AN INTERNATIONAL THEATRE FESTIVAL AND CITY BRANDING: INSIGHTS FROM MANAGERS REPRESENTING FOREIGN ARTISTIC TROUPS

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Purpose: This article aims to identify the role of an international theatre festival in city branding by analyzing the perspective of participants representing foreign artistic ensembles.

Design/methodology/approach: The study is based on a qualitative case study methodology, focusing on the Direction East Theatre Festival in Białystok. Six in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) were conducted with theatre managers from Eastern Europe and analyzed using MAXQDA software and an abductive approach.

Findings: Participation in the festival transforms the perception of the city from initial unawareness or stereotypes to a positive, detailed image. Discovering Białystok's multicultural roots generates strong identity connections, redefining "the East" as a strategic asset. The festival's high organizational professionalism (systematic approach, team commitment) is crucial for the city's brand credibility. The mechanism of the "ambassadorial effect" was also confirmed, where high-quality experiences lead to spontaneous promotion of the city by participants.

Research limitations/implications: Limitations include the subjective nature of the data and the inability to generalize findings to a broader population due to the small, purposive sample. Longitudinal studies, inclusion of a wider range of stakeholders, and comparative analyses with other festivals are recommended.

Practical implications: Recommendations include investing in organizational professionalism, fostering an engaging atmosphere, involving the audience, developing international cooperation, consciously strengthening the ambassadorial effect, professional visual (including linguistic) communication, and integrating events with urban space.

Social implications: The festival fosters intercultural dialogue and strengthens inclusive local identities, positioning the city as open and cosmopolitan.

Originality/value: The article makes a significant contribution to place branding theory by exploring the under-researched area of theatre festivals from the unique perspective of international artists in the specific geopolitical context of Białystok. It presents a three-phase model of perception change, enriching existing theoretical frameworks.

Keywords: Place branding, City branding, Theatre festival, Experience marketing, Multiculturalism.

Category of the paper: Case study, Research article.

1. Introduction

The application of branding concepts in urban management has become a subject of growing interest among both scholars and practitioners (Stevens et al., 2021). Increasingly, brands are being perceived as integral elements of public space, and local governments are beginning to recognize their strategic importance (Rudolf, Glińska, 2019).

Braun and Zenker (2017) define place branding as the overall image and set of associations (both functional and non-functional) related to a given location, based on its visual, verbal, and behavioral expressions, which are reflected in the city's objectives, communication, values, and stakeholder culture. A brand refers to the identity established for a specific territory with the aim of promoting its uniqueness. This identity is grounded in the distinctive and unique features of a place (Ginesta et al., 2024). Kalandides (2012) emphasizes the need for co-creation of place identity by a variety of stakeholders, including residents, local authorities, entrepreneurs, and tourists. The dynamic and relational nature of place identity forms the foundation for building its brand (Kavaratzis, Hatch, 2013). The goal of brand management is to shape specific associations with a given place among targeted audiences (Reynolds et al., 2022). Municipal governments engage in branding initiatives aimed at stimulating economic development, attracting talent, and encouraging visits to the city (González et al., 2025). A positive city brand image plays a crucial role in attracting investors, tourists, employees, students, and prospective residents, and is essential in urban management processes (Grębosz-Krawczyk, Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2024).

Culture plays a particularly significant role in defining a city's brand identity, understood as the activity of municipal cultural institutions, whose influence often extends beyond the city's administrative boundaries (Rudolf, Glińska, 2019). In the place marketing literature, there is growing interest in the role of artistic festivals as tools for supporting city branding (Getz, 2008; Quinn, 2010; Johansson, Kociatkiewicz, 2011). Theatre festivals, however, are less frequently examined compared to other types of events in place branding research. Nevertheless, they can serve as a valuable tool for brand development. Their significance lies in the creation of deep, culturally rooted community narratives that can enhance a city's recognition and identity at both national and international levels (Wilmer, Koski, 2018; Oham, Ejike, 2022; Thomasson, 2022).

The aim of this article is to identify the role of an international theatre festival in building a city's brand from the perspective of participants representing foreign artistic ensembles. The study employs a case study methodology, focusing on the „Direction East" theatre festival organized in the city of Białystok. As part of the case analysis, in-depth interviews were conducted with theatre group managers from several European countries. The study's conclusions may be converted into managerial implications, targeting managers of cultural institutions and representatives from Local Government Units responsible for the oversight of cultural institutions.

2. Literature review

The Development of City Branding

In marketing terms, a city can be perceived as a product—a combination of tangible attributes and intangible components that interpenetrate to create a unique experiential space for residents and other categories of "users" of the city's offerings (Glińska et al., 2009). The need to treat the city as a multidimensional product, whose brand is shaped by the experiences of both residents and visitors, is also emphasized by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005). As a distinct type of product, the city competes with other urban centers for factors that ensure a high quality of life for its inhabitants. It vies for the attention and trust of various stakeholder groups: investors, tourists, students, skilled workers, as well as media interest and the engagement of the local community (Florek, 2013), which constitutes the basis for brand development.

The concept of city branding emerged in the late 1990s, when Anholt (1998) introduced the notion of "nation branding", later adapted to the urban context. In his subsequent work, Anholt (2006, 2010) developed the theory of "competitive identity", which goes beyond traditional approaches to place marketing by emphasizing the importance of a coherent strategy integrating the place's politics, economy, and culture. According to Dinnie (2011), city branding has evolved from mere place promotion to comprehensive identity management.

Gilboa et al. (2015) emphasize that by integrating branding techniques into governance, city authorities can unify stakeholders around a new competitive identity, subsequently communicated to target audiences. In the domain of territorial branding, a key responsibility of brand managers is to communicate selected attributes of the city. These efforts result in perceptions based largely on psychological and emotional associations with the place (Braun et al., 2012). Cities seek to utilize both material and immaterial elements of their identity to create messages that appeal to a broad audience (Rudolf et al., 2023).

