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How Can Cities Build Their Brand through Arts and Culture? An Analysis of ECoC Bidbooks from 2020 to 2026

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Abstract: Recognizing the vital role of a positive city image in attracting stakeholders, urban officials are increasingly implementing cultural branding strategies to establish and highlight their city's distinct character. Culture, essential in urban development, shapes identity and local economy, encouraging social cohesion and sustainability. According to existing research, strategies for branding places—and cities in particular—through arts and culture include associating them with a famous personality (such as Barcelona's perceived connection with Gaudi), flagship buildings (like Paris with the Eiffel Tower) and hallmark events (as exemplified by Cannes and its Film Festival). The European Capital of Culture awarded annually by the European Union, which associates a city with a good cultural reputation, was a favorable starting point for this research. Fourteen EcoC Bidbooks brought forward by candidate cities bidding for the title within the 2020–2026 time frame were analyzed in order to investigate essential components of city branding. The study delves into aspects such as perceived image of European Capital of Culture candidates, problems behind this perceived image and ideal city image, revealing recurrent themes that define cultural European cities today. In addition, the research identifies new strategies that complete Ashworth's list (such as culture tailored to a particular natural environment, alternative spaces turned into culture hubs, artistic transportation, historical moments and movements, culture gamification, grassroots culture, culture thematization, highlighting the cultures of minorities, cultural fusions and embracing local folklore and mythical creatures). This helps bridge a gap in the specialized literature on cultural place branding. The study's originality extends to the analysis of Ecoc Bidbooks as a sum of cultural branding strategies proposed by the candidate cities. Each Bidbook is in fact a cultural vision of the city under optimum financial circumstances, thereby carrying a significant weight in the realm of research.

Keywords: branding; city branding; arts marketing; cultural events; cultural management



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1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected and competitive global landscape equally shaped by constant innovation and challenges, city officials turn to place branding techniques as a strategic approach to distinguish themselves, attract investment, and foster growth [1]. Experts argue that we are currently experiencing a progressive wave in city branding, initiated in 2010 and characterized by multiple stakeholders that co-create city brands, which are “inherently complex and uncontrollable” [2]. Considered “snapshot[s] of the symbolic battlefield of cities” [3], these marketing efforts meant to create a distinct beneficial perception of a place are aimed at tourists, businesses, professionals and residents alike. Within this context, culture and the arts play a significant role in enhancing the overall experience of a city, adding a layer of depth and authenticity. A vital component of urban development strategies, culture is connected to identity [4] and the local economy, contributing to social cohesion, environmental sustainability, diversity, community dialog and ultimately, a better quality of life [5].

In aiming to explore essential tactics in contemporary city branding, the authors turned to European Capital of Culture Bidbooks as valuable collections of cultural strategies. These documents refer to the proposals submitted by cities when contending to become the European Capital of Culture (ECoC). Bidbooks outline each city's vision, strategy, cultural program, and plans for hosting cultural events and activities if selected as the European Capital of Culture for a specific year. Each proposal is in fact a cultural vision of the candidate city under optimum financial circumstances, thus an extensive information repository for research purposes.

While it is true that some of the bids brought forward by ECoC candidates were extensively analyzed in specialized literature, be it as case studies for urban regeneration through culture [6], as examples of economic development [7], or in relationship to sustainability [8], analyzing the bids from the point of view of cultural city branding has not yet been carried out. This document analysis investigates 14 Bidbooks within the 2020–2026 time frame in order to bring a contemporary outlook on a series of paramount issues related to city branding through culture and the arts in a contemporary European context. The Bidbooks were sourced online from the official websites of the European Capital of Culture candidates. Three main objectives were formulated:

Objective 1 (O1). *To identify patterns in the perceived brand image of contemporary European city candidates.*

Objective 2 (O2). *To investigate the major problems that contemporary European cities face that can influence their perceived city image (problems that, if addressed, would positively influence their city brand).*

Objective 3 (O3). *To determine patterns in the ideal cultural city brand for European cities bidding for the EcoC title within the 2020–2026 period.*

The analysis revealed four major themes currently affecting the image of European Bidbook candidates (O1): (i) image of struggling post-industrial cities, (ii) perceptions of isolation and distance, (iii) identity and recognition challenges, and (iv) negative stereotypes (e.g., “unproductive”, “lacking soul and life”).

Some of the major problems candidates must confront in order to improve their city brand (O2) include (i) economic challenges, (ii) demographic aging and brain drain, (iii) lack of active citizens, (iv) difficulties in integrating marginalized groups, (v) political extremism, xenophobia, and intolerance and (vi) unbalanced community and widened opinion divide.

Each of the candidates for the EcoC title aims to identify itself with a vibrant cultural epicenter (or ideal city image—O3), yet cities strive for different goals, such as (i) the post-industrial city revived through culture, (ii) the smart city, (iii) the green and sustainable city, (iv) the city of active and involved citizens and (v) the collaborative city, respectively.

Exploring the contemporary image of European cities, along with the associated problems and the ideal city image provides valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of cultural identity, urban development, and societal aspirations within the European landscape. By delving into the perceptions and representations of cities, this research takes a step forward in providing a nuanced understanding of the challenges modern European cities face, ranging from socio-economic disparities to environmental sustainability concerns. Furthermore, by juxtaposing the existing city image with the aspirational ideal, researchers can catalyze discussions on urban planning, policy formulation, and community engagement strategies aimed at fostering inclusive, resilient, and vibrant urban environments. In a rapidly evolving European context, where cities serve as hubs of innovation, culture, and diversity, unraveling the complexities of their image becomes not only relevant but imperative for shaping a more cohesive, equitable, and sustainable future.

The second part of the research embarks on a more profound exploration of city branding and city branding through culture and the arts. Specialized literature in the field presents a multifaceted landscape. Some studies highlight the significance of city branding in shaping perceptions and attracting investment [9–11]. Others discuss the environmen-

tal implications of city branding efforts, examining how sustainability principles can be integrated into branding strategies to promote eco-friendly practices and enhance urban resilience [12]. Furthermore, literature emphasizes the evolving role of digital technologies [13] and social media platforms in amplifying the reach and impact of city branding initiatives [14]. When it comes to integrating arts in the process of building a city image, scholars highlight the intricacies of cultural identity within city branding strategies, emphasizing the interplay between heritage, creativity, and community engagement [15,16] or challenges in promoting cities through culture [17].

