

## Perceived urban quality of life in Timișoara's districts

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Media and previous research on quality of life for residents of Timișoara highlighted discontent about the level of pollution, hospitals, job and business opportunities, and the overall quality of life in the city, and contentment regarding schools, utilities and private medical centers (Morais & Camanho, 2011; Agenția pentru Dezvoltare Regională Vest, 2013). We conducted an analysis of differences between the two districts regarding subjective advantages and disadvantages, the general level of urban quality of life and the level of neighborhood and community quality of life. We applied the questionnaire on urban quality of life adapted by Alexander Keul (2008) after Detroit Area Study developed by Robert Marans (2001), on 90 citizens from Timișoara, from Soarelui and Circumvalațiunii districts. Results showed significant differences between the two neighborhoods for the general level of urban quality of life, and for the perceived quality of the neighborhood. There were no significant differences for the level of perceived quality of the community. In conclusion, the citizens from the district Circumvalațiunii had a higher degree of urban quality of life when compared with the citizens of the district Soarelui. Also, citizens from Circumvalațiunii were more satisfied with the quality of their neighborhood than citizens from Soarelui. The qualitative and quantitative results and further directions are discussed in this article.

Keywords: urban quality of life, neighborhood, community, Timișoara.

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### Introduction

Timișoara, the city named by its residents "little Vienna", has strong occidental influences reflected in the culture, the history of the city, and the attitudes of inhabitants. The citizens often compare the city, in the popular culture, with other West-European cities, rather than Romanian cities, especially when they discuss their expectations for the development of the city.

The concept "quality of life" is controversial for the citizens of Timișoara because some people address it from a darker perspective, making references to the high level of pollution, noise, and insufficient green spaces. Previous

studies on quality of life highlight the fact that Timișoara's residents have a poor quality of life, comparing to other European cities (Morais & Camanho, 2011). On the other side, Numbeo, the world's largest database of user contributed data about cities and countries, reported a high quality of life index for Timișoara, with good evaluation for safety, healthcare, and climate, moderate indexes for property prices and pollution, and low indexes for purchasing power, cost of living and traffic commute time (Numbeo, 2016).

Environmental perception has become part of studies interested in investigating the quality of life of citizens, which has been considered a multidimensional construct

and an important indicator of physical and psychological well-being (Utsey, Bolden, Brown, & Chae, 2001). In the newer paradigm of environmental sustainability, environmental perception is considered very important, and the European Environmental Agency has elaborated a set of indicators to measure environmental sustainability, which include “subjective assessment measures” such as citizen satisfaction with the local community (Dumitru, Garcia-Mira, Maricutoiu & Ilin, 2014).

Although the concept of quality of life is encountered in domains such as psychology, sociology, economy, geography, public health, and transportation, its definition as described in the scientific literature is not yet definite. In some theoretical approaches, quality of life was described as consisting of factors such as health, physical environment, natural resources, personal development, and safety, while other economic theories presented it as one of the three pylons of quality (Mitchell, Namdeo, & Kay, 2001). World Health Organization defines quality of life in 1993 (p. 3) as “individuals’ perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns”. Other authors described quality of life as the satisfaction of life, or as the degree to which a person enjoys the opportunities they face in life (Kamp, Leidelmeijer, Marsman, & Hollander, 2003).

One of the most complex definitions for quality of life, formulated by Salvaris, Burke, Pidgeon and Kelman (2000), states that quality of life is the general level of well-being and accomplishment that people feel as a consequence of the conditions provided by the social, economic, and natural environment of the community, and the personal, physical and financial background. The concept of quality of life was addressed in both quantitative and qualitative studies, therefore underlining the subjective and objective dimensions of the construct (Marans, 2001).

The dimensions of quality of life differ from one study to another, but certain aspects of this concept remain constant in the scientific literature. For example, a study from New Zealand (Wellington City Council, 2003) emphasized dimensions of the quality of life such as demographic factors, knowledge and abilities, health, the residence, social contact, political and civil rights, economic standard of living, economic development, the natural and built environment. In another study from Canada (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 1997), six dimensions were pointed out: personal well-being, urban economy, the urban environment, community’s values and leadership, and pride. A similar approach to the current study was the one developed by the European Commission (2005), through the Urban Audit programme ([www.urbanaudit.org](http://www.urbanaudit.org)), which distinguished among nine dimensions of quality of life: demographic factors, social aspects, economic aspects, civic engagement, training and education, environment, transport and travel, culture and leisure, innovation and technology.

