

NAVIGATING THROUGH CULTURE: HOW TIFF SHAPES CITY BRANDING AND URBAN IDENTITY

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***Abstract:** This paper investigates the role of the Transylvania International Film Festival (TIFF) in shaping Cluj-Napoca's city brand and cultural identity. Framed as a process of "navigating through culture," the study examines how TIFF creates intersections between local identity, cultural innovation, and international recognition. Using a qualitative approach, the research draws on interviews with festival organizers and cultural communication experts to capture insights into the festival's branding strategies and symbolic significance. Findings indicate that TIFF functions not only as a major cultural event but also as a catalyst for city branding: it reinforces residents' sense of belonging while projecting Cluj-Napoca as a vibrant and creative hub in the European cultural landscape.*

***Keywords:** Cultural Communication; City Branding; Cultural Festival; TIFF Cluj; Urban Identity*

Introduction

In recent decades, culture has become a central element in the strategies through which cities seek to distinguish themselves in an increasingly competitive global environment. Festivals, exhibitions, and other large-scale cultural events are no longer perceived solely as forms of entertainment, but as instruments of urban development, tourism promotion, and identity construction. The interconnection between cultural initiatives and urban branding has generated a wide field of academic inquiry, highlighting the symbolic and economic dimensions of cultural production.

Within this context, film festivals represent a particularly relevant case, as they bring together local communities, creative industries, and international audiences, while simultaneously projecting a city's image onto the global cultural stage. The Transylvania International Film Festival (TIFF), launched in 2002 in Cluj-Napoca, exemplifies this dynamic. Over the past two decades, TIFF has grown into the most important film festival in Romania, gaining international recognition and transforming the city into a vibrant cultural hub. Its presence contributes not only to the city's visibility but also to the shaping of a collective urban identity rooted in cultural participation and cosmopolitan values.

This paper examines TIFF as a case study to understand how cultural events can act as catalysts for city branding and identity formation. The focus is placed on the intersections between local traditions and global flows, on the symbolic capital generated by cultural consumption, and on the ways in which the festival contributes to redefining the image of Cluj-Napoca within Europe. By addressing these aspects, the study aims to shed light on the broader role of cultural festivals in shaping the narratives through which contemporary cities position themselves in the global cultural landscape.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The role of cultural and creative sectors in urban development has increasingly been recognized as a key driver of sustainable city growth. A fertile cultural environment fosters the emergence of a creative class, which in turn supports the formation of an entire urban ecosystem (Moga, 2017). Effective communication plays a major role in this process, transmitting messages from the cultural industry to the public and creatively structuring these messages. Such communication builds strong relationships

between creative communities and institutions, as well as between these communities and consumers, in formats adapted to both B2C and B2B contexts.

Cultural production encompasses the creation, distribution, and consumption of cultural goods, while marketing provides the framework within which this system operates (Anholt, 2007). Cultural actors can be grouped into three main categories: creators of cultural products (designers, artists, architects), cultural intermediaries (individuals or organizations responsible for distribution and communication), and consumers, who transform products into meaningful experiences. Marketing acts both as context and facilitator, influencing production, distribution, and consumption, while also shaping symbolic and aesthetic aspects of cultural goods.

The relationship between consumption and cultural production has been widely examined. Scholars such as Levy, Simmel, McCracken, Douglas, and Isherwood (cited by McCracken) observed that people acquire cultural products not merely for functionality but for the meanings they carry—myths, narratives, symbols, emotions, fantasies, and experiences. A cultural product that provides symbolic benefits aligned with cultural priorities is more likely to be embraced, often becoming a ritual. McCracken (2008) defines ritual as a social action dedicated to manipulating cultural meaning for communication and collective or individual categorization.

Historically, creativity has been essential for cities, enabling them to function as markets, centers of production, and hubs of exchange (Zukin, 2005). Creativity supports economic, social, and technological development and underpins the ability of cities to compete in a globalized context, increasingly relying on the projection of attractive images and symbols rather than geographic or natural resources (Landry, 2000; Björkman, 2002). Björkman introduces the concept of *aura*—the experience of beauty, exclusivity, uniqueness, and authenticity associated with cultural products, services, or brands. In the context of festivals, the term *vibe* is often used, with similar connotations of uniqueness and emotional resonance.