Branding thus becomes an increasingly widespread practice of "selling" specific characteristics of a city—its history, lifestyle, and culture—in order to gain new opportunities, prestige, or competitive strength (Zhang, Zhao, 2009).

Culture and Cultural Events in City Branding

The role of culture and cultural assets in shaping a city's identity is highlighted by numerous scholars, including Zenker (2009), Merrilees et al. (2012), Gilboa et al. (2015), Glińska (2016), and Rudolf & Glińska (2019). Their research points to the significant contribution of a city's cultural offer to its brand, identifying key elements such as vibrant cultural institutions, the organization of events and festivals, live performances, and a wide range of opportunities to engage with culture in one's free time (Rudolf, Glińska, 2019).

In examining the cultural dimensions of city branding, it is worth referencing the work of Richards and Palmer (2010), who analyzed how cultural events transform urban space and influence its perception. Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2015) explored the use of cultural heritage in city branding, while Govers (2018) examined the role of the creative sector in developing a competitive urban identity.

Several researchers have focused specifically on the role of cultural events in city branding. Richards (2017) investigated how such events impact brand value by generating unique experiences. His findings suggest that the success of cultural events depends on their authenticity and ability to engage diverse stakeholder groups. He also emphasized that events should be grounded in the local cultural context in order to produce distinctive experiences that resonate with both residents and visitors. Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015) explored how cultural experiences are transformed into brand associations, proposing a participatory model of place branding in which cultural events—such as theatre festivals—serve as key tools for brand building.

Artistic Festivals in City Branding

In place marketing literature, there is growing interest in the role of artistic festivals as instruments for city brand development. Quinn (2010) emphasizes that festivals serve not only as tourist attractions but also as influential factors in shaping urban image. Her research highlights the long-term impact of festivals on urban development and their capacity to foster cultural tourism. She draws particular attention to the connection between festivals, local cultural identity, and urban policy.

Getz (2008), meanwhile, proposed a theoretical framework for analyzing events as strategic tools in destination management. He defined "event tourism" as a deliberately designed activity aimed at promoting cities through events, which can enhance brand recognition and shape visitor experiences.

Further insights are offered by Johansson and Kociatkiewicz (2011), who examined festivals as tools for repositioning Scandinavian cities on the international cultural map. They highlighted the tensions between creativity and control in event management, noting that festivals—beyond their artistic value—play a strategic role in territorial marketing. These studies portray artistic festivals not merely as temporary attractions but as complex instruments of urban policy, place branding, and local community engagement.

Theatre Festivals and City Brand Building

While considerable attention has been paid in the literature on place branding and event marketing to music, film, and multi-genre festivals, theatre festivals remain a relatively underexplored area. Their distinctive nature—rooted in performativity, local narratives, and cultural dialogue—positions them as especially valuable in the context of city branding.

Wilmer and Koski (2018) argue that international theatre festivals act as platforms for intercultural dialogue, where theatre becomes a medium connecting diverse cultural traditions and languages. They explore how such festivals can help position cities as open and cosmopolitan, which is especially valuable in attracting cultural tourists and investors. Similar conclusions were drawn by Hauptfleisch et al. (2007), who, studying South African theatre festivals, emphasized the role of theatre as a community-building tool in culturally diverse societies.

Bennett and Woodward (2014) offer an insightful perspective on how festival participation shapes a sense of belonging, particularly among individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Their findings are especially relevant in the context of multicultural and borderland cities, where theatre festivals may function as integrative forces that strengthen inclusive local identities.

Some scholars have investigated the relationship between theatre festivals and city brand development. Jakob (2012) approached this issue through the lens of "eventification"—the transformation of urban space into a stage for experience consumption. He noted that contemporary urban development increasingly prioritizes the creation and promotion of experiences. Theatre festivals exemplify this trend, turning both products and places into a kind of "theatre" in both literal and metaphorical senses. Eventification, in turn, is employed as a branding tool—festivals not only offer intense experiences but also contribute to constructing the image of a city as dynamic, creative, and attractive for living, working, and investing.

Oham and Ejike (2022) identified the evolution of branding strategies within the performing arts sector, emphasizing the role of events (including theatre) in shaping the image of institutions and cities. They stressed the importance of consistent visual communication, cultural values, and audience experience in creating a recognizable and authentic place brand through festivals.

Thomasson (2022), on the other hand, examined how theatre festivals in Edinburgh and Adelaide became central to city branding strategies, crafting images of dynamic, open, and culturally engaged urban centers. Her research also explored how the process of "festivalization" affects public space and urban identity, revealing tensions between promotional goals and the social and political dimensions of festivals.

3. Research Methodology

The research methodology was based on a qualitative approach. The primary research method was a case study analysis, which is understood as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2003).

Achieving the article's objective was made possible through the selection and analysis of a case: the Direction East theatre festival, organized by the Aleksander Węgierko Drama Theatre in Białystok. This event was established in 2017, referencing the international idea of the Eastern Partnership - a cooperation program within the European Neighbourhood Policy involving six Eastern European countries: Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The main goal of organizing the festival was to strengthen cultural cooperation between the Drama Theatre and institutions from the Eastern Partnership countries and cultural centers located in border regions. One of the organizers' aims was also to expand the cultural offerings in an area distant from Poland's largest cultural centers, namely Białystok - the capital of Podlaskie Voivodeship. The event is financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, the budget of Podlaskie Voivodeship, and the institution's own funds. Over eight editions, artists from Armenia, Belarus, Czech Republic, Georgia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Ukraine, the United States, as well as Polish theatres from Tarnów, Bielsko-Biała, and Rzeszów, among others, have performed in Białystok.