The dimensions of the urban quality of life which we addressed in our study originated in the study of Robert Marans (2001) on the Detroit area. The questionnaire developed by Robert Marans was adapted by Alexander Keul (2008) in Austria, for a study about quality of life in six urban districts from Salzburg. The dimensions of quality of life after Marans (2001) are the years of residence at current address, subjective evaluation of the urban quality of life, the quality of urban transport, the

distance to urban transport, satisfaction with the residence, grocery shops and their quality, the use of green spaces, access to leisure spaces, quality of the neighborhood, safety and risk assessment. In the study on quality of life of Detroit area (DAS2001), the dimensions of residential environment described above were included in three categories: personal housing space, the neighborhood of the residence, and the community from the neighborhood. For example, questions about environmental attributes (traffic, noise), social aspects (family, friends, safety), and public services (protection from police, schools, parks, means of transport) were addressed to find out more details about the neighborhood. Regarding the community, questions about shopping, accessibility and transport, and leisure were proposed. For the evaluation of the housing space, aspects such as living costs, space, and property size were investigated.

In the current study we evaluated Timișoara residents’ perception of the neighborhood quality of life, we described the positive and negative aspects of two districts, and offered a few solutions for improving the quality of residents’ life, based on our findings.

#### *Timișoara’s districts*

Timișoara is the capital and largest city of the historical region of Banat, Timiș County, located in western Romania. In 2011, with 319 279 inhabitants and a population density of 2.622 inhabitants / km<sup>2</sup>, it was the third largest city in Romania.

For this study, we evaluated the quality of life in two districts of Timișoara: Soarelui and Circumvalațiunii (see Figure 1 for exact location). Soarelui’s neighborhood is located in the southern part of Timișoara, having an area of approximately 5406947 square meters, and green spaces and having an area of approx. 202358 sqm. It was built around 1985, being among the last working class neighborhoods built by the communist regime in Timișoara. Before 1985, these lands were not used for constructions but were meadows and plots for agriculture. Most residents were employed in factories on the industrial platform Buziaș. In this district there are several kindergartens and a school with primary and secondary classes – the latest school built in Timișoara. Circumvalațiunii district owes its name to Circumvalațiunii Road, one of the most important transportation arteries in Timișoara, so named because it circumvents the current Old Town - former fortress and its strongholds. Circumvalațiunii district has an area of approx. 3890504 square meters and green spaces on an area of approx. 47375 square meters.

We chose these neighborhoods because we consider them opposites in many respects: district Soarelui is newer than the district Circumvalațiunii, is in a marginal area of the city less connected to the central area, but it is a neighborhood of predominantly green spaces. On the other hand, Circumvalațiunii district has several advantages regarding public services and connection to the city center. We aim to underline the differences in terms of quality of life in these neighborhoods, taking into account their particularities.

#### *Present study*

The objective of this study was to identify the level of quality of life for residents of two districts from Timișoara – Soarelui and Circumvalațiunii – and to verify the differences between the two neighborhoods as regards to quality of urban life.

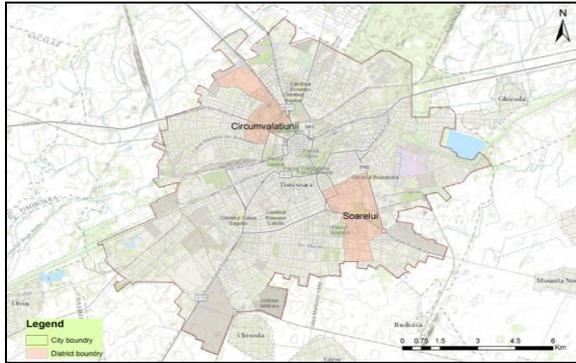


Figure 1. Delimitation of the districts Soarelui and Circumvalațiunii on the map of Timișoara

**Method**

*Participants and procedure*

The data was gathered on field, by Psychology students of the West University from Timișoara, who previously received training on data gathering. Participants completed the questionnaire in paper and pencil format and were randomly selected. The questionnaire lasted around 10 minutes to be completed. No incentives were received by the participants for completing this questionnaire.

