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Festivalization of Cities: Arts-led Urban Branding and Social Impacts

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ABSTRACT

Festivalization has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary urban development, whereby cities strategically deploy festivals, cultural events, and artistic spectacles to strengthen urban branding, stimulate economic growth, and enhance global visibility. This study examines the relationship between festivalization, arts-led urban branding, and their associated social, spatial, and economic impacts. Drawing on comparative global perspectives, the paper explores how festivals function as instruments of cultural policy and urban governance, enabling cities to reposition themselves within increasingly competitive global networks. The study analyses historical trajectories of festivalization, from traditional cultural celebrations to contemporary mega-events and creative-city strategies, highlighting the growing integration of festivals into urban regeneration and cultural-development agendas. Particular attention is given to the mechanisms of arts-led branding, including strategic branding, collective branding, thematic festivals, and stakeholder coalitions that shape city identities and public perceptions. The paper further investigates the social impacts of festivalization, emphasizing issues of participation, equity, community cohesion, and cultural inclusion, while also addressing concerns regarding socio-spatial inequality, exclusion, and cultural commodification. Economic dimensions such as tourism development, local business growth, labor precarity, and creative-industry expansion are critically examined alongside governance structures, policy instruments, and funding models that sustain festival-led urban development. Through case studies from cities in both the Global North and Global South, the analysis demonstrates that festivalization produces uneven outcomes shaped by local governance, economic conditions, and cultural priorities. The study concludes that although arts-led urban branding can generate visibility, cultural vitality, and economic opportunities, it also risks reinforcing gentrification, cultural dilution, and sustainability challenges if not accompanied by inclusive cultural policies and long-term urban planning strategies. Ultimately, festivalization represents both an opportunity and a challenge for contemporary cities seeking to balance global competitiveness with local cultural integrity and social equity.

Keywords: Festivalization, Urban branding, Cultural policy, Creative cities and Social impacts

INTRODUCTION

Cities increasingly engage in festivalization, strategic investments in spectacles, events, and activities that foster social interaction, artistic creativity, and commercial exchange [1]. This approach promotes arts-led urban branding, leveraging festivals as primary tools to enhance a city's global profile and sense of identity [2]. Festivalization entails systematic attacks on place-based differences that undermine local socio-spatial configurations, catering to creators and consumers, and thus configuring urban development along a specific trajectory. While some cities reap the rewards of enhanced visibility, status, and income, others suffer from the intensified exposure that festivalization provokes [1]. Moreover, arts-led urban branding produces uneven social impacts. Social benefits such as improved community cohesion, revitalised public space, greater participation, broader access, and increased visibility for local creatives accompany spatially and materially selective interventions that specifically target the inner city, elite neighbourhoods, and externally-oriented sites.

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Festivalization thus exacerbates socio-spatial inequalities, leading to tensions between enhancing global connectivity and preserving local identities [2]. Research aims to examine the arts-led branding mechanisms employed, assess the social and economic impacts generated, and analyse awareness of the spatial variations, also compare the regimes of festivalization undertaken, and delineate the links between festivals, cities, and culture policy for which festivalization has emerged as a highly relevant contemporary concept [1]. Cities increasingly engage in festivalization, strategic investments in spectacles, events, and activities that foster social interaction, artistic creativity, and commercial exchange [1]. This approach promotes arts-led urban branding, leveraging festivals as primary tools to enhance a city's global profile and sense of identity. Festivalization entails systematic attacks on place-based differences that undermine local socio-spatial configurations, catering to creators and consumers, and thus configuring urban development along a specific trajectory [2]. While some cities reap the rewards of enhanced visibility, status, and income, others suffer from the intensified exposure that festivalization provokes. Moreover, arts-led urban branding produces uneven social impacts. Social benefits such as improved community cohesion, revitalised public space, greater participation, broader access, and increased visibility for local creatives accompany spatially and materially selective interventions that specifically target the inner city, elite neighbourhoods, and externally-oriented sites [3]. Festivalization thus exacerbates socio-spatial inequalities, leading to tensions between enhancing global connectivity and preserving local identities. Research aims to examine the arts-led branding mechanisms employed, assess the social and economic impacts generated, and analyse awareness of the spatial variations, also compare the regimes of festivalization undertaken, and delineate the links between festivals, cities, and culture policy for which festivalization has emerged as a highly relevant contemporary concept [1].