"Direction East" is one of the few theatre events in Białystok that allows for the experience of intercultural relations and cooperation. The festival takes place annually and enables audiences to watch theatre performances by international theatres and groups. The strengths of the festival include: expanding the city's cultural offerings, the presence of guests from culturally diverse countries in Białystok, their grassroots promotion of the city, and the development opportunities for international cooperation in the field of culture, which constitute a potential that can become an element of the city's branding strategy.

Before commencing the research, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1. How has participation in the international Direction East theatre festival influenced the perception of Białystok's city brand by foreign participants?

RQ2. How did foreign participants evaluate the Direction East theatre festival and its connections to Białystok's city identity?

RQ3. What benefits can Białystok's city brand gain from organizing the Direction East theatre festival, in the opinion of foreign participants?

To obtain answers to the research questions within the framework of the case study analysis, individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted. This is a commonly used technique in qualitative research. It is based on a natural human communication scheme - they resemble everyday conversations during which participants engage in dialogue, exchanging thoughts, formulating questions, and providing answers. An in-depth interview is a focused conversation between two people: the researcher and the interviewee, which can be structured and standardized in various ways (Glinka, Czakon, 2021). Such a conversation can take place as a direct face-to-face meeting or using communicators such as Zoom, Google Meet, MS Teams, FaceTime, and many others (Lobe, Morgan, Hoffman, 2020).

For a fuller picture of the studied phenomenon, "face-to-face" communication is more often used in scientific projects. In addition to the information contained in spoken words, this form allows for better reception of non-verbal cues (Onwugebuzie, Leech, Collins, 2010). Due to geographical distance and factors limiting mobility (e.g., the war in Ukraine, COVID-19), researchers now equally often use electronic communication means that also enable video connection. Compared to live conversations, online interviews have some limitations, but they allow for international research reach, flexibility, and acceleration of the research process (Glinka, Czakon, 2021).

The selection of an adequate research method determines the quality and reliability of the results obtained (Creswell, Creswell, 2018). IDI is a special type of interaction in which the researcher asks questions about opinions, experiences, objections, dreams, fears, and hopes, and the respondent provides answers to these questions (Knott et al., 2022). An in-depth interview, as a qualitative method, allows for a deep understanding of complex socio-cultural phenomena through the exploration of individual experiences and perspectives of the subjects (Kvale, Brinkmann, 2009). Research on the impact of cultural events on a city's image requires understanding the multidimensional relationships between various stakeholders (Richards, Palmer, 2010).

A particularly important factor justifying the choice of the IDI method was the international nature of the studied group. As Marschan-Piekkari and Welch (2004) note, international research requires particular sensitivity to cultural and linguistic context, which the applied method enables. In research on the perspective and experiences of theatre festival participants, qualitative methods are valuable for studying the intangible, emotional, and symbolic aspects of cultural events (Getz, 2010). Johansson and Kociatkiewicz (2011) successfully used in-depth interviews with artistic directors, obtaining valuable data on the processes of constructing narratives about a city through cultural events.

In summary, the choice of the in-depth interview stems from the characteristics of the studied group and the specificity of the research topic, enabling the acquisition of in-depth data on the perspective of participants of the "Direction East" Theatre Festival, representing artistic ensembles from Eastern Europe, which is crucial for understanding the festival's role in the city branding process.

The selection of respondents for the IDIs was carried out based on the list of participants from all editions of the "Direction East" Festival. Six individuals holding managerial positions in theatres from Eastern European countries, who visited Białystok as part of their festival participation, were selected.

Purposive sampling was used, which allowed for the selection of respondents possessing specific knowledge relevant to the adopted research objective (Patton, 2015). The sample included 6 respondents representing theatres from Armenia, Ukraine, Lithuania, North Macedonia, and Georgia, diverse in terms of culture, institution size, and artistic profile (Table 1). The institutions included national theatres, academic theatres, as well as non-

institutional theatres. The criterion for selecting respondents was their active decision-making role in the theatre's participation in the festival and their experience in institution management. This sampling approach enabled obtaining data from individuals possessing both decision-making competencies and a strategic perspective necessary to evaluate the festival's impact on the international perception of the city (Robinson, 2014).

Table 1.
Characteristics of respondents by organization, occupation, country and city

Symbol	Organization	Occupation	Country	City
R1	National Theatre Bitola	Theatre manager	Northern Macedonia	Bitola
R2	Movement Theatre	Theatre manager	Georgia	Tibilisi
R3	Alytaus Miesto Teatras	Theatre manager	Lithuania	Alytus
R4	Left Bank Theater	Theatre manager/director	Ukraine	Kyiv
R5	National Academic Gabriel Sundukyan's Theatre	Theatre manager/director	Armenia	Yerevan
R6	Vazha-Pshavela State Drama Theatre	Theatre manager	Georgia	Telavi

The study employed a **semi-structured in-depth interview**, which combines a structured set of questions with the flexibility to explore unplanned topics (Longhurst, 2003). This type of interview allowed for thematic consistency while adapting to the individual course of the conversation and the specificity of the respondent's experiences, which is particularly crucial in this type of research (Galletta, Cross, 2013). The interview protocol included 11 main (open-ended) questions, grouped into four complementary thematic areas, forming a logical sequence from individual experiences to strategic reflections, and consisted of the following parts:

- city perception - an area exploring respondents' initial perceptions of the city and their evolution in the context of festival participation, in line with the concept of place image formation through direct experience (Zenker, Braun, 2017);
- festival experiences - a block of questions concerning the multidimensional experience of festival participation, including organizational aspects, the event's atmosphere, accompanying activities, as well as a comparison with other events of this type and the emotional dimension of the experience. This section is based on the festival experience model proposed by Getz and Page (2016);
- festival's impact on city brand - an area analyzing the perceived benefits for the city resulting from the festival's organization, behavioral intentions (propensity for repeat visits), and evaluation of marketing activities, referencing the concept of place brand equity as per Jacobsen (2012);
- conclusions and recommendations - a section covering suggestions for optimizing festival organization, reflections on the event's connections to the city's identity, and an open question allowing respondents to raise important issues not covered in previous questions.