Despite these various studies, specialized literature on specific techniques for implementing city branding through culture remains limited. So far, there have been four main general tactics mentioned in studies [18,19] that can serve as cultural city branding strategies: iconic structures or flagship buildings, association with a personality, megaevents and “Thematization” (associating a city with a theme in order to create a memorable narrative). Even though these are valuable general tactics, there is a clear opportunity for the formulation of more targeted and nuanced branding approaches. This is a niche not yet exploited, which triggered the need for the authors to answer the question: “How exactly can cities build their brand through arts and culture?”. This generated the fourth objective of the research:

Objective 4 (O4). *To identify events/performances from the cultural program envisioned by EcoC candidates that can be scaled at city level and become cultural branding strategies.*

The same 14 Bidbooks were analyzed to meet this objective, with the research taking place in two stages: the first was drafting a document for each of the candidate cities with all the cultural events suggested for the Capital of Culture year. The second phase was choosing the events that could be scaled at city level and become cultural branding strategies. The resulting information was further categorized and new specific strategies emerged as part of the process. These 10 new strategies are as follows: culture on water/culture tailored to a particular natural environment, alternative spaces turned into culture hubs, including old ports or industrial sites, turning the city’s public transportation into moving artistic galleries, focusing on historical moments and movements, culture gamification, art-themed tours and circuits, grassroots culture, choosing a creative field and using it to brand a city, highlighting the fascinating cultures of minorities, cultural fusions and embracing local folklore and mythical creatures. The specialized literature on specific techniques for implementing city branding through culture remains limited, despite the presence of various studies in this field. These specific strategies on how to make the experience of a city memorable and thus contribute to its cultural brand image bridge a gap in specialized literature, adding new methods on how city branding through culture can be approached.

The article is divided into six sections: introduction, literature review, materials and methods, findings, discussion (including limitations to the study and potential areas for further research) and conclusions.

2. Literature Review

As places compete to establish distinctive identities and narratives, understanding the dynamics and ramifications of city branding has become essential for policymakers, urban planners, marketers, and scholars alike. City branding is gaining importance in urban development and sustainability as well, with strategies being implemented to create long-term value while preserving the city’s identity and assets [20]. Urban centers around the world are realizing the value of promoting their unique characteristics and creating a strong brand image to attract residents, businesses, and tourists [9–11]. Scholars highlight an array of advantages associated with city branding, among them the potential to strengthen local identities, increase the level of satisfaction among residents [21], stimulate economic growth [22] and raise the quality of life [23].

According to Ashworth [19], our encounters with locations are defined by a series of factors: to begin with, they stem from perceptions and mental images formed by our cumulative experiences of being in those places. Secondly, they arise from place portrayal as described by movies, literature, artworks, and news stories. Intentional public policy interventions like urban design and city planning also contribute to the perceived image. In this context, Ashworth defines place branding as an effort to steer these processes toward a predetermined goal. On a deeper social level, Kavaratzis [24] brings forward the need for branding strategies to develop mental, psychological, and emotional associations with a place.

The complexity of the managerial process of city branding is emphasized by Anholt [25] the author states that the branding of places “covers some of the hardest philosophical questions one can tackle: the nature of perception and reality, the relationship between objects and their representation, the phenomena of mass psychology, the mysteries of national identity, leadership, culture and social cohesion, and much more besides”. Therefore, building a city image is a *mélange* of research and targeted marketing strategies.

More recent studies define branding as an essential strategy for reconstructing the city’s image, focusing on its role in delivering an urban identity, as well as formulating sustainable renewal strategies [26]. Three foundational principles for branding and urban renewal are mentioned by the authors, highlighting the importance of stakeholder awareness and knowledge: (i) establishing a sense of place identity and employing it for promoting the city, (ii) safeguarding cultural and historical heritage while implementing branding strategies and (iii) developing new infrastructure to facilitate the branding process and support urban renewal initiatives.

An interesting and modern approach argues that a progressive wave in city branding is currently unfolding, initiated in 2010 and characterized by multiple stakeholders that co-create city brands, which are “inherently complex and uncontrollable” [2]. This perspective emphasizes the evolving landscape of city branding in reaction to contemporary challenges and the widespread use of digital technologies, particularly social media platforms. By capitalizing on the interactive and participatory nature of social media, cities have the opportunity to influence vibrant online communities, thus enhancing their brand exposure. The integration of social media into city branding strategies marks a significant paradigm shift, reshaping how cities communicate, engage, and delineate their identities in the digital age [14,27]. Integrating sustainability principles into branding strategies in order to promote eco-friendly practices and responsible city growth is another important aspect of building a contemporary city image [12].

By distilling complex narratives and cultural heritage into a cohesive brand identity, cities can differentiate themselves in a competitive global landscape. A city’s essence and values are often encapsulated in a branding theme. For instance, one can think of cities like Mecca (Saudi Arabia), Jerusalem (Israel), Vatican (Italy) or Braga (Portugal) and instantly correlate them with religion. Other branding motifs include politics (Brussels or Washington DC), technology (Tokyo), sustainability and green transportation (Amsterdam, Copenhagen), fun and gambling (Las Vegas), gastronomy (Lyon [28]) and so forth. In Japan, the use of mascots to brand a city is a common practice and the city of Kumamoto employs a bipedal plush bear as the region’s image, with positive economic results [29].

Within this context, culture and the arts play a significant role in enhancing the overall experience of a city. Drawing upon their cultural wealth and heritage, cities can craft authentic, memorable, and sustainable brands that deeply resonate with audiences and create lasting value for their communities. A culturally vibrant place is likely to establish a favorable perception [30], one that is likely to “stick in the mind” of visitors and create place attachment [31].

Culture was first introduced by city administrators as a catalyst for urban regeneration in the 1980s [32], as post-industrial towns were transitioning to service-driven economies. A notorious example of a culture-led urban rejuvenation project is the SOHO neighborhood in Manhattan, New York, turned from a decaying manufacturing district into a vibrant culture

stage with galleries and theatres, as artists began to move into the neighborhood and repurpose the iron-cast buildings [33]. The Bilbao waterfront promenade is another inspiring rehabilitation example; the 14-year transformation process of an industrial port area into a mixed-use space for innovation was based on architecture and design strategies [34]. Iconic buildings were planned and constructed on the site, such as the Guggenheim Museum and the Euskalduna Conference Centre Music Center, both housing cultural events. ‘The Bilbao effect’ or the ‘Guggenheim effect’ is currently associated with a major tourist and economic boost thanks to the building of iconic structures [35].

Proven as effective strategies for city planning, cultural initiatives and events have begun to be employed as urban administrative tools. Concepts such as “arts marketing” and “cultural management” have gained popularity among marketing professionals and city officials. Culture became “more and more the business of cities” [36] and art-related events started being employed as tools not just for enhancing the economy of a place, but also for improving its image and creating a competitive advantage [37]. Other scholars added that what sets a city or a city brand apart is a significant concentration of creative people and an active cultural environment [38]. For example, the most well-known city branding strategy that includes a cultural component belongs to the state of New York, which developed its campaign based on the slogan and logo “I love NY” [10]. Several elements came together to build a brand for New York in the 1970s: an economic crisis, credible research, adequate funding, and the right people [39]. Other notable city branding campaigns include Amsterdam with its branding project “Iamsterdam”, and Berlin, which launched the “Be Berlin” branding campaign in 2008. These are still among the cities ranked highest in the world in terms of brand awareness and reputation [40]. Yet, there are many examples of locally known culture-driven gems, such as Hay-on-Wye, the 2000-inhabitants in Wales, United Kingdom, known as the “town of books” which annually holds a literature festival gathering over 185,000 attendees (according to the Hay Festival Report in 2023 [41]), or Telluride in Colorado, USA, visited for its colorful Victorian buildings and art galleries.