Film festivals, as highlighted by De Valck (2007), operate at the intersection of local identity and global aspirations, creating spaces where local traditions meet global cultural flows. They generate both cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), enhance visibility, and contribute to city branding. Storytelling and narrative construction are central to building the aura or vibe of festivals, communicating vision, mission, and values while engaging audiences and fostering curiosity and motivation.

Cultural production also impacts individual and collective identity. Through participation in cultural experiences, consumers create meanings in their own lives and engage with the city's symbolic landscape. Organizational studies (Becker et al.) highlight that cultural creation is often collaborative, involving multiple actors working together to produce artistic and cultural outcomes. The consumption of cultural products, particularly experiential ones, is often hedonistic, aimed at pleasure, emotions, and multi-sensory engagement (Holbrook & Hirschman, 2002).

Finally, cultural production shapes consumer culture and urban perception. The aesthetics, signs, symbols, and meanings embedded in cultural products influence lifestyles, economic activity, and the symbolic positioning of cities in global networks. Festivals like TIFF exemplify this interplay, functioning simultaneously as instruments of community engagement, platforms for cultural consumption, and mechanisms for urban identity construction.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to capture the complex interplay between cultural events, city branding, and urban identity. A qualitative approach is particularly suited for exploring symbolic and discursive dimensions, allowing for an in-depth understanding of meanings, perceptions, and narratives produced by different stakeholders.

The empirical material was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of both local and central authorities, as well as with key members of the organizing

team of TIFF. The selection of participants was based on their direct involvement in policymaking, cultural management, or festival organization, ensuring that perspectives reflect a wide spectrum of institutional and cultural actors.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility, allowing the researchers to address predefined themes while also encouraging participants to elaborate freely on their experiences and interpretations. The interviews focused on three main areas: (1) the perceived role of TIFF in promoting Cluj-Napoca as a cultural city; (2) the impact of the festival on local identity and community cohesion; and (3) the strategic use of TIFF within broader city branding and cultural development policies.

The data were transcribed and analysed thematically. By triangulating perspectives from local authorities, central decision-makers, and festival organizers, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how TIFF contributes to redefining Cluj-Napoca's urban identity.

Findings

The analysis of interviews revealed several key themes that illustrate the multidimensional role of TIFF in shaping Cluj-Napoca's cultural identity and city branding strategies.

1. TIFF as a Vector of European Visibility

The festival significantly enhances Cluj-Napoca's international recognition, attracting tourists, media coverage, and partnerships with European cultural institutions. Festival Manager, CH, emphasized: "TIFF was the first film event in Romania to successfully encapsulate and promote the concept of a festival. At the international level, TIFF has effectively transferred the city's image, establishing Cluj-Napoca as an important hub for the Romanian film industry. The strong relationship between TIFF and Cluj-Napoca has promoted cultural values, supported the domestic film industry, elevated the city's profile both nationally and internationally, contributed to the development of the events sector in Cluj-Napoca, and maintained coherent communication between the festival and the host city."

2. TIFF as a Catalyst for Community Engagement

By involving residents, volunteers, and local artists, TIFF fosters social cohesion, strengthens a sense of belonging, and bridges local traditions with contemporary cultural practices. MF, the Prefect of Cluj County, highlighted this dimension:

"Cultural events such as TIFF, the longest-standing major cultural event in Cluj, are vital for a community. They not only offer us the opportunity to enjoy art, but also help us connect, discover new perspectives, and build a stronger shared identity. These events are the living heart of the city and its engine of social and cultural development."

3. TIFF as a Tool for Cultural and Economic Development

TIFF is also perceived as an engine of economic growth and cultural innovation, aligning with broader strategies to promote cultural tourism and creative industries. TM, Social Media Manager of TIFF, emphasized:

"TIFF is not only the longest-standing festival in Cluj but also a catalyst that has transformed the way the city perceives cinema and cultural events. It has brought together tens of thousands of people, educated generations of young audiences, created jobs, and nurtured a community that today takes pride in Cluj's designation as a UNESCO City of Film. This speaks volumes about what culture can achieve when pursued with purpose and consistency."