The structure of the interview protocol was designed according to the "funnel sequence" principle, starting with general questions and gradually moving to more specific and reflective ones (Morgan et al., 2008). Questions were formulated in an open-ended, non-judgmental manner, avoiding specialized terminology, with the aim of minimizing communication barriers in an intercultural context (Ryen, 2002).

Due to geographical location and the geopolitical situation in some of the surveyed countries, it was decided to conduct all interviews remotely, via the MS Teams platform, which allowed for video recording of the interview after obtaining informed consent from the respondents. Interviews were conducted between February and April 2024, each lasting from 45 to 60 minutes. This strategy allowed for adapting the research process to the time and logistical capabilities of the respondents (King, Horrocks, 2010). Subsequently, textual transcripts of the recordings were made using Turboscribe software and exported as .docx files. In the next step, the accuracy of the automatic transcription process was checked, necessary corrections were made, and the text was formatted for better readability. The transcription process was carried out using standards of denaturalized transcription, which preserves the content of utterances while correcting pauses, repetitions, and paralinguistic elements that do not add substantive value (Oliver et al., 2005). The interviews were conducted in English and then translated into Polish.

Data analysis was performed using MAXQDA software, which enabled systematic coding, categorization, and interpretation of the collected textual materials (Kuckartz, 2014). A multi-stage qualitative coding process was carried out: (1) initial familiarization with the material and marking key fragments, (2) creating codes based on identified patterns and significant statements, and (3) organizing codes into a hierarchical structure reflecting the main thematic areas of the study (Schreier, 2012). In the elaboration of the results, an abductive approach was used, combining elements of inductive and deductive analysis, which allowed for the identification of both themes emerging directly from empirical data and those related to existing theoretical frameworks of place branding (Timmermans, Tavory, 2012).

The analysis of the collected material was conducted in accordance with the adopted principles of qualitative coding in MAXQDA software. The identification of 14 main thematic categories allowed for a systematic examination of the multidimensional impact of the international "Direction East" theatre festival on the city's brand from the perspective of international participants. The abductive approach used enabled the combination of empirical observations with existing theoretical frameworks of place branding (Timmermans, Tavory, 2012), resulting in an in-depth analysis of place perception formation processes.

4. Results

Regarding the search for answers to RQ1 "How has participation in the international Direction East theatre festival influenced the perception of Białystok's city brand by foreign participants?", the analysis of empirical material obtained from the interviews revealed a distinct three-phase process of experiencing the city: the pre-festival phase, re-evaluation of the image during the festival, and a positive post-festival transformation. The pre-festival phase was characterized by a predominant lack of knowledge about the city or its perception as a secondary cultural center. Statements from respondents from various countries (North Macedonia, Armenia, Georgia, Lithuania, and Ukraine) confirm that Białystok, prior to their visit, did not function in their awareness as a significant point on Poland's cultural map, with the exception of a respondent from Lithuania, who knew the city due to its theatre traditions and geographical proximity. One respondent [R1] openly admitted to a lack of knowledge: "We didn't know too much about Białystok and we just based it on our general idea and knowledge about Poland as a country". Similarly, a manager from another theatre [R5] stated: "When we talk about Poland, Białystok is not the first thing that comes to your mind". The head of another theatre group [R2] expressed expectations: "I expected a small European city, with a lot of space". Particularly interesting was the statement of a Ukrainian director [R4], who had a specific attitude in the context of the war: "I didn't know about Białystok. And it was my first time meeting the city. And we had a topic about a full invasion, about people abroad, about women abroad. So I wasn't and didn't feel like a tourist". One individual [R6] noted: "I've been to many other cities in Poland before, traveling, studying, and also visiting them, as well as for business purposes. But I knew that Białystok would be absolutely different". The analysis of Białystok's pre-festival perception perfectly illustrates the "departure zone" of a place experience in the framework of Pine and Gilmore's (1998) theory, where a lack of familiarity or stereotypical notions precede the actual aesthetic and educational experience. According to this theory, a full place experience requires engaging all four dimensions (entertainment, educational, escapist, and aesthetic), which in the case of the surveyed respondents was only to occur in subsequent phases of their contact with Białystok.

The experiences of festival participants reveal a positive re-evaluation of initial perceptions of Białystok, focusing on three dimensions: discovering the city's multicultural history, appreciating the organizers' hospitality, and being delighted by the festival audience's engagement. This last element emerges as a key factor shaping the city's image. The director of one of the theatres [R1] described the discovery process in detail: "we visited almost the entire city center, it was a two-hour tour. We visited all the main landmarks and squares in Białystok". Particularly significant was the discovery of multicultural roots: "we heard a really interesting fact that in Białystok you can buy 'boza' (a slightly fermented drink from Balkan and Turkish cuisine), which we didn't know before, and it was especially interesting that it was brought by

Macedonian immigrants in the early 1920s". The same respondent [R1] added: "we went to the Jewish ghetto in Białystok and the guide told us everything that happened during World War II". Another participant [R2] enthusiastically reported: "we were excited, and we liked this city very much". He also appreciated the hospitality: "we had a great host (...) the hospitality at the festival was so good that we ate a lot of chocolate, we actually ate everything, and the chocolate was the best!" The director of another theatre [R3] positively assessed the local audience: "I was impressed with the audience. There were many people at both of our performances". Another surveyed person [R5] confirmed: "The organizers also prepared a very hospitable and warm welcome for us. And I could also see that the audience, the best part for me is how well prepared the audience was (...) I could feel how emotional these people are, how deep they are". Another respondent [R6] added: "the best part for me is how well prepared the audience was and they not only participated in our shows, and had interactions after the performances (...) this small city and this wonderful audience are actually very actively involved in the world of theatre. For me, it was a bit surprising". The theme of the festival audience repeatedly appeared in the statements, whose activity and engagement positively influenced the perception of both the city and the event: "I wouldn't say it's everywhere in the world, this kind of unique audience and unique perception of the artistic and creative world itself. People in Białystok truly love theatre (...) When I think of Białystok, the first thing that resonates in my mind with the city is the Direction East Festival" [R6].