Kavaratzis has formulated a conceptual model for building a city image that encompasses three phases of public image communication. The author states that the main communication channel is in fact the city’s architecture, museums, public art, urban planning, and the overall perception of the city’s conduct, which consists of the vision of city officials and administrators. Voluntary communication, such as advertising, official logos and slogans are considered secondary communication, while the tertiary level consists of involuntary discourse like media coverage and word-of-mouth advertising [24,42]. Ashworth mentions famous personalities, flagship buildings and large-scale events as valuable city branding patterns [19]. A broader view of building the image of a city comes from Lucarelli. In developing a framework for the analysis and evaluation of city brands equity, the scholar considers the following dimensions: history and heritage (e.g., Communism), events and activities (e.g., European Capital of Culture), processes and institutions (public hearings, branding campaigns), artifacts and spatial planning (e.g., museums), as well as graphics and symbols (logos, slogans, personalities), each of the five components integrating cultural aspects [43]. In recent studies, authors have delineated several subordinate concepts derived both from Ashworth’s list and Kavaratzis’ conceptual model. For personality branding, Nagaynay and Lee mention place names, city slogans, logos, and symbols as important components. Flagship construction is defined as including landmarks, iconic monuments, heritage buildings and public spaces. Lastly, events’ brandings are subcategorized into cultural festivals, entertainment, concerts, film festivals and meetings (including conferences) [26].

Focusing on a cultural personality to build a city brand can prove to be a successful long-term strategy. This technique is referred to as the “Gaudí gambit”, after the successful branding campaign of Barcelona, centered around the renowned architect and designer, Antonio Gaudí [19]. Other cities have also crafted their image closely tied to famous painters or musicians [44], such as Vermeer (Delft, The Netherlands), Hundertwasser (Vienna, Austria), Mozart (Salzburg, Austria), or Bach (Eisenach, Germany). Cities like

Prague and Lisbon have designed walking tours based on literary figures such as Franz Kafka or Pessoa, respectively. Ashworth also mentions mythological personalities such as King Arthur's 'Camelot', which defines the image of Winchester in Hampshire and music genres that become associated with places, for example, Jazz and New Orleans.

Tourists go to a city with the purpose of visually experiencing the objects and structures in the built environment [45]. This introduces the notion of 'flagship' buildings and emblematic architecture, as a means to grow attractiveness and enhance place branding. Aside from the classic example of the Eiffel Tower, built between 1887 and 1889, which quickly became a symbol of Paris, the capital of France is abundant in architecture with a unique, easily recognizable style. One example is the Pompidou Center, or Beaubourg Center, which was built in 1971, celebrating modern architecture. The French government intended for the building not only to promote contemporary art but also to alter citizens' perceptions of local authorities by making them appear interested in culture and progress [24]. Examples of flagship buildings that culturally represent cities across the world include the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Turkey, the Acropolis in Athens, Greece, the Colosseum in Rome, Italy, Sydney Opera House in Sydney, Australia, Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain or the Uffizi Gallery and Brunelleschi's Dome in Florence, Italy. Each of these cultural landmarks represents an important aspect of their respective region's history, heritage, and cultural identity, making them significant symbols of their city's perceived image.

When developing a city image, design and architecture can be employed to consolidate the look and feel of certain neighborhoods. City officials can turn to signature design, which "may be conveyed through an assortment of related buildings, spaces and streetscape elements, such as signage, paving, and street furniture which taken together make statements about the place" [19]. Taking things further in urban planning and development, creating signature districts might involve design choices to make an area stand out and contribute to the overall identity of a city. Usually known for their distinctive features, architectural style, cultural significance, or historical importance, signature districts or neighborhoods can become focal points that attract locals and visitors alike. Famous cultural examples include Paris's Left Bank or Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum complex. A drawback to this branding technique (flagship buildings, signature design and signature districts, further referred to as "flagship architecture") is that municipalities begin to prioritize the construction of emblematic buildings in central areas at the expense of habitable buildings and hire world-renowned architects in an attempt to "rebrand" the city without giving priority to the needs of the city's inhabitants [46]. Some scholars underscore the potential hazard of turning livable areas into 'theme parks,' thereby prioritizing tourist satisfaction over that of the residents [47]. Therefore, it is important to highlight the need for sustainable development in shaping the city's brand, specifically by preserving the city's tangible assets while also enhancing them to support the momentum of progress [48]. "A good city is like a good party—you stay longer than you plan", said Danish architect Jan Gehl [49]. He believed that good architecture is not about form, but about the interaction between form and life. In the last 50 years, Gehl has changed the way we think about architecture and urban planning, moving away from the modernist, functional, and utilitarian approach to a more human approach that invites people to use their cities.

Hallmark events represent another branding strategy extensively referenced in specialized literature. The positive effects of large-scale events on a city's image and global awareness have been acknowledged in several pioneering papers from the 1990s [50,51]. Avraham also conducted a study on the consequences of mega-events, arguing that cities hosting internationally known events witness significant changes in the urban landscape, often resulting in major investments. These investments can, in turn, bolster the competitive edge of cities [52]. Other authors argue that places organize events with the aim of creating memorable experiences for visitors, which, in turn, contribute to enhancing the destination's appeal and attractiveness [53,54]. Furthermore, specialized literature mentions that festivals have multiple functions, including the display of local culture,

fostering international relations, and improving the marketing of local offerings. Smaller events can also contribute to the enhancement of a city's image because they are often more authentic and profound. As a result, they can help visitors and locals connect with the genuine personality and feel of a city. All in all, events are recognized as an effective place marketing tool that and inspires affection in visitors and residents [55,56].