Ninety subjects, out of which 49 females (54.4%), completed the questionnaire; 52 were from the Circumvalațiunii district (57.8%) and 38 from Soarelui district (42.2%). The mean age was 43.73 years (SD = 20.10) and 37.8% of the subjects were born in Timișoara. As respect to education, 1% of the respondents attended primary school, 4.5% attended secondary school, 29% had high school diploma, 18% had postsecondary school diploma, 34.5% had an undergraduate degree, and 13% a postgraduate degree. Regarding the occupation, 32.5% were full-time employees, 21.5% part-time employees, 14.5% were retired, 9% were students, 10% were unemployed or homemakers and 12.5% belonged to other categories (unqualified workers, freelancers, and others). Regarding the monthly income, 10.5% of the respondents reported an income lower than 700 lei/month, 37% had an income between 700 and 1500 lei/month, 30% an income between 1500 and 3000 lei/month, 19% between 3000 and 6000 lei/month, and 3.5% had an income higher than 6000 lei/month.

*Measures*

We used the Questionnaire for Quality of Urban Life developed by Robert Marans (2001) and adapted by Alexander Keul (2008). The questionnaire consisted of 8 open questions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of districts, followed by 43 items measuring the quality of life in the neighborhood. The 43 items were scored on 5-point Likert scale (0=I don't know; 1=Yes, very much; 2=Rather yes; 3=Rather no; 4=No, not at all). The items were grouped in two subscales: perceived quality of the neighborhood (items referring to safety, education, cultural events, grocery stores, green spaces, transport, noise, environment, the urban/rural features of the neighborhood, and pollution), and perceived quality of neighborhood's community (items referring to social networks, number of inhabitants, social problems, the age of inhabitants, ethnicity, and satisfaction with neighbors). The questionnaire showed good reliability, with  $\alpha = .83$ . The scale for the quality of the neighborhood consisting of 27

items showed good reliability with  $\alpha = .81$ , and the scale for quality of the neighborhood's community consisting of 16 items had a lower reliability of  $\alpha = .64$ .

Finally, we addressed a few demographic questions on gender, age, birthplace, education, occupation, and income.

**Results**

In this section we will present qualitative results for perceived advantages and disadvantages of the two neighborhoods and quantitative results for the level of perceived urban quality of life. The majority of respondents willingly chose the district they currently live in (N = 46), while for the others it was a coincidence (N = 38) (see Figure 2). As for means of transport, most respondents used the public transport (N = 54). Participants also preferred to walk (N = 46), and to use their personal car (N = 35).

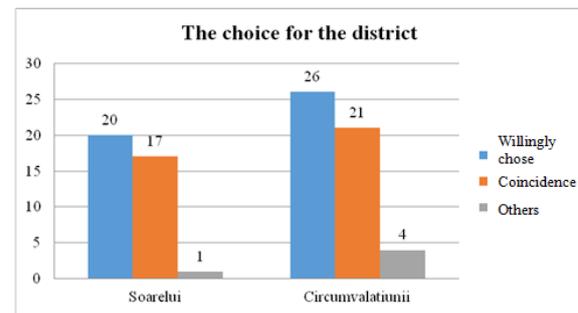


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents based on their choice for the district

We selected the following narrative topics from the open answers, representing the quality of people-environment interaction: distance from the city center, routes of public transportation (bus stations), shops and malls, restorative spaces (green spaces, parks), noise, pollution, and traffic.

As respect to its advantages, Circumvalațiunii district is closer to the city center, and there are many shops and shopping centers in the area. On the other hand, the disadvantages of this region are air pollution, noise and traffic congestion.

Soarelui district has considerable advantages due to access to public transport (bus stops nearby), more restorative spaces including parks and green spaces (forests), and quiet streets. Its disadvantages are a greater distance from downtown, and the lack of easy access to public services (e.g., post office) and shops. Table 1 presents the frequencies for narrative themes drawn from the answers given by participants to the advantages and disadvantages of their neighborhood.

To identify the possible differences between the two districts, we calculated the independent *t*-test with the SPSS (IBM Corp, 2012). By looking at Table 2, we can see that Circumvalațiunii district's inhabitants perceive the quality of life to be higher than the inhabitants of Soarelui district ( $t = 2.04, p = .04$ ). Also, there were significant differences between the two districts on the perceived quality of the neighborhood ( $t = 2.23, p = .029$ ), with a higher score for Circumvalațiunii district. We found no significant differences for the perceived quality of neighborhood's community ( $t = .19, p = .84$ )

**Table 1.** The frequency of narrative themes from the open answers

	<i>Qualitative items</i>	Circumvalațiunii District	Soarelui District
Advantages	The proximity to the city center	16	4
	Access to public transport	3	10
	Shops and malls	26	8
	Green spaces, parks	2	12
	Quiet	2	10
Disadvantages	Noise	14	2
	Air pollution	5	2
	Traffic	6	0
	Remoteness from city center	0	5
	Lack of public services and shops	0	5