The spokesperson of Cluj-Napoca City Hall also highlighted the institutional commitment to TIFF: "The Transilvania International Film Festival (TIFF) is one of the defining cultural landmarks of Cluj and an event that has placed our city on the international map of cinema. For the local community, TIFF

means more than a festival: it is a platform for cultural education, for promoting young filmmakers, for stimulating creative industries, and for strengthening urban identity.

The City Hall of Cluj-Napoca consistently supports this event, both through budget allocations and through logistical facilities and partnerships designed to encourage public access and community involvement. In 2025, the Local Council approved funding of 1,950,000 RON for TIFF, a sum that reflects the municipality's commitment to investing in culture as a driver of the city's sustainable development.

We believe that TIFF is an example of best practices in the cultural field, successfully bringing together tens of thousands of people, promoting the city's heritage, and contributing to Cluj's recognition as a UNESCO City of Film. We want this collaboration to continue and grow, so that TIFF remains the cultural heart of the city and a benchmark of excellence at an international level."

4. Negotiating Local and Global Narratives

Finally, TIFF operates at the intersection of local identity and global aspirations. While rooted in Cluj-Napoca's cultural context, the festival adopts international standards and aesthetics, producing a hybrid cultural space where local traditions converge with global trends.

Overall, the findings confirm that TIFF functions as a multidimensional platform, enhancing international visibility, consolidating community identity, driving economic and cultural development, and positioning Cluj-Napoca as a creative and globally connected urban center.

Discussion

The findings reveal that TIFF plays a complex and multifaceted role in Cluj-Napoca's urban identity and city branding. Insights from both institutional representatives and festival organizers demonstrate that the event simultaneously strengthens community bonds, stimulates economic and cultural growth, and raises the city's international profile. The statement of MF, Prefect of Cluj County, situates TIFF at the heart of community life, underscoring its role as the "living heart" of the city and a generator of social cohesion. This aligns with theoretical perspectives that emphasize the power of cultural production to construct collective identities and strengthen social bonds (McCracken, 2008; Holbrook & Hirschman, 2002).

TM, Social Media Manager of TIFF, highlighted the festival's transformative impact on the city's perception of cinema and cultural life, stressing its contribution to building the community that enabled Cluj's designation as a UNESCO City of Film. This illustrates Björkman's (year) notion of aura—the sense of exclusivity, authenticity, and symbolic resonance generated by cultural products and events. TIFF's consistent and purposeful development has not only created an "aura" around the festival itself but also reinforced the city's brand narrative as a European hub of creativity.

These insights confirm that festivals like TIFF function as both symbolic and practical instruments of city branding. They merge local and global narratives (De Valck, 2007), generate symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and contribute to sustainable development strategies by attracting talent, investment, and cultural tourism (Landry, 2000). At the same time, they highlight the crucial role of communication—both institutional and digital—in shaping narratives and projecting them to diverse audiences (Moga, 2017).

Conclusion

TIFF exemplifies the transformative power of cultural events in constructing urban identity and supporting city branding strategies. As revealed by the interviews, the festival operates as a cultural catalyst that fosters community pride, strengthens social cohesion, generates economic opportunities, and positions Cluj-Napoca as a creative hub within Europe. The testimonies of local authorities and

festival organizers underline that TIFF is more than a cultural event: it is a driver of symbolic capital, an anchor of collective identity, and a vehicle for global recognition.

Cluj's status as a UNESCO City of Film demonstrates the long-term impact of TIFF's sustained growth and purposeful vision. The festival's ability to combine local traditions with global cultural flows illustrates how urban identity can be strategically constructed through culture, communication, and creativity.

Ultimately, the case of TIFF demonstrates that cultural production and consumption are not only aesthetic or entertainment phenomena but also engines of sustainable urban development. Cities that invest in fostering cultural "auras" and in cultivating creative ecosystems are better equipped to compete globally, while also reinforcing the sense of belonging and pride of their citizens. TIFF thus stands as a model for how culture, when pursued with consistency and meaning, can redefine both a city's identity and its future trajectory.

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