Conceptual Framework: Festivals, Urban Branding, and Cultural Policy

Festivalization encompasses the increased significance of cultural events in urban life, and despite its connotations, does not imply the mere appropriation of festivals for marketing objectives. As a process, it describes the dynamics, mechanisms, and effects involved in the use of festivities to acquire urban distinction, offer foregoing concepts are equally important to study with regard to contemporary forms of festivalization [2]. Arts-led urban branding represents a strategy to develop or redress a city's image through the introduction of distinctive events, thus making a city stand out and establishing unique identification points [3]. Festivalization and arts-led urban branding highlight intrinsic attributes associated with cultural policies including the current rise of branded events around the world [2]. A basic distinction is made between cultural policy and cultural governance. Cultural policy refers to the explicit or implicit objectives, values, priorities, and approaches that inform practices regarding the funding, financing, support, and promotion (or non-promotion) of arts and culture by public authorities and the public sector. Such policies shape the nature of opportunities and constraints encountered by artists, cultural managers, and non-profit organizations within the cultural sector, both formally and informally [3]. Cultural governance extends beyond public authority policies to encompass the broader array of institutional actors and instruments regulating patterns of public, private, and philanthropic funding [3]. Cultural governance thus describes the structures, processes, and mechanisms through which public, private, and non-profit agents receive support or encounter obstacles in pursuing the creation or presentation of culture. Cultural governance engages both formal and informal modes of public, private, and philanthropic support that influence artists and cultural organizations in pursuing cultural expression [3].

Historical Trajectories of Festivalization

The historical trajectories of festivalization encompass premodern city festivals, the emergence of cultural festivals in Europe, and the contemporary proliferation of festivals, particularly in the Global South. Cultural and arts festivals have a rich past in many cities, sometimes linked to religious or seasonal celebrations, often undergoing transformations related to urbanization, economic modernization, and societal change [4]. Earlier iterations were intertwined with broader branding discourses; festivals formed, evolved, or ceased in waves driven by economic, political, or technological shifts, with significant historical referents underpinning today's urban branding agendas. Major turning points include the link between urbanism and large-scale events around the 1851 Great Exhibition in London; the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century emergence of modern European arts festivals alongside continental urban cultural policies; the post-World War II turn to inclusivity associated with international cultural congresses; and the festivalization of public space during the later twentieth-century cultural turn [4]. The contemporary proliferation of festivals appears to reflect a variety of economic, political, and technological developments [5]. On the economic side, regions have sought to enhance local brand equity in the face of rising global competition, while the development of cultural and creative industries has fostered a search for new value-creation pathways. Festival-led cultural branding initiatives have thus formed part of wider urban branding discourses, although the relationship remains complex and non-linear 1. The governance of festivalization varies across regions [5]. At the global level, the Global South has emerged as a significant site for the instrument-

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driven promotion of cultural festivals, linked to developmental goals and articulated through various international instruments, including UNESCO's 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Asia has become a major site for the establishment of cultural or arts festivals, especially since the 1990s, facilitated by changes in cultural policies and official support for cultural and creative industries in many countries [3].

Mechanisms of Arts-led Urban Branding

Festivalization describes an evolving pattern where cities are transformed into eventful spaces through art festivals [4]. This process can be driven by economic, social, environmental or political conditions and shapes the developmental modes of various cities, leading to different branding processes [3]. Arts-led branding can be further categorized into collective branding and strategic branding. Collective branding is a decentralized process that highlights local actors, fosters identity cooperation, and utilizes local initiatives. Arts-led cities form decentralized coalitions among multiple actors that collectively brand the city through the medium of arts. Collective branding emerges out of arts-led cities aiming to regain agency in an evolving neoliberal era where public authorities act more like economic stakeholders [4]. On the contrary, strategic branding is a centralized process where a prominent authority acts as the key decision-maker and enabler. The city ensures that the different elements come together consistently according to a clear development strategy. Strategic branding appears in the cities undergoing a transitional phase from an industrial city to a more sustainable cultural city, and a stronger public presence is needed to catalyze and streamline diverse arts-led initiatives [4]. Festival-led tools, imagery and narratives, stakeholder coalitions, and policy support have been identified as arts-led city branding tools. City branding is a saturated and yet non-trivial task [5]. Festival-led branding serves as tools to alleviate branding difficulties. Festivals generate fresh imagery of the city that attracts far-reaching attention from outsiders and temporary visitors. These temporary spectacles are capable of showcasing the various cultural offerings embedded in the city, as well as its distinct urban forms and functions, aiding the development of a lasting city brand, and generating the possibility of unforeseen convergences across different individual branded cultural offerings [5]. The arts are identified as a driver for city branding by means of circulating temporary events; juxtaposition of diverse cultural forms; tailored thematic approach; and cross-sector targeting. Temporary exhibitions, concerts or theater performances happen on a frequent basis and circulate rapidly across the city or at a supra-city level [6]. Art festivals invite the participation of visual art with well-designed thematic routes. Activities of widely varying types or scales coexist and yet retain their core individualities without undermining one another [6]. Theme-based festivals or branding are more common, branding on festivals focusing on the nature of the arts, rather than actors like venues, artists or periods. Cross-sector targeting refers to the branding targeting diverse groups of various age cohorts, social segments, or domestic/overseas audiences [6].

