

Framing ECoC České Budejovice 2028 coverage in media and professional public

Ludmila Novacká, Matěj Pejsar

Abstract

The main aim of this study was to analyse the media coverage of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2028 and to explore how professional and academic audiences perceive its anticipated impacts. Authors of article focused on extent and nature of media coverage of the ECoC 2028 project within the Czech media, and to explore public perceptions of the project. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods. The study further presents an opinion of two focus groups evaluating the anticipated impacts of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme. The first group comprised university students specialising in tourism management, while the second consisted of professional journalists and authors active in the field of tourism and hospitality. The findings from both research methods are surprisingly very similar. Only two extreme results from the media coverage were not confirmed in the focus groups.

Keywords: Tourism, Culture, European Capital of Culture, České Budějovice, Survey Mediatization, Focus groups

JEL classification: Z32, Z10, Z19, L82

Ludmila Novacká, University of South Bohemia, Faculty of Economics, Department of Trade and Tourism, Studentská 787/13, České Budějovice, Czech Republic, e-mail: novacka@ef.jcu.cz

Matěj Pejsar, University of South Bohemia, Faculty of Economics, Department of Trade and Tourism, Studentská 787/13, České Budějovice, Czech Republic, e-mail: pejsam01@ef.jcu.cz

DOI: 10.32725/acta.2025.007

© Copyright by Faculty of Economics, University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice

1. Introduction

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) is a European initiative that originated 42 years ago at the instigation of the Greek Minister of Culture. Both its content and organisational structure have evolved. Initially, the programme focused on capital cities with millennia-long cultural traditions. “Nine cities initially collaborated to coordinate their cultural programmes and organise pan-European events” (European Commission, 2025). Over time, the ECoC programme has shifted from promoting tourism and visitor numbers toward fostering social well-being, community engagement, and creative participation. Its current form increasingly emphasises active cultural involvement and the regeneration of urban and brownfield spaces for new cultural uses.

Over the last two decades, the ECoC has developed into a complex cultural policy instrument that combines economic, environmental, and social sustainability while stressing citizen participation and long-term legacy¹ (Perrin & Turşie, 2020). Recent studies show that the visibility and success of ECoC projects depend largely on how they are represented in the media and perceived by local and professional audiences (Birkner, 2024; O’Boyle & Gallagher, 2023). Media framing and public discourse thus play a key role in shaping cultural identity and expectations surrounding these projects (Fan & Lin, 2022; Udden Babar, 2025).

This study examines how the ECoC České Budějovice 2028 is portrayed in Czech media and how professional and academic audiences perceive its anticipated impacts, linking the concepts of mediatization, communication, and cultural evaluation.

2. Theoretical Background

In this evolving context, media play a decisive role in constructing the public image of the ECoC and influencing how citizens and visitors perceive its meaning and outcomes. The concept of mediatization has therefore become central to understanding contemporary cultural policy and destination branding. As Birkner (2024) defines it, mediatization refers to the growing importance and influence of media across all spheres of society. This phenomenon transcends the idea of media as mere communicative tools, positioning them as structural forces that institutions must accommodate (Fan & Lin, 2022).

Recent discussions on mediatization theory highlight how media have become deeply embedded in all aspects of social and cultural life. Hjarvard (2008) sees mediatization as a process in which social institutions adapt their logic to media norms, with “media logic” shaping cultural and journalistic communication. Horváth (2011) describes this through the linear transmissive model, emphasizing the transfer of encoded information between sender and receiver. Earlier, Manovich (2002) showed how new media build on conventions of older media, such as framing and spatial representation, to construct new mediated realities. Finally, Niklas Luhmann (2006) situates media within functionally differentiated social systems where meaning arises through constant interaction between system and environment. Together, these

¹ The European Capitals of Culture (ECOC) initiative is designed to:

- Highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe
- Celebrate the cultural features Europeans share
- Increase European citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area
- Foster the contribution of culture to the development of cities

In addition to this, experience has shown that the event is an excellent opportunity for:

- Regenerating cities
 - Raising the international profile of cities;
 - Enhancing the image of cities in the eyes of their own inhabitants
 - Breathing new life into a city's culture and boosting tourism
- (European Commission, 2025)

perspectives illustrate how mediatization reshapes the structures through which meaning and information circulate in contemporary culture.

Contemporary research has increasingly recognised that the ECoC's visibility and perceived success depend on how effectively media narratives align with the event's cultural mission and with local identity formation. O'Boyle & Gallagher (2023) note that media logic can reshape institutional behaviour, as actors in politics or culture adapt their communication to the needs of visibility and audience engagement. Similarly, Grosso et al. (2024) demonstrate that social media metrics significantly affect users' intent to visit destinations, confirming that tourism and media are deeply interlinked.

In tourism, mediatization influences how destinations are perceived, branded, and experienced. Fan and Lin (2022) argue that tourism has entered an era of mediated tourism, where virtual experiences often precede physical visits. Tourists engage with destinations through imagery and narratives that create expectations before travel occurs. Udden Babar (2025) likewise shows that both traditional and social media affect destination reputation and actual travel decisions, confirming that mediated content has tangible behavioural consequences.

For cities aspiring to be recognised as cultural destinations, such as those awarded the ECoC title, media representation becomes both an opportunity and a challenge. As Udden Babar (2025) and Bílková et al. (n.d.) argue, media cooperation is essential for popularising culture and ensuring that the ECoC message reaches diverse audiences. Examples from Matera (Delio & Angela, 2020) and Liverpool (West, 2022) demonstrate that strategic media framing can create lasting "legacy narratives," transforming local identity and reputation.

