect of perceived participation on intention to stay in our study is based on a similar understanding. The fact that young people feel that they have a say in the city administration constitutes a different dimension of this relationship they establish with the city.

Özçınar et al. (2025) examined the attitudes of university students in Manisa towards the city and found that young people's social, cultural, and economic evaluations were generally low, and they had a positive outlook in certain areas such as gastronomy and natural attractions. It emphasizes that local governments should develop policies for young people. The study in question is limited to defining the current situation of students and does not address whether these evaluations are reflected in the intention to stay in the city. Our study contributes to the literature at this point, models the relationship between perceptions of the city and the intention to stay, and reveals the role of place attachment in this process.

Recent studies conducted in Türkiye also show that young people's decisions to stay in the city cannot be explained solely by economic factors. In the study conducted by Dursun and Dursun (2025) in the province of Erzurum, it is seen that limited career opportunities lead young people to big cities, but social ties and local identity support them to stay in the city. Tsekoura and Koutsou (2026) examined 35 studies from five continents and found that lack of job and educational opportunities are the main barriers to stay. Family ties, place attachment, and social relationships are among the main reasons for staying. Choi and Kramer (2025) explain in their study that social commitment and family support affect young people's intention to stay. Mei et al. (2026) reveal that community capital based social relationships contribute to the intention to stay in rural

settlements. The economic attractiveness of a city for young people is not solely determined by wages and employment. It is examined through perceived economic opportunity, work areas, internships, learning, entrepreneurial ecosystem, and career plans. Location branding studies show that residents form personal bonds with the place brand, and these relationships drive loyalty (Kemp et al., 2012).

2.4. Intention to Stay in a City After a Disaster

The majority of the studies examined were conducted in cities where daily life is largely normal. However, living in a post disaster city can affect individuals' relationship with the city and their future decisions in different ways. The disaster environment makes the current model important in some ways. Akdu-man Yiğit (2026) examines the migration caused by disasters in Türkiye in 2023 and shows that migration is largely concentrated in twenty provinces. While underdeveloped provinces are losing population, large metropolises are gaining population. Kahramanmaraş is also among the provinces that are losing population. Therefore, the intention of young people to stay in the city is seen as an important policy issue for Kahramanmaraş.

Disasters also affect the physical conditions of daily life. Sakarya and Bektaş (2025) compare renovated and unrenovated risk areas in provinces affected by the 2023 earthquakes and reveal that areas renovated before the earthquake were less damaged. If housing, transportation, and basic services are not adequately rebuilt, the functional dimension of place attachment may weaken. Additionally, disasters can alter individuals' attachment to place. Qian et al. (2025) examine the long term recovery after disasters, showing that the housing environment, tourism, and social and cultural capital contribute to restoring place attachment. In contrast, Sabah and Gülümser (2026), in their study examining temporary settlements in Antakya, explain that long term temporary housing can weaken the bond between residents and the city.

In their study of residents who were displaced after floods, Mortimer et al. (2026) found that some residents may develop negative emotions instead of positive attachment to their former places. Qing et al. (2022), on the other hand, show that location dependency reduces the intention to move in rural areas of China with high earthquake risk. Canbulut and Eraslan (2025) compared people who left, returned, and stayed in Hatay after the 2023 earthquakes, stating that belonging to place and culture plays an important role in explaining these preferences and that preferences cannot be explained solely by economic factors.

Farny and Dentoni (2025) state that social identity, collective thoughts about the disaster, and holistic memory affect recovery. Norris et al. (2008) approach a similar approach by focusing on social capacity. When these studies are evaluated together, it is seen that in a city in the process of reconstruction, place identity may play a stronger role than the functional dimension of place attachment. The current study tests this expectation with survey data.

2.5. City Image Cognitive And Affective Dimensions

City marketing and destination image research usually describe city image along two axes. The cognitive axis contains evaluations of the attributes of a city. The affective axis contains the emotional tone that the city evokes. This two part structure has been a cornerstone of image formation models since the work of Baloglu and McCleary (1999). Cognitive image draws on economic dynamism, safety, accessibility, quality of social life, and public services. Affective image is usually measured with semantic differential items such as pleasant versus unpleasant or exciting versus dull. In the context of youth stay intention, city image is not only a control variable. It is a companion construct that helps explain when perceptions of economic opportunity turn into behavioral intentions and when they do not (Lu et al., 2025).