Analyzing these experiences through the lens of place brand equity (Konecnik, Gartner, 2007), it can be observed how, during the festival, all dimensions of Białystok's brand value are strengthened: from brand awareness (recognition of the city as a cultural center), through perceived quality (level of festival organization) and positive associations (hospitality, engaged audience), to brand loyalty (expressed through the desire to return and sentiment towards memories).

The post-festival perception of the city was unequivocally positive for all respondents. One participant [R5] showed the clearest transformation: "after visiting the Direction East festival, I think that when we talk about Poland, the first thing that comes to my mind is Białystok". Another participant [R6] noted: "after participating in the festival, we checked every subsequent year whether it was just our emotional connection or if we all actually had this objective attitude." The importance of the festival for future international cooperation was often emphasized: "this is the beginning of a very beautiful and nice cooperation between two theatres (...) the day after the festival ended, we had an invitation for the next edition". Similarly for the Lithuanian theatre: "We have common plans. We are very much looking forward to going there (...) we are doing our joint project. And we will have five days" [R3]. Recommendations for other theatres to participate in the festival also appeared: "you should definitely go there and see the festival, they will choose you, it's a very good opportunity to go and see Białystok, and the people are very nice, and the festival is very good, very well organized" [R2]. The human factor was of greatest importance for one respondent [R4]: "maybe

it's a bit funny, but I would say that the face of the city for me, for Białystok, is the face of the festival organizer".

The unequivocally positive perception of Białystok through the experience of participating in the Direction East Festival confirms Zenker and Braun's (2017) concept of the strategic role of cultural events in city branding. Analyzing respondents' statements in search of answers to RQ2. "How did foreign participants evaluate the Direction East theatre festival and its connections to Białystok's city identity?" several aspects were considered: impressions of the city, atmosphere and emotions, festival organization - constituting the foundation of a positive experience. Promotional activities, accompanying events, and comparisons with other festivals were also included. The "Organization" category was a key element in evaluating the festival from the participant's perspective, significantly influencing the city's image. One manager [R3] emphasized the importance of organizational continuity: "the people who work on the festival, they literally work on the next edition from the first day the last edition of the festival ended. Actually, the day after the festival ended, we had an invitation for the next edition." She then added: "We go to Białystok and we know that everyone will be very helpful, everything will be fine, very well prepared". The head of one of the ensembles [R2] particularly valued the professionalism of the technical staff: "the stage technical crew was so good that when we started preparing the lighting, they did it in one second (...) we finished our rehearsal before the performance because everything was ready". A representative of another theatre [R5] noted the systematic nature of the actions: "I could see that the main people, the main players in the organizing team are very dedicated to this work. Very dedicated". Others also highly praised the organizers' approach: "the organization was on a high level and this is very important for me, because we also organize a new directing festival in my theatre (...) I come to festivals not only as a participant, but as a colleague who organizes a festival. That's why I think it's a really high level when you are surrounded by this attention all the time" [R4]. Organizational flexibility was also appreciated: "the organizing team of Direction East Festival also did a great job when they were working on bringing the Direction East Festivals to an online version during COVID-19. We also participated in that edition of the festival (...) you know how artistic people were hungry for these kind of opportunities at that time" [R6].

While the organization of the Direction East festival generally received positive feedback, respondents identified key areas for improvement, namely networking, critical engagement, and overall festival visibility and promotion. A recurring desire was for a more integrated festival experience beyond just performances. One respondent wished for "more things that are around the festival, but not a performance... something that will bring all people closer. I also understand that this is a really big budget issue" [R1]. This highlights a need for informal gathering spaces to foster connections. Another manager added, "I know that this is a common question about budgets, about money. But of course, I would prefer to come earlier, leave later and have this networking part" [R4]. The lack of dedicated networking, including a "festival club" [R3], was a missed opportunity for dialogue. Furthermore, critical reception and

documentation require development. A manager suggested "critics... who could speak and write more about the performances" [R1], indicating a gap that could enhance the festival's professional image. Practical issues included poor urban visibility. One participant noted, "When you come to the Direction East festival, you don't see any signs in the city" [R3]. Communication barriers also arose: "I was badly translated... conversations with the audience are sometimes even more important for us" [R4]. This points to the need for high-quality translation. Finally, program diversification was suggested to broaden appeal, such as "proposals for a younger audience" [R3], which could increase reach. These critical insights, despite budget limitations, offer valuable recommendations for enhancing future festival editions.

Such high organizational quality not only affected the comfort of participants but also, in line with Richards and Wilson (2004), strengthened the positive image of the city as a place open to culture, capable of professionally implementing international events. The statements of Direction East festival participants show diverse opinions on promotional activities - on one hand, the high quality of visual materials and social media activity were praised, while on the other, insufficient visibility of the event in urban space was pointed out. The quality of visual documentation was appreciated, confirmed by the words of the director of one of the theatres [R3]: "you have a very good photographer, really. Especially after our first performance, which was a couple of years ago. We even asked if we could use those pictures for our theatre". Another director [R1] shared this opinion: "I like short films before performances and presenting some people from the crew of each performance, and also trailers of performances". He also noted the evolution of the marketing strategy: "I think the festival has good marketing. Maybe the first edition wasn't so 'aggressive', but the next two years were really active and nice, good marketing, especially on social media".

