



An International Theatre Festival and City Branding: Insights from Managers Representing Foreign Artistic Troupes

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Abstract

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