A recurring event that successfully transforms cities into dynamic cultural centers every year is the European Capital of Culture. Ever since 1985, the European Commission together with the European Parliament have been endorsing cities all over the continent to take center stage for a one-year period. So far, the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) title has been awarded to more than 60 cities across the continent. Some of the program's long-term benefits, as listed on the official website of the European Commission [57], include revitalizing the local cultural scene, boosting the global recognition of cities and improving the perception of cities among their residents, which are all important facets of city branding. If the first five ECOC hosts focused on celebrating the artistic abundance of established cultural cities, such as Athens, Florence, Amsterdam, West Berlin and Paris, the 1990s brought of shift of thought. Glasgow was the first city to use the ECOC opportunity as part of its urban regeneration strategy. The plan was to use arts and culture in order to move on from its decaying post-industrial town image. "Doing a Glasgow" became synonymous with a city makeover [58], as 1990, the year Glasgow held the ECOC title, brought a major increase in its external reputation, a total remodeling of its city center and the implementation of almost 3500 cultural events [59]. It was the first time that the ECOC bid was deliberately used as a means for shifting the city's image. Following this example, other cities used the opportunity to change their industrial profile into one that involves arts and creativity, such as Essen, Germany, in 2010 or Košice, Slovakia's second city after Bratislava, designated European Capital of Culture in 2013. Annually, two cities are designated with the title of European Capital of Culture, representing two distinct countries. Every three years, three cities are selected, with the third one located in a non-European Union country.

The present study involves analyzing these documents to explore essential aspects related to city branding through arts and culture. In the following section, the authors will provide an overview of the study design.

3. Materials and Methods

The qualitative research conducted in this study relied on document analysis. Specifically, the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) Bidbooks served as the primary dataset for the research. ECoC Bidbooks provide comprehensive documentation of each city's cultural, artistic, and creative initiatives, as well as their proposed plans and strategies for hosting the program of events during their bidding year. The reports were obtained from the official websites of various European cities that had previously submitted bids to become the European Capital of Culture. When the documents were not available online, the authors contacted the municipalities of the cities targeted for research in order to receive a PDF version of the bids.

14 Bidbooks spanning the period from 2020 to 2026 were utilized for the research. By concentrating on this specific timeframe, the authors sought to provide a timely and relevant analysis of cities' cultural aspirations and planning efforts, offering valuable insights for understanding contemporary dynamics in cultural development and European urban branding. The study and analysis of documents occurred between June 2022 and January 2024. Out of the cities targeted for research, 13 successfully won the title and one was shortlisted but did not win (Ljubljana, Slovenia). However, the authors considered the Ljubljana Bidbook relevant, as it provided an original cultural program and a sustainable vision. Additionally, Bidbooks from cities representing diverse geographical locations and cultural contexts were selected to ensure a broad and representative sample of data. The following ECoC Bidbooks were analyzed: Rijeka, Croatia bidding for 2020; Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg, and Kaunas, Lithuania for 2022; Eleusis, Greece, Timișoara, Romania,

and Veszprém-Balaton, Hungary for 2023; Bad Ischl, Austria, Bodo, Norway, and Tartu, Estonia for 2024; Chemnitz, Germany, and Ljubljana, Slovenia for 2025; Nova Gorica and Gorizia, Slovenia, Oulu, Finland, and Trencin, Slovakia in 2026.

In delving into essential aspects of contemporary city branding sourced from ECoC Bidbooks, the authors set to meet the first objective of the research, which was to identify patterns in the image of bidding cities, at the moment of their application for the title of European Capital of Culture. We sought to answer the following question:

Q1. *What is the perceived image of European cities bidding for the ECoC title (at the time of writing the bid)?*

Govers argues that “for places to be admired, they have to be admirable, which means that only real policy changes and initiatives that make contributions to humanity will improve reputation”. The scholar suggests changing the narrative from “competition and presence” to “collaboration and esteem (from jockeying for positions to respected reputation)”, thus highlighting the importance of authenticity and substance in place branding [60]. If a city is defined by serious economic, social, or political problems, its image is unlikely to change for the better, unless these issues are addressed. This vision triggered a secondary purpose of this study, which was to explore the in-depth problems European candidates face, examining how culture can offer solutions and, consequently, shape the perceived image of these cities. A second question was formulated:

Q2. *What are some major problems behind the perceived image of European cities bidding for the ECoC title (that can be addressed through culture)?*

In line with the third objective, the authors further sought to investigate if there is an ideal image brought forward by the candidate cities that can possibly replace the existing brand. We outlined the third question for the basis of our research as follows:

Q3. *What is the desired image for European cities bidding for the ECoC title?*

In order to meet answer these questions and thus meet the first three objectives, the authors did a thorough investigation of each of the 14 Bidbooks, extracting relevant information related to three qualitative indicators: “perceived image”, “problems with the perceived image” and “ideal city image”. The second stage was to refine this information and centralize it (results of this stage are in Table 1 of this research). Lastly, the authors looked for patterns in order to highlight relevant aspects of European city images today.

Table 1. Perceived image, problems associated with perceived image and desired city image for ECoC candidates and winners, during the 2020–2026 period.

| City and Year of ECoC Candidacy | Perceived Image | Problems Associated with Perceived Image | Desired City Image |
|---------------------------------|--|---|--|
| 1. Rijeka, Croatia, 2020 [61] | Post-industrial port city | Deindustrialization, demographic ageing, unemployment, emigration of youth, difficulty in discerning a unique identity | Port of Diversity—city with a strong cultural identity, completing the transition from a once primarily industrial city into a city of education, culture and tourism. |
| 2. Esch-sur-Alzette, 2022 [62] | Financial city, fiscal haven | Migration from outside Europe, xenophobia, far-right political groups, borders that are becoming increasingly tangible. | Undiscovered second city, hidden and edgy |
| 3. Kaunas, Lithuania, 2022 [63] | Former multicultural city, now sterilized, neglected and bullied second city lacking self-esteem | Limited responsibility and accountability, weak cross-sectoral cooperation and insufficient links between culture, education, business, and social sectors. | A unifying identity based on culture |

Table 1. Cont.