Despite the positive reception of marketing activities, participants also expressed criticism. One respondent [R3] noted the lack of event signage in urban space: "speaking about the festival marketing, I can make some remarks (...) when you come to the Direction East festival, you don't see any signs in the city". Greater activity in online communication was also postulated: "I think it would be useful to have some online streaming from the talks. That could encourage other people from Białystok and the audience to come" [R4].

The analysis of the "Marketing" category reveals that despite the growing professionalization of promotional activities, place branding - as per Anholt (2006) - remains a complex process that requires consistent management of the city's image, its cultural offerings, and its presence in public and digital spaces.

Unique character compared to other festivals

Comparisons of the Direction East festival to other cultural events in the region allow for grasping its specificity against diverse socio-political and organizational contexts. One participant [R1] contrasted it with their national situation: "in our country all festivals are

very weak in every aspect, and especially budgets. We cannot afford many side programs of organizing festivals". A representative from another theatre [R5] emphasized the unique hospitality: "what makes Białystok Festival different, it seems that the festival is the main mission of the whole group, of the whole theatre (...) the organizers were really doing everything to make the hosts feel really comfortable". Another participant [R4] considered the specificity of the wartime context: "every festival for us, in some ways, it's the same. Because it gives us the possibility of having a voice, of talking about war, of talking about Ukraine".

In line with Getz and Page's (2016) concept, the strength of a festival as a place-making tool lies in its ability to offer unique experiences - those that not only engage artists but also provide them with space for dialogue with the audience and real social impact.

Atmosphere as a meaning generator

The "Atmosphere" category was consistently described as unique, emotional, open, and conducive to building relationships among artists, audience, and organizers. One respondent [R2] recounted an extraordinary moment: "one Polish journalist stood up and said that I want to thank you and I want to sing a song for you (...) it was the first time in our life that somebody sang a song for us (...) it was so emotional". Another participant [R3] also appreciated the quality of interaction with the audience: "it's very good to have post-performance reflections, to have discussions - your festival enables this". One interviewee [R6] noted: "I would say that the overall atmosphere was so dynamic and interesting on many levels (...) I still cherish those days and the memories we had in Poland".

This festival transcends the sphere of a cultural event, becoming an engaging, multi-level experience that influences the identity of recipients and their perception of the host city, referencing Pine and Gilmore's (1998) concept of the experience economy.

City Identity in an International Context

Statements from foreign participants indicate strong connections between Białystok's city identity and the character of the event. The director of one of the theatres [R1] positively assessed the geographical connotations: "when I first thought about it, I understood why the name is 'Direction East' (...) it's a really nice thing, to see something that is really oriented towards Eastern European countries". Another manager [R5] saw the festival's name as a symbol of openness: "the city is open. It's an open society (...) Direction East is doing its best to invite something that is not national. This is also characteristic of Białystok". The international potential of the event was also emphasized: "The Direction East Festival could be an event that actually contributes to making Białystok an important cultural landmark" [R6].

A deeper analysis of the qualitative data reveals significant concerns regarding the festival's identity and its integration with the urban fabric. These critical voices point to the need for a more cohesive vision and a stronger connection with the host city. A fundamental question

about the festival's core purpose emerged from the discussions: "What are we actually talking about, what is Direction for all of us? Is it the same Direction? Is it the same vector? Are we just Direction as a geographical part, but not a part of meanings and a part of strategy, a cultural strategy for tomorrow?" [R4]. This suggests a perceived lack of a clear, shared vision or strategic direction for the festival beyond its geographical designation.

Moreover, managers expressed a desire for a more pervasive and engaging festival presence within the city itself. One suggestion was that "maybe these accompanying things and accompanying events of the festival could be spread throughout the city (...), so that festival guests have a broader or more specific picture of what is happening" [R1]. This indicates that the festival's current reach might be too limited, narrowing the immersive experience for international guests. This sentiment ties into a broader reflection on the relationship between festivals and their host cities: "Usually... there is often no connection between the city and the festival... Does the festival have to become educational in some sense?" [R4]. Concrete suggestions for strengthening this urban integration included: "Organizers could definitely think about an opening and closing ceremony. (...) Maybe also better visibility in the city. More posters, actions, activities, performative events in the city streets" [R3]. These highlight that the festival's limited public presence and lack of city-wide engagement activities diminish its overall impact.

These critical perspectives emphasize that for the Direction East festival to truly thrive and fulfill its potential, it may need to re-evaluate its core identity and actively seek ways to embed itself more deeply into the city's life and consciousness, moving beyond an event focused solely on a specific venue.

According to Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2015), urban branding is not a simple promotional activity but a complex process where meanings are created through experiences, relationships, and narratives - which is confirmed in the case of Białystok and the Direction East festival.

Emotional engagement as a catalyst for place attachment

The emotional category showed the intensity of foreign festival participants' experiences. One director [R5] described impressions from a post-performance discussion: "the lady in the audience who said such a compliment about our performance that in a way it was like electricity that passed through my body (...) it really, it emotionally broke me, all of it, all these events". The festival's diplomatic potential, a chance to improve relations between countries, was also pointed out: "we are all divided now. And I believe that the purpose of such festivals is just to give us one more chance to build this dialogue between countries and having this specific historical background between Ukraine and Poland now" [R4].

Cultural events not only provide artistic content but also create a framework for emotional and social interactions that give places meaning, aligning with Smith's (2012) concept of "meaning generators".

In interviews with respondents, they were also asked about potential benefits they believed the Białystok city brand could gain from organizing the Direction East theatre festival [RQ3]. It turned out that the International Direction East Theatre Festival is perceived by foreign participants as an initiative bringing multidimensional benefits to the host city. A representative from one of the theatres [R5] stated that "Direction East Festival makes Białystok a better place, for sure, especially in the theatre world (...) I would like to come back with my family". Another respondent [R2] observed a positive effect: "this trip to Poland had such an impact that (...) just because we played Hamlet at the festival in Białystok, in April we are going to Adana, Turkey". The conclusions lead to Anholt's (2006) concept, according to which cultural events serve as place branding tools, influencing its international recognition and attractiveness.