Social Impacts: Equity, Participation, and Community Dynamics

Although festivals can be used to economically boost a city, they may also diminish a community's ability to participate fully and shape its character. The introduction of large-scale annual festivals often alters and distorts the cultural values and practices of diverse and fluid communities [2]. Developments in festivals that communities have participated in to define their identity and shape their future have shifted attention away. Bandung's "ARTicipate City, Festival Kota" remains a significant forum for the youth of creative community groups as an annual festival with the full involvement of young creative community groups [2]. It is held in five zones throughout the city to emphasize accessibility and participatory involvement without differentiate [3]. The festival, which is held as a celebration of the anniversary of Bandung, has shifted from a arts culminating event into a month-long dissemination and construction activity, thereby becoming a national youth communication medium. Besides multi-genre performances, ARTicipate City, Festival Kota has also developed visual-art workshops on mural, street-art, digital art, and fine art and literature workshop on workshop [3]. ARTicipate City, Festival Kota as local-owned event is still unmaximal [5]. It's branding through mutual commitment and responsibility among the actors still needs to be reinforced. It is essential to maintain the idea of celebrating the city anniversary by involving the creative group institution [6]. By not emphasising the hard-sell campaign, the creative group can still access the festival although it is by invitation. Pedal Surya, one of the festival participants, indicates that they cannot cyclicly participated with a particular festival due to heavy organisational focus, should another festival is able to convey the same mission and vision, they are open to join [7]. The proposals for 4th Bandung Biennale, namely the publication to realize participation commitment, and the APC, the annual forum to lessen the prestige of festival and invite back multi-discipline on menciptakan ruang komunikasi, relate to the ARTicipate City, Festival Kota to reclaim pluralism. IDE Bandung, DELOG, and Komunitas Akar Rumput are still involved to assist the creative groups to facilitate the artistic importance in spring-board and pedagogy manner [7].

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Economic Impacts: Tourism, Local Businesses, and Labor

Research on the economic impacts of arts-led urban branding focuses on tourism flows and related expenditures, local business dynamics and turnover, the adaptability of local business ecosystems, labor conditions linked to temporary festivals, the formation and flexibility of new skills, and efforts to anticipate seasonal variations in demand patterns. Findings indicate that [1] labor agreements, contracting arrangements, and working conditions for temporary gig workers are highly fragmented; [2] the distribution of effects among participants is uneven and the so-called economic multiplier effect can be limited; and [3] earners at the end of the value chain receive a disproportionate share of the economic benefits.

Spatial Variations: Global Case Studies and Comparative Perspectives

Urban festivals have been proclaimed the “new engine of metropolitan development” addressing economic, social, and political challenges [1]. The following cases showcase how cities across the globe employ arts-led urban branding festivalization and the beneficial or adverse impacts of these endeavours [2]. Five distinct cities, Bristol, Cape Town, Leeuwarden, Lisbon, and Mumbai, illustrate diverse frameworks, objectives, and style permitting informative comparative analysis. Bristol, exhibiting complex post-industrial characteristics of the global North it benefits from smart-city initiatives promoting economic, social, and cultural regeneration [3]. The governance structure comprises a hybrid public-private partnership involving city officials and the privately funded Bristol City Futures. The city’s key festivals, Harbour Festival, Balloon Fiesta, and Bristol International Festival, catalyse branding uploads, evoking images of the city as vibrant, inclusive, and diverse [4]. The nine-year-old Cape Town Festival, held in the city centre and across the metropolitan region, features cultural activities and large-scale international events. In 2016, the city launched a five-year “Festival Strategy” to brand the metropolis as Africa’s capital of festivals in harmony with “Creative Cape Town”, a flagship cultural programme. Governance involves the metropolitan authority and cultural institutions [5]. Leeuwarden, a small post-industrial city, was proclaimed European Capital of Culture in 2018 adopting a strategy to brand itself as a festival city through partnerships involving public authorities and companies with the aim of raising the cultural profile of the metropolis [6]. Lisbon sets out to reposition the city and repair the reputational damage sustained during the previous economic crisis. The local government, having adopted the Festival Strategic Plan in 2014, closely oversees all major festivals, requiring them to submit annual applications outlining their activities, yearly attendance, target audiences, and expected impacts on the city [7]. Mumbai obtains an urban brand by showcasing the city’s cultural vibrancy through external festival branding. The urban landscape already harbours prominent festival brands nurturing rich urban cultural practices Morgan M [8].