2.6. Participatory City Branding Co-Creation And Governance Climate

In the studies, the place brand is not considered as a ready made product designed and presented in advance, but as a process shaped by stakeholder interaction. In this respect, it is stated that the city brand is not a structure that occurs spontaneously in people's minds, but is fed by the relationships established by stakeholders with each other and with institutions (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). In addition, it is stated that participation is not considered as an abstract dimension added to space branding, but as one of the basic mechanisms that directly create brand value.

Maziashvili et al., (2023) show that participation can occur through both online and face to face channels, and that the factors determining participation have technological, relational, and attitudinal characteristics. It is stated that these factors present a similar structure between different urban and rural examples. It is stated that economic opportunities in the city can be evaluated more positively by young people who feel that they contribute to the city's management and policies. This is the main reason why perceived participation is given a moderator role in the conceptual model. Tottenborg et al. (2023) show that effective governance tools are needed for par-

ticipatory place branding to be successful. Accordingly, it is stated that the support of local actors to the process does not arise spontaneously.

Ramos et al. (2026) examine 48 studies addressing youth participation in local governance across 24 countries. The research notes that youth participation yields positive outcomes in terms of citizenship participation and personal skills, but the actual policy impact is more limited.

This result is considered important for the current study. If participation primarily affects young people's perceptions of their position in the city and their thoughts about the city, it is considered that it may operate as a separate factor that directly affects the intention to stay, not as a condition that strengthens economic perceptions. The H5 hypothesis tests this relationship.

2.7. Place Attachment Conceptual Foundations And Measurement

Studies examining place attachment focus intensively on the psychological aspect of the bond between people and places. Scannell and Gifford (2010) organize place attachment into person, process, and place dimensions and emphasize emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components. The two most commonly validated dimensions in measurement are place identity and place dependence. It describes how important place identity is for a place's self concept, while place dependence describes how much a place supports important activities and goals. The psychometric properties of both have been tested in many samples (Williams & Vaske, 2003).

The data obtained indicate that place attachment can reveal behavioral outcomes such as staying and living in the specified place. Strandberg (2023) explains that positive features in a city cannot definitively affect the decision to live in a positive place, and states that self congruity and place attachment significantly mediate the desire to stay. This finding supports the mediating role of place attachment in the current model and strengthens the prediction that perceptions of economic opportunity indirectly affect the desire to stay through attachment.

There appear to be three significant gaps in the literature. Urban residents are still given limited space, while younger residents are less explored (Swain et al., 2024). Studies examining youth intention to stay in the city rarely consider economic perceptions, attachment, and place dependence in the same model. Furthermore, most existing studies cover cities that are stable and have not experienced a major disaster. Post-disaster research mostly focuses on resettlement, housing, and psychological health. The relationship between urban marketing and urban branding and young people's intention to stay in the city in the post-disaster period is less examined.

This study addresses these gaps together. It explains the intention of young residents to stay in the city during the reconstruction process with the theory of place attachment, the current approach that emphasizes staying as an active choice, and the social exchange theory. Thus, economic perceptions, place attachment and perceived participation are examined together in the same model with the intention of young people to stay.

2.8. Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

The model considers perceived economic opportunities as the main determinant of young people's intention to stay in the city. These opportunities cover access to employment, internship opportunities, and entrepreneurship possibilities. Place attachment, with its identity and functional dimensions, represents the mental process through which economic evaluations transform into a behavioral inten-

tion. Perceived participation assumes a moderating role in the model. The underlying assumption here is that the impact of economic opportunities on the intention to stay is not limited solely to current economic conditions, but also depends on young people's feeling that they have a say in the future of the city. Table 1 summarizes the main variables included in the model.

H1. Perceived economic opportunities have a positive effect on youth stay intention.

H2. Perceived economic opportunities have a positive effect on place attachment.

H3. Place attachment has a positive effect on youth stay intention.

H4. Place attachment mediates the effect of perceived economic opportunities on stay intention.

H5. The effect of perceived economic opportunities on stay intention is stronger when perceived participation is higher.

Table 1. Constructs in the Research Model

Construct	Code	Items	Role in the model	Response format
Perceived economic opportunities	EKO	6	Independent variable	5-point Likert
Perceived participation	KAT	6	Moderator	5-point Likert
Cognitive city image	BIL	6	Companion image construct	5-point Likert
Affective city image	DUY	4	Companion image construct	Semantic differential
Place identity	PAI	4	Mediator component	5-point Likert
Place dependence	PAD	4	Mediator component	5-point Likert
Stay intention	STAY	4	Dependent variable	5-point Likert

Note. Place attachment (PA) was computed as the mean of the eight place identity and place dependence items.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

The study uses a cross sectional quantitative design based on a questionnaire. The target group consists of residents of Kahramanmaraş aged 18 to 34. The design tests whether perceived economic opportunities predict the intention to remain in the city and whether place attachment mediates and perceived participation moderates this relationship.