The analysis of Direction East festival participants' statements indicates the need to expand festival activities into Białystok's urban space. Postulated actions included: "organizers definitely could think about an opening and closing ceremony (...) some kind of parade in the main part of the city with artists invited from different countries" [R3]. Other respondents [R1] had similar conclusions: "maybe these accompanying things and accompanying events of the festival could be spread around the whole city, organize a concert in another part of the city (...) mark some places that are symbolic for the city". Attention was also drawn to the quality of translations: "really, really, really important for us to be heard" [R4]. Words of support also emerged: "don't stop. And I know that not stopping is very difficult (...) don't stop and don't lose the really friendly atmosphere that has already been created" [R5].

Despite difficulties with the renovation of the theatre building - the festival organizer - the value of continuing the festival's friendly atmosphere was emphasized. These recommendations correspond with Richards and Wilson's (2004) concept, according to which the integration of cultural events with urban space creates a multidimensional experience, building place identity. Such an approach increases the visibility of events and strengthens local community engagement. Implementing these strategies could enhance the festival's impact on Białystok's cultural landscape.

5. Discussion

The qualitative study conducted among representatives of foreign theatre ensembles participating in the "Direction East" festival revealed that this event plays a significant role in transforming the perception of the city of Białystok. Before arriving, many respondents had no information about the city or perceived it as marginal within Poland's cultural context. However, participation in the festival initiated a process of re-evaluation - all respondents transitioned from indifference or unawareness to a positive and detailed image of the city as

an open, professional, and culturally active center. The building of a positive city brand perception was influenced by three main elements:

- festival organization - participants unanimously emphasized the high organizational level of the event - systematic approach, attention to detail, technical competence, and team commitment. Both stationary activities and earlier online editions were positively evaluated, which aligns with Richards and Wilson's (2004) theory regarding the impact of event execution quality on the host city's image;

- festival atmosphere - described as friendly, open, dynamic, and conducive to building relationships. Meetings with the audience, post-performance discussions, and direct interactions played a particularly important role, which - in line with Pine and Gilmore's (1998) "experience economy" concept - create deep emotional connections with the place;

- emotions related to festival participation - the most frequently mentioned aspects were strong emotions related to the audience's reception of performances, spontaneous gestures (e.g., a Polish journalist singing), but also a sense of closeness with the organizers. These emotions constituted a long-lasting memory resource for participants, thus an element building loyalty towards the place brand (Konecnik, Gartner, 2007).

Both the festival's name and Białystok's location - on the eastern fringes of Poland and the European Union - were interpreted by participants as symbolically significant. The city emerged as a meeting place for cultures, a space for dialogue, and a reinterpretation of Eastern European identity. Many respondents perceived the festival as a gesture of invitation and openness from Poland, allowing them to see Białystok as a place resonating with their own cultural heritage (Zenker, Braun, 2017).

Some approached this with more detachment, pointing to the complexity of the concept of "the East" and the need to consider contemporary political and social differences. However, the dominant tendency was a positive reinterpretation of peripherality as an asset - a space that is different, yet significant and creative.

The conducted study, focusing on the role of the international "Direction East" theatre festival in building Białystok's brand from the perspective of foreign participants, provides important insights that resonate with existing theoretical frameworks of place branding, while offering new perspectives. The three-phase process of city perception transformation, from initial unawareness or stereotypical perception, through dynamic re-evaluation during the festival, to an unequivocally positive post-festival image, confirms Pine and Gilmore's (1998) concept of the experience economy. Participation in the festival was not merely passive consumption of events but a multidimensional aesthetic and educational experience that activated all four dimensions of experience, leading to deep engagement and a lasting change in perception. A key element is the dominant role of organizational professionalism and atmosphere in shaping a positive city image. The high quality of organization, attention to detail, technical competence, and the commitment of the organizing team, repeatedly

emphasized by respondents, align with Richards and Wilson's (2004) theory. According to this theory, the quality of event execution directly translates into the host city's image, building trust and credibility. Moreover, the specific atmosphere of the festival - described as open, dynamic, and conducive to building relationships - along with intense emotions accompanying the reception of performances and interactions with the audience, constituted a key "meaning generator" as per Smith (2012). It was precisely these emotional and social interactions, and not just artistic content, that endowed Białystok with deeper meaning, transcending purely functional associations with the city.

The study also highlights the symbolic weight of Białystok's geographical and cultural location. The festival's name "Direction East" and the city's position on the eastern fringes of Poland and the European Union, perceived by participants as a symbol of openness and a space for intercultural dialogue, confirm Zenker and Braun's (2017) thesis on the importance of cultural context in place branding. Białystok, from the position of a city previously marginal in international perception, gains the status of a place resonating with the participants' own cultural heritage, which is particularly significant in a region with a complex history and identity. This is a departure from the stereotypical perception of peripherality, towards re-defining it as an asset - a creative and significant space.

The research results indicate specific mechanisms by which the "Direction East" festival transforms experiences into value for the city brand. The ambassadorial effect, consisting of spontaneous recommendation of the festival and the city by participants in their countries of origin, is consistent with Anholt's (2006) "cascading effect" concept. Furthermore, established international relationships and partnership projects attest to the lasting impact of the event, extending beyond its temporal scope. The discovery of Białystok's multicultural roots strengthened its identity as an open and historically rooted place. The respondents' postulated stronger integration of the festival into the urban fabric (parades, performative actions, festival club) confirms Richards and Wilson's (2004) theory on the importance of integrating cultural events with urban space to increase visibility and social engagement.