Governance and Policy Instruments

Festivalization encompasses a wide range of celebratory events but is most frequently associated with either carnivals or arts festivals [4]. Arts-led urban branding employs festivals as key tools for city positioning and promotion. Analysis of the festivalization of cities in the Global North and Global South suggests that the promotion of art festivals is the central mechanism of arts-led city branding, while other branding processes often occur alongside [5]. A festival-centered arts-led branding framework suggests a set of festival-led branding tools (brand-selection festivals, signature festivals, flagship festivals, and mega-festivals), the central role of imagery and narratives in the branding process, the need for strategic coalitions among stakeholders, and the importance of supportive cultural policies [7]. Governance and policy instruments markedly influence the festivalization of cities and shape the specific branding, economic, and social impacts associated with it [2]. Planning instruments (e.g., cultural plans, strategic plans, urban frameworks) guide the integration of festivals into broader urban development agendas. Funding mechanisms involve public, private, and hybrid approaches [8]. Regulatory frameworks apply to logistics, safety, security, advertising, and other operational aspects. Ex ante and ex post evaluation metrics assess qualitative and quantitative dimensions. Collaboration across public sectors (e.g., culture, tourism, transport, urban planning) and the private sector enhances coherence and effectiveness. Each type of instrument may be present at various governance levels [1]. Examining planning instruments, funding mechanisms, regulatory frameworks, evaluation metrics, and cross-sector collaboration illuminates how diverse governance contexts frame the role of festivals in urban development agendas [2].

Challenges and Critiques: Gentrification, Sustainability, and Cultural Dilution

Arts-led urban branding practices receive varied critiques from scholars who highlight risks associated with the festivalization process [3]. Gentrification threatens to erode cultural authenticity, displacing local artists, cutting access to affordable spaces, and ending vibrant cultural activities. Practices associated with festivalization can become a focus of marketing efforts designed to enhance the corporate and national image of urban regions while sidelining local, grassroots expressions of cultural identity [4]. Sustainability concerns arise regarding the danger of cities attracting an excessive number of festivals that overstretch organizational capacities and erode the quality of cultural events. Concerns center on the sustainability of festivalization itself, commercial pressures to reaffirm

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the brand identity of organized cultural events, and the compatibility of the festivalisation approach with broader cultural diversity [5]. Environmental effects arise from massive migrations of artists and cultural workers, rent and real estate price hikes triggered by cultural attractiveness, and the associated rise of temporary, short-lived, and “carnival” cultural activities disconnected from a city’s intrinsic cultural heritage, identity, or characteristic cultural expressions [5]. Festivalization can generate tension between the drive to enrich the festival offer and the preservation of urban cultural recognition. An absence of public policies that guarantee urban cultural development encourages the commodification of culture [6]. The increased presence of global brands and images, often incongruous with local cultures, fosters urban “cultural depublishation” [6]. Multinational company logos can dominate the visual landscape, replacing local urban imagery, weakening place-specific textual references, and inhibiting follow-ups or story-telling. In postindustrial and globalized contexts, urban cultural development increasingly implies a singular, and often foreign vision of the city as brand [7]. Following mammoth sporting events, mega-events, and permanent attractions, the festivalization of urban culture constitutes a complementary stage in the derailing of the notion of city as a cultural palimpsest and public-good narratives [7].