3.2. Population, Sample, And Sampling Approach

The population covers young adults aged 18 to 34 who live in Kahramanmaraş. The sample was designed to reach different subgroups. These included university and associate degree students as well as young employees in the public sector, private sector, and organized industrial zones. Although job seekers were also targeted during data collection,

the realized sample consisted predominantly of students (48.7 %) and employed respondents (48.8 %), with a small residual group (2.5 %) classified as "Other". The targeted sample size was planned as at least 400 participants to perform regression based mediation and interaction analyses. Consequently, a total of 439 valid responses were included in the analysis. Therefore, the sample leans toward students but still covers the young workforce of the city. This structure is reported openly and is evaluated as a limitation in the later parts of the study.

Data were collected between 15 February and 15 March 2026. The field work therefore covered a period of about 4 weeks. The fieldwork therefore took place in the third year of the reconstruction process that began after the earthquakes of 6 February 2023. Questionnaires were distributed on university campuses, in public institutions, in private firms and in the organized industrial zone to face to face and through an online form. No responses were collected outside this period.

3.3. Measurement Instruments

All questions were adapted from the literature and adapted to the Kahramanmaraş context. Semantic differential questions were used to measure affective city image. A five point Likert format, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), was preferred for all other questions. Perceived economic opportunities (EKO) were defined as the independent variable. Data were collected with six items covering employment prospects, internship availability, on the job learning opportunities, the quality of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and access to career networks.

The model includes perceived participation (KAT) as the moderating variable. Under this heading, six questions were asked to determine the participation of young people in local processes, the accessibility of participation channels, and whether they can express themselves.

Place attachment (PA) functions as the mediating variable. Within this structure, four items evaluate place identity (PAI) to show the extent to which Kahramanmaraş is integrated into residents' self concept, while the remaining four items assess place dependence (PAD), capturing the extent to which the city supports the activities and goals that matter to the respondents (Williams & Vaske, 2003).

Stay intention (STAY) is the dependent variable. Four items cover the intention to remain in Kahramanmaraş. Two items address the short term and two items address the long term.

Cognitive city image (BIL) with six items and affective city image (DUY) with four items were measured as companion constructs. Occupation status, length of residence in the city, purpose of stay, accommodation type and perceived income were recorded as background variables.

3.4. Scale Adaptation, Pilot Study, And Ethics

An expert panel of academics and local stakeholders first reviewed the items for clarity and contextual fit. A pilot test with about 50 respondents was carried out between 01 February and 10 February 2026. It checked item behavior through item total correlations and internal consistency values before the final instrument was confirmed. Main data collection started after this test. All respondents provided informed consent and were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and the anonymity of their responses. Ethical approval was granted by the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University (meeting no: 2026-1, decision no. 11, dated 9 January 2026). The committee unanimously approved the survey application.

3.5. Data Screening And Analytical Strategy

Before the analysis, the dataset was screened for missing values and entry errors. Missing data representing less than 0.1 % of total responses and a single out of range value were treated as missing data. Analyses were conducted using the average of the participants' responses for each scale. After cleaning the data, reliability was checked using Cronbach's alpha, and descriptive statistics along with the correlation matrix were calculated.

The main analysis relied on structural equation modeling with latent variables, estimated with maximum likelihood in the semopy package. Perceived economic opportunities, place identity, place dependence and stay intention were modeled through their items, and place attachment entered the model as a second order factor defined by its identity and dependence dimensions. The structural part traced the paths from economic opportunities to attachment and from both of them to stay intention. The indirect effect was evaluated with a Sobel type test and with a bootstrap confidence interval based on resampling. Ordinary least squares regressions on composite scores served as a complementary check in the spirit of the causal steps logic of Baron and Kenny (1986), and the two approaches converged on the same indirect effect, although they differ in how the remaining direct path is classified (Section 4.4). Moderation was tested by entering mean centered composite scores for economic opportunities and perceived participation together with their product term into a regression predicting stay intention, since latent interaction models add estimation complexity without changing the substantive question.