6. Summary and references

The presented study makes a significant contribution to place branding theory, especially in the context of the role of cultural events in shaping the image of cities with a specific geopolitical location. The results unequivocally show that an international theatre festival can act as a powerful catalyst in the process of city perception transformation, particularly for centers with low recognition or those burdened by stereotypes. The identified three-phase process of image change (unawareness/stereotypes → positive image) confirms and expands the understanding of place branding dynamics, emphasizing the role of aesthetic and

educational experiences in the place brand building process (Pine, Gilmore, 1998). This suggests that festivals not only communicate the characteristics of a place but actively construct a new cognitive reality for their participants.

The research findings highlight that the most lasting memories and strongest associations with the city of Białystok were emotional in nature and related to personal interactions and spontaneous gestures from the audience. This finding provides important confirmation for the concept of destination brand equity (Konecnik, Gartner, 2007), indicating that in building loyalty to a place brand, the emotional dimension often outweighs rational assessments. Additionally, this strengthens Smith's (2012) perspective on cultural events as "meaning generators" that, through emotions, create deep connections between people and place.

The International Direction East Theatre Festival in Białystok significantly influences the perception of the city. The study showed that discovering Białystok's multicultural roots generates strong identity connections among participants, which strategically transforms the perception of "the East" from a geographical feature into a unique asset for border cities. Crucial for a positive city perception is the festival's high level of organizational professionalism, which builds its credibility and forms the foundation for complex emotional associations with the place brand. Moreover, investments in high-quality participant experiences result in spontaneous promotion of the city upon their return, creating a so-called "ambassadorial effect" - a more effective and credible form of word-of-mouth marketing than traditional campaigns.

The results of the conducted research allow for the formulation of a number of practical recommendations for theatre managers and local government officials responsible for city branding activities. These conclusions, however, also form the basis for developing good practices in managing various cultural institutions. A key factor in building a competitive advantage is the high quality of event organization. Cultural institutions should invest in the competencies of technical and organizational teams, ensure efficient logistics, and foster a friendly working atmosphere. This not only raises the standard of the event itself but also strengthens the institution's image as a trustworthy partner.

Another important element is building an engaging festival atmosphere. The openness and hospitality of the organizers and the unique atmosphere of the event encourage participants to return to the event in the future. Cultural institutions should consciously create an atmosphere conducive to interactions among artists, audience, and organizers, for example, through post-performance discussions, workshops, or program consultations. This fosters connection with the audience and strengthens their loyalty to the institution.

Festivals help in developing international cooperation. Cultural institutions can use artistic events as a starting point for building lasting partnerships, exchanging artists, and joint projects, which enriches the artistic offering and strengthens the institution's position in the international cultural market.

The research results also indicate the significant role of the so-called ambassadorial effect. Satisfied participants can spontaneously recommend the festival in their home countries, which is a valuable element of word-of-mouth marketing. Institutions can/should consciously strengthen this effect by building relationships with artists and guests through dedicated promotional materials, loyalty programs, or networks of ambassadors who promote the institution's brand in their environments.

An important issue is also professional visual communication and promotion. Communication strategies should be planned to include both digital media (e.g., online activity, social media, short live reports, broadcasts, re-broadcasts) and traditional media (e.g., posters, banners, flyers) to increase event recognition and strengthen the institution's image.

In the context of the international nature of cultural events, it is also worth emphasizing the importance of linguistic accessibility. Organizers should ensure a high level of live translation, subtitles for performances, and promotional materials in various languages. Attention to translations increases event accessibility and helps the institution reach international participants.

The integration of cultural events with urban space is an important element in building the institution's relationship with the local community. Cultural institutions can extend their events beyond the institution's walls, organizing performative actions, concerts, or parades. These activities help reach new audiences and strengthen the organizer's image as an active participant in the cultural life of a given city.

The proposed implications are practical in nature and point to specific actions that cultural institutions can take to increase the attractiveness of their events and build lasting relationships with artists and audiences, as well as support local governments in the process of creating a recognizable city brand.

The use of in-depth interviews as the main research technique is associated with certain limitations that should be critically considered in the context of interpreting the results. The first limitation is the subjective nature of the data, which reflects the individual perspectives of respondents, potentially influenced by situational factors, social expectations, or power relations between the researcher and the research participants (Hammersley, Gomm, 2008). The second significant limitation is the inability to generalize the findings to a broader population, which results from the non-random sampling and its limited size. The study focuses on the depth of analysis at the expense of its breadth, which is characteristic of a qualitative approach (Smith, 2017). A potential source of error may also be the language barrier, despite the use of professional translation. Some cultural and linguistic nuances might have been lost in the translation process, which poses a challenge in intercultural research (van Nes et al., 2010). Awareness of these limitations led to the implementation of strategies to minimize their impact, such as data triangulation (both data sources and data collection methods), participant verification, and researcher reflexivity (Denzin et al., 2017).

The analysis of the conducted research revealed several significant gaps that provide valuable directions for future scientific explorations in the field of place branding and the impact of cultural events. The current study, focusing on perceptions during and after the festival, does not include long-term monitoring of branding effects. It is necessary to conduct longitudinal studies that would monitor the permanence of changes in Białystok's perception over a longer period to assess the long-term impact of the festival on the city's brand.

The analysis carried out in this work was limited to the perspective of participants from international artistic ensembles. In future research, it is essential to include a wider range of stakeholders, such as the local community, city authorities, and business partners. This will enable a more comprehensive understanding of the festival's impact on the city's brand and allow for understanding the interdependencies between different stakeholder groups.

Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to compare the analyzed case study with other theatre or cultural festivals. Future research could adopt a comparative approach to identify best practices, universal branding mechanisms, and specific factors for success or challenges in the context of different urban and cultural environments.

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