| City and Year of ECoC Candidacy | Perceived Image | Problems Associated with Perceived Image | Desired City Image |
|--|---|--|---|
| 4. Eleusis, Greece, 2023 [64] | Ancient city, industrial hub in the XIX-th century. Stereotypical image of colorless, tired post-industrial town. | City surrendered to southern indolence; image reinforced by tourism branding efforts to develop the Greek economy by promoting the attractive Greek summer. | A dynamic and productive cultural center of Greece. |
| 5. Timișoara, Romania, 2023 [65] | Passive city, nostalgic about its ‘courage’ in overcoming communism (the Revolution in 1989 begun in Timisoara) | Erosion of citizens’ participation and engagement in the political and civic life, lack of responsibility for common space, increasing intolerance towards marginal groups, underdeveloped international profile | City with civic energy in motion (where cultural excellence instils self-confidence in citizens, empowering them to make a difference through participation and engagement) |
| 6. Veszprém-Balaton, Hungary, 2023 [66] | “City of queens”, The city has a rich history and was the residence of several queens of Hungary in the past. | Overshadowed city with multiple traumas and fragmented identities, ingrained passivity, and mistrust | A small, exciting city that is culturally relevant |
| 7. Bad Ischl, Austria, 2024 [67] | Natural enclave for rest | Overpopulated by tourism | A city of soft and sustainable tourism, animated by culture |
| 8. Bodo, Norway, 2024 [68] | Cold city, far from civilization | City only coming alive for a couple of months a year, during the midnight Sun, then descending into winter and darkness, brain drain, decrease in population | One of the most sophisticated and culturally smart cities in Europe, cultural hub as an attractive career choice for young people |
| 9. Tartu, Estonia, 2024 [69] | Quiet and dull city, Estonia’s oldest academic hub | Braindrain, marginalized | The city where you can stand up and speak up Arts of Survival—linking grassroots activism, local character, international culture and eco-friendly living |
| 10. Chemnitz, Germany, 2025 [70] | Industrial city in transition | Political right-wing radicalism | A cultural, digital and democratic city |
| 11. Ljubljana, candidate city, 2025 [71] | Known more as a green city, than as a cultural city | Centralization, imbalances in The urban–suburban–rural demographic and cultural development, deficits in the linguistic and cultural integration of immigrants, refugees and other marginal groups, | Dynamic and innovative cultural metropolis |
| 12. Nova Gorica and Gorizia, 2025 [72] | Nova Gorica—relatively small and less-known city Gorizia—known for cultural heritage, sustainable tourism | People in Nova Gorica say: “My city has no soul” and in Gorizia: “My city has no life”. | Nova Gorica and Gorizia—A shared cultural “conurbation brand” |
| 13. Oulu, Finland, 2026 [73] | Heavy, tech city | Unbalanced community, peripheral region | Creative and vibrant city, balanced community reconnected in a sustainable way |
| 14. Trenčín, 2026 [74] | One of Slovakia’s historical gems | Knowledge deficit, individualism over solidarity, Widened opinion divide during the pandemic. | “Green cultural capital for all” |

4. Findings

The analysis of the image of candidate ECoC cities (at the time of writing the Bidbook) reveals recurring themes which were categorized into four major dimensions:

The first discovered city image pattern was that of post-industrial cities. From the documents under analysis, Rijeka, Eleusis, and Chemnitz mentioned dealing with the challenges of transitioning from their industrial past. For these cities, gaining the ECoC title is an opportunity to redefine themselves beyond their industrial roots, by leveraging their cultural potential.

- The second dimension involves perceptions of isolation and distance. Bodo and Tartu particularly exemplify this, with Bodo being associated with a cold and distant atmosphere, while Tartu's academic significance is overshadowed by its perceived quietness and lack of excitement. Once a vibrant multicultural city, Kaunas in Lithuania is perceived as sterilized, neglected, and struggling with a sense of self-esteem. Nova Gorica and Gorizia also fall in this category, "lacking soul and life".
- Some of the analyzed cities do not have an established brand or they do have an established image, but it is not the image desired by the city administrators. Therefore, another pattern deals with identity and recognition challenges. Nova Gorica for example is a lesser-known city, while Rijeka suffers from a fragmented identity. Esch-sur-Alzette is predominantly associated with its financial status and fiscal haven role, potentially overshadowing other aspects of its identity. Veszprém in Hungary carries the historic label of the "City of queens", yet it struggles under the weight of historical traumas and fragmented identities, impacting its recognition. Bad Ischl in Austria is often perceived as a natural haven for relaxation, potentially masking other dimensions of its persona. In the case of Ljubljana, a candidate city for 2025, its reputation is more centered around its environmental consciousness rather than its cultural identity. Oulu in Finland faces the challenge of being seen primarily as a heavy-tech city, which also takes over other aspects of its character. Lastly, Trenčín is regarded as one of Slovakia's historical gems and wishes to add a cultural dimension to its existing image through its ECoC candidacy.
- The fourth category includes negative image stereotypes. Kaunas, once a vibrant multicultural city, was perceived at the time of writing the Bidbook as having undergone a process of sterilization and neglect. Timișoara carries a passive and nostalgic perception, overshadowing its historical image as the first Romanian city to overcome communism. Nova Gorica and Gorizia are both weighed down by stereotypes of lacking soul and life, while Eleusis struggles with the stereotype of being labeled as lazy and unproductive. Challenging these stereotypes in order to foster a more positive perception among stakeholders was a key objective addressed by these cities in their cultural bidding program.

The second question addressed in the study was "What are some major problems behind the perceived image of European cities bidding for the ECoC title?" Within the Bidbooks, each of the candidates mentioned a series of problems that need to be addressed through the cultural programme. The challenges encountered by cities aspiring to become European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) are varied and intricate, reflecting the complex nature of their historic development and transformation. The authors identified five common themes:

The first encountered pattern was economic challenges, including low investments and unemployment. These problems are mentioned by Rijeka, Croatia (unemployment and transition challenges from its industrial past) and Eleusis (unemployment and youth migration). Esch mentions migration from outside Europe, which also adds to the list of economic challenges.

- Demographic aging, youth emigration, brain drain and knowledge deficit were another recurring set of problems affecting the image of cities bidding for the ECoC title. These issues were mentioned by several candidate cities, particularly Rijeka and

Eleusis as part of their deindustrialization process and Tartu, a city in Estonia that mentioned marginalization as one of its main problems. Trenčín also brought forward the problem of brain drain. The ideas expressed by the people of Nova Gorica and Gorizia—“My city has no soul” and “My city has no life”—also reflect the problem of youth emigration.

- The third dimension identified by the authors was a lack of active citizens and limited responsibility. Timișoara, Romania mentions an erosion of citizens’ participation and engagement, along with a lack of responsibility for common spaces. The Veszprém-Balaton region in Hungary identifies an ingrained passivity and mistrust among its residents. Similarly, Kaunas, Lithuania, is facing challenges of limited responsibility, which come with weak cross-sectoral cooperation, and insufficient links between culture, education, business, and social sectors.
- A fourth set of problems centers on challenges in integrating immigrants and marginalized groups, as well as escalating concerns regarding xenophobia. Ljubljana mentions deficits in linguistic and cultural integration, as well as significant obstacles to effectively integrating immigrants and marginalized groups. The challenge of integrating immigrants and marginalized groups is also mentioned in the Timșoara and Esch-sur-Alzette Bidbooks. Xenophobia, intolerance and political extremism are brought forward by Chemnitz, Germany, demonstrating the imperative need for addressing them through culture and/or targeted public policies. Trenčín also highlights the problem of individualism over solidarity.
- Oulu, Finland and Trenčín, Slovakia, mention the concern for the city’s unbalanced community and widening opinion divide, which was identified as the fifth category of image problems. Imbalances in the urban–suburban–rural demographic are also mentioned in Ljubljana’s ECoC Bidbook, with consequences such as disparities in access to resources, uneven distribution of public services, and challenges in fostering social cohesion.