3.6. Common Method Bias

Predictors and outcomes came from the same respondents at a single point in time, so common method bias deserves attention. Several procedural remedies were applied in line with the recommendations of Podsakoff et al. (2003) and the updated guidance of Podsakoff et al. (2024). Participants were told that responses would stay anonymous. Item blocks used different scale formats since affective city image used a semantic differential format. The wording of cause and effect items was varied. As a statistical check, Harman's single factor test showed that the first unrotated factor explained 35.9 % of the total variance in the items, which stays well under the 50 % threshold. Marker based and collinearity based diagnostics offer stronger tests in general (Lindell & Whitney, 2001; Kock, 2015). The variance inflation factors in the regression models stayed below 2, which signals no harmful collinearity. Method effects therefore appear unlikely to govern the data.

4. Findings

4.1. Sample Characteristics

Table 2 presents the profile of the 439 respondents. Students form the largest group at 48.7 %. Private sector employees follow at 31.9 % and public sector

employees at 16.9 %. The median length of residence in the city is about 2 years and the mean is about 6.3 years. The spread is wide since the sample includes both newcomers who arrived for education and long term residents.

Table 2. Sample Profile (N = 439)

Occupation	n	%
Private sector employee	140	31.9
Public sector employee	74	16.9
Student	214	48.7
Other	11	2.5
Total	439	100.0
Residence duration in the city	Median	Mean (SD)
Years	2.0	6.3 (8.5)

Note. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Residence duration was recorded in days and converted to years.

4.2. Measurement Model Reliability And Descriptive Results

Table 3 presents the reliability metrics alongside descriptive statistics. Every Cronbach's alpha meets or exceeds the conventional .70 benchmark. Place identity yielded the strongest internal consistency at .92, whereas the overall place attachment construct, encompassing eight distinct items, was calculated at .88. The measurement and structural models were estimated on the 18 items of EKO, PAI, PAD and STAY, cognitive and affective city image were measured as companion constructs and were not included in the estimated model. Regarding the structural phase, the confirmatory measurement model driven by latent factors demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2(130) = 312.17$, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .057). Every factor loading reached statistical significance, with standardized loadings ranging from .24 to .88. The weakest values appeared for one short term stay intention item (.24) and one place dependence item (.37), both of which remained within the model to preserve content validity, as further detailed in Section 7. Composite reliability ranged from .73 to .92 and exceeded the conventional .70 benchmark for every construct. Average variance

extracted ranged from .41 to .74 and fell below the .50 threshold for perceived economic opportunities, perceived participation, cognitive city image, place dependence and stay intention. Because the composite reliability of these constructs remained above .70, convergent validity was regarded as adequate (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was assessed with the heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations. All ratios stayed below the conservative .85 threshold, including the ratio between place attachment and stay intention (.75), which supports the empirical distinctness of the two constructs despite the strong structural path between them. The highest ratio emerged between perceived economic opportunities and perceived participation (.84), a pattern consistent with the correlation reported in Table 4 and discussed in Section 5.4 (Henseler et al., 2015).

The computed means for economic opportunities ($M = 2.78$) and cognitive image ($M = 2.69$) fall just below the scale's theoretical midpoint, while intention to stay scores slightly higher ($M = 3.04$). Such results characterize an urban environment undergoing an initial recovery phase, where younger cohorts approach economic circumstances with caution but largely express an intent to remain.

Table 3. Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Items	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE	Mean	SD
Perceived economic opportunities (EKO)	6	.81	.82	.43	2.78	0.76
Perceived participation (KAT)	6	.81	.80	.41	2.94	0.78
Cognitive city image (BIL)	6	.83	.83	.46	2.69	0.83
Affective city image (DUY)	4	.85	.85	.60	2.84	1.09
Place identity (PAI)	4	.92	.92	.74	2.78	1.18
Place dependence (PAD)	4	.71	.75	.44	2.60	0.86
Place attachment (PA)	8	.88	.92	.59	2.69	0.91
Stay intention (STAY)	4	.70	.73	.45	3.04	0.99

Note. All items used a 1 to 5 response range.

The relationships among the research items are given in Table 4. A positive and significant correlation at the .001 level was obtained for all variables. While the most prominent relationship with stay intention emerged with place attachment ($r = .59$) and place identity ($r = .56$), its link to perceived economic opportunities remained at a moderate level ($r = .36$).

Furthermore, economic opportunities are strongly correlated with perceived participation ($r = .67$). This strong relationship shows that young residents demonstrate a high level of willingness to be involved in local and regional development regarding local economic growth.