Methodologies for Assessing Impacts

Cities globally are affected by festivalization, hotel development, and emerging cities. In-depth case studies and comparative agencies are needed [5]. Further Theoretical Development, Compile historiography of festivalization, scientific hygiene, urban governance evaluation, sustainability certification, and avoidable municipality indexes. Art festivals support tourism, local companies, and multi-firm innovation networks [5]. Econometric models, surveys, journals, extraction, chaotic matrices, share counts, artisanal mesh operations, natural-language recognition engines, apps, optical character recognition of captions, lexicons, sentiment analectors, discounts and condensing operations are urgent [6]. Participatory festivals are linked to spatial appropriation and valorisation. Quantitative Infrastructure, Mapping represents supply and output, visualizing including through socio-spatial anti-linguistic coverage relate sentiment outcomes, evaluative proto-metrics, segmentation analysis, user-experience. Combining trajectory analysis like Multi-Class Partition-Based Clustering Identification Hardware program equal urban and festival models related behaviours-growth, observe both through practitioner-actor cooperation leading a thorough anti-denominator examination commons-community, linguistic-contemporary is needed [7]. Urban festivals linking significant demographic distributions transitability-activation a major urban-arts external. Thematic including metropolitains-help-desire and other configuration evolution similarly firm. Semi-space compleglos on festivalize-Latitude alone varies communal case-fishing provide Mobilite major-city distinction area- transmission [8]. Whether culture nurturing public-space activity issues remains. Survey cities for - provisional commonalities identification automated content-knowledge gathering catalogue outlines explore define circulation actual, hybrid contemporary-general framework agglomeration-scale further-development [6]. Urban determination dynamic-uncertainty, size-growth paths collaboration-framework material point-yield extension-social preservation cities, arrival a instruction fundamental relation observe-space gathering-variety function-transmission [3].

Implications for Urban Planning and Cultural Development

Urban development can benefit from celebrating the link between local culture and the festivalization process through arts-led branding [4]. Small urban venues and creative entrepreneurs often shape local branding strategies in ways that challenge dominant megafest-based formulas. Specific, localized knowledge can therefore be beneficial in implementing festivalization elsewhere, with lessons from smaller communities and arts-led shifts in scale and focus demanding greater attention [5]. Arts-led branding has become an important strategy in urban development, enabling smaller, postindustrial cities to gain visibility on the global stage [5]. Arts-led branding seeks deeper social impacts, enhancing collective ownership of place, fostering the inclusion of marginalized groups, animating underused public spaces, and enlarging the set of multiple narratives around a location. Knowledge from smaller, non-capital cities is often more readily applicable than reflections on larger ones, yet metropolitan regions and major arts cities nevertheless offer significant lessons [1, 2].

CONCLUSION

Festivalization has become a central strategy in contemporary urban development, reflecting the growing significance of culture, creativity, and events in shaping the identity and competitiveness of cities. Through arts-led urban branding, festivals are increasingly employed as tools for enhancing global visibility, stimulating tourism, attracting investment, and repositioning cities within international cultural and economic networks. This study has shown that festivals are no longer isolated cultural activities but have evolved into integrated mechanisms of urban governance, cultural policy, and city branding. The analysis demonstrates that festivalization produces both opportunities and tensions. On one hand, festivals contribute positively to urban life by revitalizing public spaces, promoting cultural participation, strengthening community interaction, and supporting local creative industries. Festivals can foster civic pride, encourage artistic experimentation, and create platforms for

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local and international cultural exchange. Economic benefits also emerge through tourism growth, increased commercial activity, and the expansion of creative and cultural industries. In many cities, particularly postindustrial and emerging urban centers, arts-led branding has become an effective strategy for urban regeneration and global recognition. On the other hand, the study highlights that the benefits of festivalization are unevenly distributed. Arts-led urban branding often prioritizes inner-city districts, elite cultural spaces, and globally marketable images at the expense of marginalized communities and local cultural practices. The process can contribute to socio-spatial inequality, rising living costs, displacement of local residents and artists, and the commodification of culture. In some contexts, festivalization transforms culture into a market-oriented spectacle disconnected from the everyday realities and identities of local populations. Such developments raise critical concerns about gentrification, cultural dilution, sustainability, and the dominance of externally driven branding agendas over grassroots cultural expression. The comparative cases examined further reveal that governance structures and policy frameworks significantly shape the outcomes of festivalization. Cities that adopt inclusive and participatory cultural governance models are more likely to balance economic goals with broader social and cultural objectives. Effective planning instruments, cross-sector collaboration, transparent funding mechanisms, and community participation are essential for ensuring that festivalization contributes to long-term cultural development rather than temporary image-building exercises. Equally important is the recognition of smaller-scale, community-led, and locally rooted cultural initiatives that preserve urban diversity and strengthen social cohesion. Ultimately, festivalization reflects broader transformations in the relationship between culture, economy, and urban development in a globalized world. Festivals have become powerful instruments through which cities narrate their identities, compete for visibility, and negotiate cultural meaning. However, sustainable and equitable festivalization requires policies that move beyond commercial branding and prioritize cultural inclusion, social justice, environmental sustainability, and the preservation of local heritage. The future of arts-led urban branding therefore depends on the ability of cities to balance global aspirations with the protection and celebration of diverse local cultural identities.

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