As cities compete for the title of European Capital of Culture, their desired image is powerfully connected to an ideal cultural profile. Nevertheless, distinct features were emphasized by each candidate city. The analysis of these ideal cultural profiles revealed five recurring themes, which meet the third objective of the research, namely to determine patterns in the ideal cultural city brand for European cities bidding for the EcoC title within the 2020–2026 period.

- The first ideal brand image identified was that of “dynamic city revived through culture”. Cultural diversity is seen in several bidding documents as a tool to bring social energy back to the city. Rijeka, Croatia, Kaunas, Lithuania and Eleusis, Greece seek to breathe new life into their cultural fabric in order to increase their quality of life. Veszprém-Balaton and Esch-sur-Alzette, which aim to establish themselves as exciting and culturally relevant destinations, also fall into this category.
- “The city of active and involved citizens” is another ideal image that certain European cities strive to attain. Timișoara, Romania, wishes to be a place with civic energy in motion, with people motivated to participate and actively engage in public life. Similarly, Tartu, Estonia, is imagined as a city that empowers its residents to “stand up and speak up”. And the ideal for Chemnitz, Germany is a “truly democratic city”.
- Bodo, Norway, Chemnitz, Germany and Ljubljana, Slovenia correlate their ideal cultural image with digitalization and innovation, “the smart city” image thus being the third identified ideal brand amongst bidding cities.
- “The green and sustainable city” was a theme that characterized most of the bidding documents. Yet, a few cities focused exclusively on an ideal city brand that incorporated this dimension. On this note, Oulu, Finland articulated the ambition to become a “creative and vibrant city” with a strong focus on sustainability. Trenčín, Slovakia, had a vision of a “green cultural capital for all”, highlighting the importance of environmental consciousness in its bid. Bad Ischl stated the wish to evolve from a city overpopulated by tourism to one practicing “soft and sustainable tourism”.

- Nova Gorica, Slovenia and Gorizia, Italy, envision a collaborative “conurbation brand”, the first of its kind in the history of cities to win the ECoC title. This led to the introduction of a separate ideal brand dimension, which the authors termed “the collaborative city.”

In order to meet the last objective of the research, namely to identify events/performances from the cultural program envisioned by EcoC candidates that can be scaled at city level and become cultural branding strategies, the authors took a slightly different approach. The research was conducted in two stages. The first was drafting an extensive document for each of the candidate cities pinpointing all the cultural events suggested for the Capital of Culture year. The second step was choosing the events that could be scaled at city level and become cultural branding strategies. The results in the second stage are listed in Table 2. For Rijeka, the first city analyzed, the authors entered all the proposed happenings and events that can be multiplied and become strategies. For the rest of the Bidbook under analysis, the authors only wrote what is new (that does not overlap with the events and strategies brought forward by the previous cities in the analysis).

Table 2. Events from the ECoC Bidbooks that can be scaled at city level and become cultural city branding strategies.

| City and Year of ECoC Candidacy | | Elements in the Cultural Program That Can Become City Branding Strategies | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|--|
| 1. | Rijeka, Croatia, 2020 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Underwater and on-the-water events: underwater performances, exhibition of puppets made from water-resistant material, floating stages ♦ Cultural rehabilitation of old industrial sites (Old Port of Rijeka and old railroads) ♦ Turning regular transportation into artistic vehicles in motion ♦ Culture gamification programs open for all inhabitants and visitors ♦ Virtual and thematic artistic walks ♦ Container cinemas spread throughout the city (a powerful symbolic link between ports and industrialization) | |
| 2. | Esch-sur-Alzette, 2022 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Massive-scale digital installations (public square enhanced with 360 degrees of digital panorama, presenting the history of the city), digital media and digital arts | |
| 3. | Kaunas, Lithuania, 2022 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Focus on a certain historical moment in the life of the city (events around the modernist period and architecture of Kaunas) ♦ Focus on mythical creatures (festivals of local myths and monster and puppet exhibitions): Beast of Kaunas, ferries and dragons | |
| 4. | Eleusis, Greece, 2023 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Grassroot City branding for changes in citizens’ perception: cultural events in schools, cultural exchanges between teenagers, culture for factory workers) ♦ Gastronomy ♦ Environment-inspired Art, ECO-Art, culture and sustainability projects | |
| 5. | Timișoara, Romania, 2023 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ River themed culture | |
| 6. | Veszprém-Balaton, Hungary, 2023 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Lake-themed culture events ♦ Cultural events and performances on flat roofs and roof terraces of public and private buildings | |
| 7. | Bad Ischl, Austria, 2024 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Water sound installations and performances | |
| 8. | Bodo, Norway, 2024 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Highlighting the culture of a minority (example: Sami Culture) ♦ Hiking cabins turned into cultural and artistic venues | |
| 9. | Tartu, Estonia, 2024 [69] | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Light holograms of historical buildings that no longer exist | |
| 10. | Chemnitz, Germany, 2025 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Transformation of 3000 old garages into arts and performance spaces. ♦ Animation events across the city (manga, comic books) ♦ Conversion of public and private attic spaces into cultural venues and performing spaces | |

Table 2. Cont.

| City and Year of ECoC Candidacy | | Elements in the Cultural Program That Can Become City Branding Strategies | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|---|
| 11. | Ljubljana, candidate city, 2025 | ♦ | Artistic bike paths |
| | | ♦ | Eco Art Villages within the city |
| | | ♦ | Revival of cultural cafes |
| 12. | Nova Gorica and Gorizia, 2025 | ♦ | Borderless concept—art at the borders of two cities located in different countries |
| | | ♦ | Focus on art and sports projects |
| 13. | Oulu, Finland, 2026 | ♦ | Traditional forms of art relocated in new ways: to the hospital, the university, shop spaces |
| | | ♦ | Thematic art villages within the city (example: winter village with artistic events, performances and ice sculptures) |
| 14. | Trenčín, Slovakia, 2026 | ♦ | Arts and SPA in cities with hot springs (commissioned artists in collaboration with health practitioners to prepare activities such as nature walks with meditative sonic sculptures, and immersive morning waves with calming tunes) |
| | | ♦ | Atypical cultural fusions (subcultures and folk: folklore music with breakdance choreography, parkour dubstep party with folk dance performances, graffiti murals inspired by textile art) |

By analyzing these results, 10 strategies for developing a city brand through culture were extracted. These are as follows:

Culture on water/culture tailored to a particular natural environment was the first identified strategy. Cities close to water (weather sea, rivers, lakes) can grow their image by having cultural events envisioned for this environment. These include floating stages, underwater performances, as well as various sound and art installations. Taking the idea further, city administrators can look to natural environments, such as hills, forests, or even unused arable land to create on-site booming cultural happenings that can be associated with their city brand image.