**Table 2.** T test results for Soarelui and Circumvalatiunii districts

	<i>Mean</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
	Soarelui	Circumvalațiunii		
Quality of urban life	1.88 (.38)	1.72 (.37)	2.04*	.42
a. Quality of neighborhood	1.97 (.37)	1.75 (.37)	2.66*	.59
b. Quality of community	1.78 (.47)	1.76 (.5)	.19	

Notes: \*  $p < .05$ ; Standard deviations are represented in parenthesis near the mean values.

**Table 3.** T-test differences between Soarelui and Circumvalatiunii districts on the subscales of the questionnaire

	<i>Mean</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
	Soarelui	Circumvalațiunii		
<i>Neighborhood quality</i>				
Subjective evaluation of neighborhood	1.68 (.38)	1.52 (.31)	2.11*	.46
Demographic factors	2.14 (1.25)	2.00 (1.09)	.54	
Safety	1.96 (.96)	1.89 (.72)	.37	
Education	2.22 (.82)	1.77 (.91)	2.37*	.52
Leisure	2.11 (.58)	1.81 (.67)	2.20*	.47
Shops	1.81 (.74)	1.18 (.38)	4.77**	1.07
Green spaces	1.71 (.49)	1.94 (.73)	-1.76	
Environmental factors	1.89 (1.11)	1.83 (1.16)	.278	
Public transport	1.74 (.79)	1.38 (.74)	2.15*	.47
Quiet	2.58 (.97)	2.94 (1.25)	-1.48	
<i>Quality of community</i>				
Social network	1.57 (.52)	1.48 (.55)	.82	
Old /young community	2.08 (.66)	2.16 (.65)	-.60	

Notes: \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; Standard deviations are represented in parenthesis near the mean values.

## Discussion

Previous studies on quality of life emphasize that in Timișoara citizens have a lower quality of life compared to other European cities (Morais & Camanho, 2011). In this study, we assessed citizens' perception of quality of life in two districts of Timișoara, Soarelui and Circumvalațiunii, and described the positive and negative aspects of neighborhoods, and possible solutions to improve the quality of life.

We started from the hypothesis that there are significant differences in terms of quality of urban life between the two neighborhoods, both in terms of general level of quality of life and on the subscales of the questionnaire: the perceived quality of the neighborhood, and the perceived quality of the community.

The results of this study showed that Circumvalațiunii district residents had a higher quality of urban life and assigned a higher quality to the neighborhood where they live, comparing to the inhabitants of Soarelui district. We did not obtain significant differences between the two

districts for how people perceive the quality of neighborhood's community.

Residents of Circumvalațiunii district were more satisfied comparing to residents of the Soarelui district regarding the access and quality of education, opportunities for leisure, access and diversity of shops, and means of transport linking the district to the city center and the main points of interest from town. Instead, Soarelui residents were more satisfied with the green spaces in the neighborhood, comparing to Circumvalatiunii inhabitants. There were no significant differences between the two districts in terms of perception of safety, pollution or other environmental factors, or the tranquility of the neighborhood. These results were supported by the answers given by respondents for qualitative questions in the questionnaire about the advantages and disadvantages of the neighborhood where they live.

We believe that future initiatives to improve the level of quality of life in Timișoara's neighborhoods should take into account the specific needs of residents, and the specific features of each neighborhood. The results of our analysis confirm that the two districts, Soarelui and

Circumvalațiunii, are different in terms of residents' perception of the aspects of urban quality of life. We believe that we need a thorough analysis of neighborhood aspects before relating them to the perception of quality of life because some intuitive findings may lead to erroneous conclusions. For example, we might be tempted to intuitively say that Soarelui residents have a higher quality of life because the district features many green spaces and is quieter. But our results indicated that the Soarelui inhabitants, in fact, had a lower quality of life than those in Circumvalațiunii district. We recommend that future studies to conduct an analysis of the physical factors that predict quality of life in the neighborhood, such as the distance from the residents' apartments to the green spaces in the neighborhood.

We wish to continue the analysis of the quality of urban life of Timisoara's residents and to include in the study all districts of Timisoara, and then compare the quality of life of Timisoara with the city of Salzburg. Thus, recommendations for improving the quality of life can be made both in relation to the specificities of each area and for the entire city of Timisoara.

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