Table 4. Correlation Matrix (N = 439)

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. EKO	1							
2. KAT	.67	1						
3. BIL	.62	.63	1					
4. DUY	.52	.53	.60	1				
5. PAI	.45	.45	.59	.53	1			
6. PAD	.53	.55	.66	.58	.60	1		
7. PA	.54	.55	.69	.62	.93	.86	1	
8. STAY	.36	.41	.47	.36	.56	.48	.59	1

Note. All correlations are significant at $p < .001$. PA combines the PAI and PAD items.

4.3. Structural Model and Direct Effects: H1 To H3

The structural model reproduced the expected relationships with latent variables. Perceived economic opportunities predicted place attachment ($b = .89$, $SE = .09$, $z = 9.67$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .67$), and attachment, in turn, predicted stay intention with the strongest path in the model ($b = .75$, $SE = .10$, $z = 7.57$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .90$). The composite score regressions told the same story in simpler form. Economic opportunities predicted stay intention on their own ($b = .47$, $\beta = .36$, $p < .001$) and predicted attachment as well ($b = .65$, $\beta = .54$, $p < .001$), while attachment predicted stay intention ($b = .63$, $\beta = .59$, $p < .001$). H2 and H3 are therefore supported. H1 is supported for the total effect ($b = .47$, $\beta = .36$, $p < .001$); once place

attachment is included, the direct path reverses sign ($\beta = -.18$, $p = .029$), a pattern examined in Section 4.4. Table 5 presents the structural paths.

4.4. Mediation Through Place Attachment (H4)

When place attachment was included in the structural equation, the direct effect of perceived economic opportunities on stay intention decreased and became negative ($b = -.20$, $SE = .09$, $z = -2.19$, $p = .029$, $\beta = -.18$). At the same time, the indirect effect through attachment remained positive and strong. The bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect (.49 to .99) excluded zero, and the Sobel test supported the same conclusion ($z = 5.96$, $p < .001$).

According to the classification of Zhao et al. (2010), this result corresponds to competitive mediation. The positive effect of economic perceptions on stay intention operates through place attachment, and the remaining negative direct effect points to a suppression effect. A consistent result also emerged in the composite score analysis, where the direct effect of economic opportunities decreased from .47 to a nonsignificant level (.09, $p = .149$). The bootstrap

confidence interval for the indirect effect of .39 (.31 to .47) did not include zero. These results support H4. These relationships remained stable when occupation status and residence duration were added to the equation as control variables. Residence duration provided a small but significant positive contribution ($b = .02$ per year, $p < .001$) to stay intention without affecting the main findings.

Table 5. Structural Equation Model Results for Direct Effects and Mediation

Structural path	b	SE	z	p	β
EKO → PA	0.89	0.09	9.67	< .001	.67
PA → STAY	0.75	0.10	7.57	< .001	.90
EKO → STAY (direct)	−0.20	0.09	−2.19	.029	−.18

Note. Model fit $\chi^2(130) = 312.17$, $\chi^2/df = 2.40$, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .057, SRMR = .049. Indirect effect = .67 unstandardized (.60 standardized), Sobel $z = 5.96$, $p < .001$, bootstrap 95 % CI [.49, .99]. Composite score regressions gave a consistent pattern with a direct effect of .09 ($p = .149$) and an indirect effect of .39 with CI [.31, .47].

4.5. Moderation Analysis: H5

The results of the moderation model established with mean centered variables are shown in Table 6. According to the findings, economic opportunities ($b = .21$, $p = .007$) and perceived participation ($b = .40$, $p < .001$) have a significant and positive effect on stay intention on their own. In contrast, the interaction term of the two variables was found to be small and statistically nonsignificant ($b = .04$, $SE = .06$, $t = 0.60$, $p = .549$). Accordingly, the H5 hypothesis was not supported. Although the high correlation between the two predictor variables ($r = .67$)

indicates a potential risk of multicollinearity, the variance inflation factor (VIF) value of 1.8 remains below standard threshold values, showing that there is no multicollinearity problem in the model. In summary, perceived participation is not a moderating variable that alters the impact of economic opportunities; instead, it provides a direct and independent contribution to stay intention. It should be noted that the HTMT ratio between perceived economic opportunities and perceived participation (.84) approaches the conservative .85 threshold, which limits the statistical power of the interaction test. This nonsignificant (null) result is discussed in Section 5.4.

Table 6. Moderation Model Predicting Stay Intention

Predictor	b	SE	t	p
Constant	3.02	0.05	61.44	< .001
EKO (centered)	0.21	0.08	2.70	.007
KAT (centered)	0.40	0.08	5.26	< .001
EKO x KAT	0.04	0.06	0.60	.549

Note. $R^2 = .184$, $F(3, 435) = 32.7$, $p < .001$. Variance inflation factors stayed below 2 for all predictors.