The second method for branding a city is to have alternative spaces turned into culture hubs, including the revival of old industrial sites. Administrators can repurpose various spaces like old coffee houses with literary tradition, pavilions, containers, old garages, mountain huts, rooftops, etc. to host various events and performances. This can be also performed in conjunction with choosing a city theme such as Cinema City or Music City. In the case of Chemnitz, Germany, 3000 old garages are planned to be transformed into creative labs, arts and performance spaces by 2025. Holding events on roof terraces of public and private buildings is a strategy brought forward by Veszprém-Balaton in their 2023 Bidbook. Trenčín, Slovakia, also mentions SPA centers as culture venues. Old industrial sites with their factories, water towers, old boats, cranes, and even old railroads can be successfully reimagined and used to animate a city through culture. From massive warehouses transformed into cultural centers to container cinemas and old water towers open for exhibiting art, city administrators can deliver a game plan of rehabilitation through arts in order to change the feel and perception of a city.

Artistic transportation is another possible city branding strategy. Cities can be known by turning their transportation infrastructure into artistic transportation with buses, trams, trains, and boats accommodating exhibitions, theater plays, poetry sessions, art projections and movies. The Stockholm [75] and Moscow subway systems [76] are both known for their underground art, with Moscow having 44 stations listed as cultural heritage sites.

Aside from historical personalities, mentioned by Ashworth, the city can promote itself culturally by focusing on a certain historical moment or artistic current in the life of a city. World famous examples include Vienna and the Secessionist art current or Tokyo and the Superflat movement, initiated by artist Takashi Murakami in 2001 [77]. Light holograms of historical buildings that no longer exist and public squares turned into 360-degree digital panoramas presenting the history of the city are some of the ideas proposed by

the candidate EcoC cities that fall into this category. Focusing on historical moments and movements is therefore another possible strategy to highlight the creative energy within a city.

Several EcoC Bidbooks added culture gamification, art-themed tours and circuits to their list of memorable experiences planned for their Capital of Culture year. Aside from being an important strategy for preserving historical local values (Wu et al., 2023 [78]), culture through gamification can be developed on a variety of art themes and can make visitors (and inhabitants alike) learn stories and notice sculptures, buildings, and public art they would normally skip. City officials can turn to cultural treasure hunts as valuable practices to increase the dynamics of city living and thus raise awareness of the potential of a certain place. Culture gamification can be mixed and matched with artistic walks, bike paths and art-themed circuits, be it with physical artworks or VR, and multiplied in key neighborhoods.

Grassroots culture, or promoting culture in unconventional places such as kindergartens, schools, hospitals, and restaurants can lead to a holistic cultural movement with the involvement of many inhabitants and tourists alike. With media as an ally, the city can become known for this specific cultural phenomenon. Although this type of strategy cannot be seen and quantified immediately, it has long-term results; amateur arts in communities can result in paid employment in the creative sector, as well as personal wellbeing (Ramsden et al., 2011) [79].

City administrators can choose a defining cultural domain (e.g., gastronomy) and use it as a theme for cultural city branding. A representative case is the municipality of Cannes in France, host of the Cannes Film Festival, also known as “the city of film”, or as the “world capital of cinema”. The UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) [80], established in 2004 to promote cooperation between creative urban centers, currently includes 350 cities from more than 100 countries. The cities that are currently part of this network place cultural and creative industries at the heart of their development plans. Each of these urban centers was included for its association with one of these seven creative fields: film, literature, music, crafts and folk arts, design, gastronomy, and media arts. The international acknowledgement of these municipalities as ‘city of literature’ or ‘city of music’ brings an official twist to their cultural brand. Cultural thematization is another identified strategy that local administrators can turn to.

The eighth method is highlighting the fascinating cultures of minorities. The events focusing on the Sami people and culture in Bodø, Norway demonstrated that cities can become associated with the positive traits of minority cultures.

Two cities on each side of the border can mutually enhance their city brands by exploring cross-cultural resources and mixing them up with new artistic experiences. Urban centers can become known for their new takes on art, by experimenting with digital and new media art, as well as with Green, Eco and Sustainable art and architecture, sound installations, etc. Cultural fusions can also take place by combining, for example, subcultures and folk elements in unique ways (parkour dubstep parties with folk dance performances represent the example brought forward by Trenčín, Slovakia).

The tenth identified strategy is embracing local folklore and mythical creatures. Aside from Ashworth’s associating a city with a mythological persona, such as King Arthur’s ‘Camelot’, linked with the city of Winchester, England (2009), cities can also focus on locally inspired monsters (Beast of Kaunas, Loch Ness Monster), ferries and dragons.

In the following section of the article, the authors will offer insights into the significance of these findings, address the limitations of the study and propose areas for further research.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study bring forward important aspects of contemporary city branding inspired by cities currently bidding for the title of European Capital of Culture. The originality of this research lies in the analysis of European Bidbooks as city branding documents. EcoC Bidbooks are in fact a sum of cultural branding strategies proposed

by the candidate cities. They are a cultural vision of the city under optimum financial circumstances.

In the first section of the study, which focused on identifying essential aspects of contemporary European city branding, the authors' analysis revealed four major themes currently affecting the image of European Bidbook candidates: image of struggling post-industrial cities, perceptions of isolation and distance, identity and recognition challenges and negative stereotypes (e.g., "unproductive", "lacking soul and life").

Some of the major problems candidates must confront in order to improve their city brand include economic challenges, demographic aging and brain drain, lack of active citizens, difficulties in integrating marginalized groups, political extremism, xenophobia, and intolerance and unbalanced community and widened opinion divide. Winning the European Capital of Culture title is seen as a way to shift these problems [7].

Each of the candidates for the EcoC title aims to identify itself with a vibrant cultural epicenter (or ideal city image), yet cities strive for different goals, such as the post-industrial city revived through culture [4,6], the smart city, the green and sustainable city [8,12], the city of active and involved citizens and the collaborative city, respectively.

These patterns provide valuable insights into the diverse challenges faced by European cities in their branding efforts. By delving into the perceptions and representations of cities, this research takes a step forward in providing a nuanced understanding of the challenges modern European cities face, ranging from socio-economic disparities to environmental sustainability concerns. Furthermore, by juxtaposing the existing city image with the aspirational ideal, further research can catalyze discussions on urban planning, policy formulation, and community engagement strategies aimed at encouraging inclusive, resilient, and vibrant urban environments. In a rapidly evolving European context, where cities serve as hubs of innovation, culture, and diversity, unraveling the complexities of their image becomes not only relevant but imperative for shaping a more cohesive, equitable, and sustainable future.

The second part of the study focused on exploring some precise methods through which cities can build their brands through arts and culture. The research was inspired by studies from Richards and Wilson [18] and Ashworth [19], who primarily focused on three strategies: iconic structures or flagship buildings, association with a prominent personality, mega-events, and "Thematization" (associating a city with a theme to craft a memorable narrative). While these strategies provide valuable general tactics, there was a clear opportunity for the development of more targeted and nuanced branding approaches. This gap has prompted the authors to tackle the fundamental question: "How can cities build their brand through arts and culture?"