Because students form nearly half the sample, the core variables were compared between students and employed respondents with Welch's t tests. The two groups did not differ on stay intention (students $M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.94$; employed $M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.04$; $t = 0.99$, $p = .324$, $d = 0.10$) or on place attachment (students $M = 2.65$, $SD = 0.89$; employed $M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.95$; $t = 0.99$, $p = .325$, $d = 0.10$). The gap in perceived economic opportunities was small and not statistically significant (students $M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.80$; employed $M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.73$; $t = 1.72$, $p = .086$, $d = 0.17$). These checks suggest that pooling the two groups does not hide meaningful

differences in the model variables, although the slightly more optimistic economic perceptions among students deserve attention in future work with larger occupational subsamples.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Direct Effect of Perceived Economic Opportunities

The analysis results support the main hypotheses of the research. Young people participating in the study who perceive job opportunities, internship

access, and entrepreneurship support in Kahramanmaraş positively have a higher willingness to stay in the city. Perceived economic opportunities alone explained about 13 % of the variance in stay intention. This finding overlaps with previous studies showing that students' positive perceptions of a city affect their future decisions to stay there. The obtained data align with theoretical studies arguing that promoting a city alone is not enough to attract young people, and concrete opportunities like jobs, internships, and entrepreneurship support must be available in the city. Economic factors constitute the first and most basic step in retaining young people in the city, but they will not be sufficient alone (Lu et al., 2025).

5.2. Place Attachment as The Bridge H2 and H3

The analysis results demonstrate the core operational logic of the research. Accordingly, young people's perceptions of economic opportunity are related to a stronger sense of belonging to the city. Belonging, which is the strongest determinant in the model, is the most closely related factor to young people's desire to stay in the city. Attachment, as the strongest factor in the study, directly shapes the willingness of young people to stay in the city. This finding overlaps with the approach of Scannell and Gifford (2010), who argue that people draw on their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral characteristics as a whole when attaching to a place. It is also consistent with the established measurement approach of Williams and Vaske (2003), which captures place attachment through identification with the city and dependence on the city. In this study, young people's identification with the city affected their intention to stay more strongly than their dependence on the city. The post disaster environment provides a logical rationale for this situation. Indeed, studies on post traumatic growth show that individuals struggling with severe adversity attach a deeper meaning to their lives after their experiences, and establish much closer ties with the people and places with whom they shared these experiences (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Researchers working on community resilience also share a similar approach at the collective level. This is because the post disaster recovery process relies not only on the reconstruction of infrastructure but also on social solidarity and a shared sense of belonging (Norris et al., 2008). Young people who experienced the earthquake and chose to stay in the city may have adopted the city as a part of their own identity. This outcome turns the identity bond established with the city into a much stronger retention factor than the convenience or comfort provided by everyday life. Indeed, most of the services and routines normally offered by the city were disrupted

due to the disaster and have not been fully restored yet. Consequently, this situation weakened the functional bond of young people with the city. Under these challenging conditions, it is reasonable that the identity bond is more dominant in determining stay intention than practical interests. This approach does not leave the obtained finding as a simple statistical result, but provides a strong theoretical foundation for it.

5.3. The Mediation Pattern (H4)

Research outputs confirm that the effect of economic factors on stay intention operates predominantly through the attachment mechanism. The results overlap with the findings of Strandberg (2023), who reports that city image affects stay intention mainly through self congruity and place attachment rather than through a purely direct path. This result reveals an important theoretical implication. Older research linking economic perceptions directly to stay intention neglects the psychological dimension of the subject. Evaluated in terms of city marketing theory, the obtained data show that there should be a long term strategic shift from promotion and communication oriented approaches toward identity building (Anholt, 2010; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). A city cannot achieve the loyalty of young people solely by offering new job opportunities or by presenting favorable economic indicators. Real loyalty can be earned when the offered opportunities become a part of how young people define themselves and organize their lives.

5.4. The Moderation Null Result And What It Might Tell Us: H5

The data reveal that perceived participation did not alter the effect of economic opportunities on the stay intention of young people. The interaction value emerged close to zero, which means the variable did not show a moderating effect. Two main implications stand out from these results. First, young people's perception that they have a say in city management has a direct and strong relationship with stay intention. This finding indicates that participation opportunities are not a side element supporting economic opportunities, but on the contrary, they operate as a completely independent factor retaining young people in the city. This obtained result is consistent with the participatory branding literature (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Maziashvili et al. 2023) arguing that participation creates city brand value on its own.