By carefully studying the cultural program imagined by 14 ECoC bidding cities, the authors compiled a "shortlist" of events that have the potential to be scaled at city level and become cultural branding strategies. These are as follows: culture on water/culture tailored to a particular natural environment, alternative spaces turned into culture hubs, including old ports or industrial sites, turning the city's public transportation into moving artistic galleries, focusing on historical moments and movements, culture gamification, art-themed tours and circuits, grassroots culture, choosing a creative field and using it to brand a city, highlighting the fascinating cultures of minorities, cultural fusions and embracing local folklore and mythical creatures.

In the realm of specialized literature, pinpointing these ten cultural branding tactics enriches scholarly discourse and expands the theoretical framework of city branding.

An overview of the objectives and findings for this research can be further analyzed in the image below (Figure 1):



Figure 1. Overview of the objectives and findings for the current research. Authors' data [19].

Due to time constraints, only 14 ECoC Bidbooks were analyzed, which is the main limitation of this research. Despite this constraint, the findings are relevant in the context of developing cities through culture and developing a city brand in particular. Aside from the academic implications, this study can be a tool for both marketers and city administrators who need an answer to the question: "What are the methods we can turn to in order to build a city brand through arts and culture?".

Further analyses of candidate city Bidbooks are likely to bring forward new branding strategies through culture. On one hand, the authors did notice recurring themes in the cultural programs of the analyzed Bidbooks and each new document under analysis brought less novelty in terms of city image aspects, as well as revolutionary ideas for events that can be scaled on the city level and become cultural strategies. On the other hand, rapid worldwide transformations (such as political instability, the rise of AI, and the focus on climate change and sustainability) will certainly create space for new approaches when developing cultural strategies.

6. Conclusions

Culture is seen as the basis of all human decisions and actions, thus playing a crucial role in sustainable development paradigms [81]. Cities around the world are realizing the value of promoting their unique characteristics and creating a strong brand image to attract residents, businesses, and tourists [9–11].

According to scholars Green, Grace, and Perkins, we are currently witnessing a progressive wave in city branding unfolding, characterized by multiple stakeholders that co-create city brands, which are "inherently complex and uncontrollable" [2]. This perspective emphasizes the evolving landscape of city branding in reaction to contemporary challenges and the widespread use of digital technologies, particularly social media platforms. The integration of social media into city branding strategies marks a significant paradigm shift, reshaping how cities communicate, engage, and delineate their identities in the digital age [14,27]. Assimilating culture and sustainability principles into branding strategies in

order to promote responsible city growth is paramount to building a contemporary city image [12].

At the heart of integrating culture into city branding is the concept of cultural identity [4]. Cities strive to discover and articulate their unique cultural attributes, such as history, traditions, arts, cuisine, and festivals, to differentiate themselves in the global marketplace. By distilling complex narratives and cultural heritage into a cohesive brand identity, cities can build their unique character in the minds of stakeholders and instill a feeling of place attachment [31].

Seeking to explore essential aspects of contemporary city branding, the authors of this article turned to European Capital of Culture Bidbooks as valuable collections of cultural strategies. Bidbooks have been studied in specialized literature from a multitude of perspectives [6–8], yet analyzing the bids from the point of view of cultural city branding has not yet been carried out. The study embarked on two different journeys, on one hand, to define the contemporary city image of European cities and assess the problems commonly associated with their brands, and on the other hand, to identify events/performances from the cultural program envisioned by EcoC candidates that can be scaled at city level and become cultural branding strategies.

The analysis of 14 Bidbooks belonging to title winners and short-listed cities for the title of European Capital of Culture during the 2020–2026 period resulted in detecting patterns in the perceived image, problems with the perceived image and ideal city image for the analyzed cities. Authenticity and transparency in city branding are paramount; “for places to be admired, they have to be admirable, which means that only real policy changes and initiatives that make contributions to humanity will improve reputation” [60]. This vision inspired the authors to delve into the profound challenges encountered by European candidates, investigating how culture can provide resolutions and thus positively influence the perceived image of these cities. The first encountered pattern was economic challenges, including low investments and unemployment. Demographic aging, youth emigration, brain drain and knowledge deficit were another recurring set of problems affecting the image of cities bidding for the ECoC title. The third dimension identified by the authors was a lack of active citizens and limited responsibility. Challenges in integrating immigrants and marginalized groups, as well as escalating concerns regarding xenophobia also characterize some of the European cities bidding for the ECoC title. The fifth category of issues deals with the concern for the city’s unbalanced community and widening opinion divide. These dimensions provide valuable insights into the diverse challenges faced by European cities in their branding efforts. By examining the perceptions and representations of cities, this research takes a step forward in providing a nuanced understanding of the challenges modern European cities must overcome.

In the second part of the study, 10 strategies of building a city brand through culture were extracted from the bidbooks, which can be added to Ashworth’s list of associating a city with a personality, flagship architecture and hallmark events [19]. These are as follows: culture on water/culture tailored to a particular natural environment, alternative spaces turned into culture hubs, artistic transportation, historical moments and movements, culture gamification, art-themed tours and circuits, grassroots culture, choosing a creative field and using it to brand a city, highlighting the fascinating cultures of minorities, cultural fusions and embracing local folklore and mythical creatures. These cultural branding strategies can be applied on their own or intertwined, depending on the objectives of city planners. The findings in this section of the study bridge a gap in specialized literature, adding new methods on how city branding through culture can be approached.

Despite the limitation of analyzing only 14 ECoC documents, the findings are relevant in the context of developing cities through culture and building a city brand in particular. This study can be a tool for both marketers and city administrators who need an answer to the question: “What are the methods we can turn to in order to build a city brand through arts and culture?”, while also offering an insight into main aspects and problems contemporary European city brands face.

There are various potential avenues for future research that intersect city branding through culture with the analysis of European Capital of Culture Bidbooks. Examples here could include comparative studies to identify trends in branding approaches or investigative efforts targeting strategies to enhance the reputation and distinctiveness of candidate cities, with a focus on the use of visual identity, storytelling, and digital marketing techniques. In this context, the authors consider it important to highlight the intersection between sustainability and cultural branding. Throughout the research process, sustainability emerged as a recurring factor to be taken into account, evident in both the specialized literature and in the Bidbooks under analysis. Culture was defined as a vital resource for innovation and local sustainable development [78] and bidding cities commonly strive for a brand that encapsulates responsible and sustainable urban development. Moreover, cultural branding and sustainability are mutually reinforcing, with each concept enhancing the other's impact and effectiveness. Therefore, investigating how modern European cities incorporate sustainability practices into their cultural program could be another captivating and insightful area of research.

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Abbreviation

ECoC European Capital of Culture

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