The second important point stems from the high correlation ($r = .67$) detected between economic perceptions and perceived participation. This high rate suggests that young people actually experience both situations as a single holistic judgment regard-

ding whether the city takes them seriously. Especially in uncertain post disaster environments, institutional support and economic opportunities may have merged in the eyes of young people. Future research tracking participants over a long period (longitudinal studies) or utilizing experimental methods can separate the effects of these two distinct signals more clearly over time.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

6.1. Theoretical Implications

The theoretical contributions of this study can be discussed in four main points. The first contribution is related to the role of place attachment in urban marketing models. The findings show that perceived economic opportunities increase place attachment and place attachment is the strongest predictor of intention to stay. When place attachment is included in the model, the direct effect of economic perceptions on intention to stay decreases and turns into a negative value. According to the classification made by Zhao et al. (2010), this situation is considered as competitive mediation.

This result shows that economic opportunities alone do not explain the intention to stay. The effect of economic opportunities on behavior largely emerges through the individual's bond with the city. This finding brings Scannell and Gifford's (2010) three dimensional approach to place attachment to the context of urban marketing. Similarly, Strandberg (2023) showed that place image does not directly affect stay behavior, but rather through self congruity and place attachment.

The negative direct impact of economic perceptions can also be explained. Young people who make positive use of economic opportunities but do not establish a strong connection with the city may see these opportunities as resources that can be used in other cities. For example, skills, internship experiences, and career connections can be used in different cities. In this case, economic opportunities can support not only staying in the city but also mobility. This interpretation aligns with the push pull approach and the view that staying is an active choice supported by ties to place rather than resources (Olumba, 2025; Tsekoura & Koutsou, 2026). In this respect, urban marketing should consider promoting economic opportunities as a necessary but not sufficient tool on its own.

The second contribution is related to the internal structure of place dependence. The findings show that place identity explains the intention to stay more strongly than place dependence. This result is meaningful in terms of post disaster urban conditions. The fact that daily services and physical infrastructure are still limited in some areas in Kah-

ramanmaraş may weaken the functional basis of place dependence. On the other hand, place identity does not depend on the existence of daily services to the same extent.

Studies on long term temporary housing also indicate that functional place attachment may weaken (Sabah & Gülümser, 2026). In contrast, the literature on post traumatic development and community resilience reveals that shared experiences and challenges can strengthen individuals identity bonds (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Norris et al., 2008; Farny & Dentoni, 2025).

This shows that the balance between place identity and place dependence is not constant. This balance may vary according to the physical, social and institutional conditions of the city. Therefore, models developed in stable cities may underestimate the role of place identity in cities in the reconstruction process.

The third contribution relates to the role of perceived participation. The findings suggest that perceived participation does not alter the relationship between economic perceptions and intention to stay, but it does explain the intention to stay independently. Social exchange theory provides a suitable framework to explain this outcome (Ahmad et al., 2023). Participation can be considered as a signal to young people that the city values them and considers their opinions. This perception has value in itself and can influence the intention to stay regardless of economic conditions.

This result also contributes to the participatory urban branding literature (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Maziashvili et al., 2023; Tottenborg et al., 2023). The findings suggest that participation may have a direct impact on the relationship established with the city and the value of the city brand rather than improving economic perceptions. The review by Ramos et al. (2026) also shows that youth participation is particularly effective on civic attitudes and personal gains, while its impact on politics is more limited.

The fourth contribution is the contextual contribution of the study. Most of the models developed on the intention to stay were created in stable urban conditions. The results of this study show that the basic structure of these models can also be used in a city in the process of reconstruction, but the relative importance of the variables may differ.

In this context, while place identity becomes more important, the role of place dependence decreases and perceived participation emerges as an independent factor. In addition, the strong relationship between economic perceptions and perceived participation ($r = .67$) is another noteworthy finding. In an environment of high uncertainty, young people may perceive different signals such as economic opportunities and participation in a more general assessment of the value that the city gives them.

Future research may examine the relationship between these two variables in more detail with longitudinal or experimental research designs. In addition, it can be investigated whether similar relationships occur in other cities that were rebuilt after the disaster.

6.2. Implications for Practice

The practical implications of this study can be discussed under five headings. First, economic programs should also support social ties. The findings show that the effect of economic perceptions on intention to stay is related to place attachment. Providing young people only with internships or work experience may not always be enough to establish a strong connection with the city. For this reason, local governments, universities and other institutions in the region can add elements that support social relations to economic programs. Pairing interns with local mentors, including neighborhood based projects in entrepreneurship programs, and connecting graduates with local companies can be given as examples of these practices.

Secondly, the balance between place identity and urban services needs to be taken into account. In this study, place identity emerged as a stronger explanatory than place dependence. While the process of rebuilding housing, transportation and social services continues, city administrations can also include practices that support young people's identity ties with the city. Projects in which young people document the reconstruction process, urban memory archives, activities for local heritage and food culture, and giving visible roles to young people in reconstruction projects can be examples of such practices.

Thirdly, youth participation should be considered as an independent application area. The findings suggest that perceived participation plays a role on the intention to stay independent of economic perceptions. Therefore, youth participation should not be seen solely as a communication element of economic programs. Youth councils, participatory budgeting mechanisms for young people in reconstruction projects, and open feedback channels can be used for this purpose. The review by Ramos et al. (2026) shows that participation that does not really affect decision making processes can produce limited results.

Fourth, young people's intention to stay in the city can be measured on a regular basis. Local governments already track various indicators such as visitor numbers, investment volume and building permits. The findings of this study show that young people's intention to stay can also be used as an indicator that can be monitored in terms of urban marketing and urban management. A short and regular annual survey that includes economic perception, place

attachment and place dependence can be used to track trends in these variables.

Fifth, in cities undergoing reconstruction, practices may need to be handled in a certain order. Current findings and related studies indicate that a complementary approach can be used rather than a single policy package. First of all, it is important to rebuild the functional infrastructure of housing, transportation, and other essential services. Sakarya and Bektaş (2025) demonstrate the role of renovation in mitigating disaster induced damage. In addition, findings that long term temporary shelter can weaken the bond established with the city indicate that delays in the reconstruction process may also have social consequences (Sabah & Gülümser, 2026).

While strengthening the functional foundation, practices that support place identity and real participation channels can accompany this process. Urban marketing messages can also show how economic opportunities are linked to the common future of the city and local life, rather than presenting them only in terms of business, investment or income figures. Thus, economic opportunities can be considered as part of the broader social and identity based relationship that young people establish with the city.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The study has certain limitations that affect the generalizability of the obtained results. First, the research design is cross sectional; that is, the data were collected within a single time period. Therefore, caution must be exercised when interpreting the causal relationships among the variables. Since the place attachment levels and stay intentions of young people were measured at the same time, it is also possible for the direction of these relationships to be reversed. Second, all data rely on the self reports of the participants. The data also describe one specific window, 15 February to 15 March 2026, the third year of the reconstruction process. Conditions in a city under reconstruction change quickly, so the reported levels of economic perception, place attachment and stay intention should be read as a snapshot of that period rather than as stable values. Although the risks of bias brought by collecting data from a single source (common method variance) were reduced through procedural and statistical controls, this risk could not be completely eliminated (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The third limitation relates to the structure of the sample. Students constitute 48.7 % of the participants, and the convenience sampling method, which targets the most easily accessible individuals, was utilized in the data collection process instead of random selection. This situation makes it difficult to generalize the findings to the entire youth population in the city. Although no significant diffe-

rence was found between students and employed individuals in the group comparisons in Section 4.6, using a probability (random) sample in future studies will increase the reliability of the results.

The internal consistency of the stay intention scale remained marginal, and one short term item produced a standardized loading of .24. The scale was retained in its original form to preserve content coverage of both short term and long term intentions, but future studies should refine the short term component of this measure. The research covers a single city and a specific moment in the post earthquake recovery process. Comparing cities rebuilt and supported for development after disasters will demonstrate the validity of the model used in this study. Examining employment, staying, or migration behaviors alongside quantitative evaluations based on youth statements will add depth to future research.

8. Conclusion and Evaluation

The study is believed to provide important contributions to the literature. The research explains the reasons for youth retention after disasters and demonstrates that the fundamental relationship between city image and stay intention maintains its validity even under extraordinary conditions (Lu et al., 2025). The mediating role of place attachment contributes to the literature by positioning this factor as a key element in determining the psychological and sociological reasons why young people stay (Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Strandberg, 2023). It also clarifies the role of participation. The findings reveal that the right of young people to participate in decisions is not a side element reinforcing economic perceptions; on the contrary, it provides a direct and independent contribution to stay intention. This situation further refines the expectations in the literature arguing that participation creates brand value on its own (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Maziashvili et al., 2023). The practical implications of these findings are set out in Section 6.2.

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of the university where the research was conducted. The committee name, date, and decision number are withheld for blind review and are provided in full on the Title Page.

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