However, media influence is ambivalent. Positive coverage can strengthen local pride and visibility, while negative framing can amplify criticism or perceived failure (Liu, 2016). Cities must therefore manage media strategically, both offensively, to promote culture, and defensively, to address controversies (O'Boyle & Gallagher, 2023).

These insights underline the key role of media in shaping how ECoC initiatives are understood, celebrated, or criticised. Public perception and institutional legitimacy depend heavily on how the event is framed in the media environment.

Building on this theoretical discussion, the first research question is developed as RQ1: How is the ECoC České Budějovice 2028 represented in Czech media, and what are the dominant narratives and perceptions?

Further, to statistically test whether certain media narratives dominate over others, we also establish the following hypotheses:

H₀ (null hypothesis): All thematic frames are evenly represented.

H₁ (alternative hypothesis): Thematic frames are not evenly represented

Alongside the growing mediatization of culture, attention has increasingly turned to the evaluation of cultural projects and their wider impacts. Contemporary approaches to cultural event evaluation emphasise multidimensional frameworks that integrate economic, social, environmental, and cultural dimensions. Biedermann et al. (2024) propose a methodological framework that allows the simultaneous assessment of all four pillars of sustainability, complementing traditional indicators with cultural value measures such as identity, belonging, and creativity. Lian and Liang (2024), in their case study of a festival, demonstrate that while economic effects tend to be the most visible, environmental and cultural impacts are often overlooked despite their significant influence on long-term sustainability.

Participatory approaches are also increasingly recognised as essential for the legitimacy and societal relevance of cultural interventions (Nelaeva & Iermolenko, 2024). The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme is often cited as a model of good practice due to its established ex-ante and ex-post evaluation mechanisms promoting transparency and transferability of results (Pirri Valentini, 2023). Similarly, Dogramadjieva & Tylko (2023) found that residents frequently value cultural enrichment and civic participation over direct financial outcomes.

From an economic perspective, Gerland (2023) found that hosting the ECoC leads to a 3–6% increase in tourist visits and short-term employment, though Nermud et al. (2021) caution that these effects are mostly temporary. Long-term impacts depend more on social and cultural legacies, civic pride, community cohesion, and the strengthening of cultural identity (Veselinovič, 2024).

These findings highlight the importance of analysing not only post-event outcomes but also pre-event expectations. How professionals and university students perceive the anticipated benefits or drawbacks of the ECoC can significantly influence implementation success.

Building on the insights of previous authors, the second research question is formulated as RQ2: Do focus groups perceive the impacts of the ECoC 2028 on the city of České Budějovice as predominantly positive or negative?

Building on the findings of the literature review, it became evident that while numerous studies address the economic and cultural legacies of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme, limited attention has been paid to how media framing and professional perceptions interact prior to the event implementation.

This gap in existing research justified the need for an integrated analysis that connects media discourse with the professional public in the preparatory phase of ECoC 2028 in České Budějovice. The main aim of this study was to analyse the media coverage of the ECoC 2028 project in Czech media and to explore how professional and academic audiences perceive its anticipated impacts.

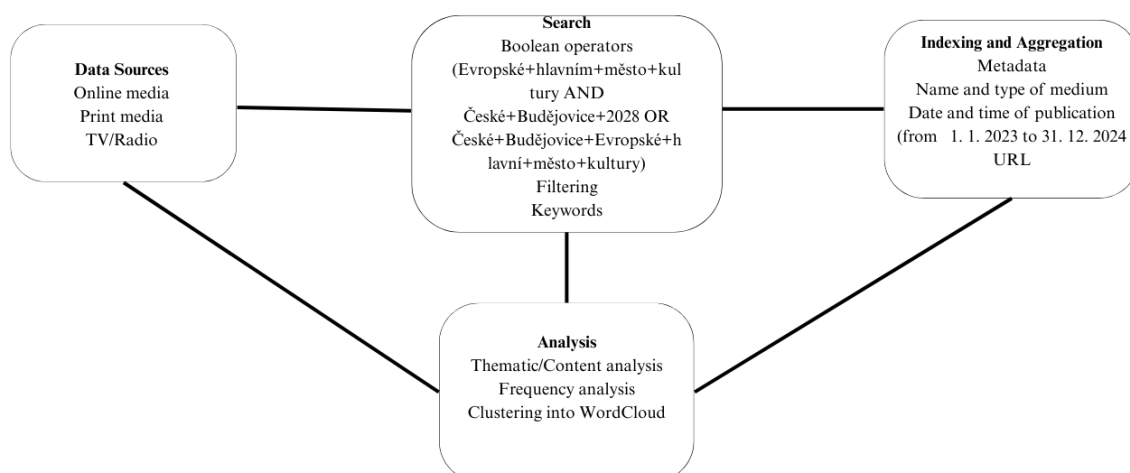
3. Methodology

A triangulation of research methods was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve the article's aim.

First, an analysis of official strategic documents, known as "Bid Books," was conducted, with a primary focus on the document for České Budějovice 2028. The financial conditions and structure of funds were analysed, as well as targeted segments of visitors, and implementation phases. A comparative analysis was also applied to benchmark the core elements in the bid books of the three different ECoC 2028 (České Budějovice, Bourges, Skopje).

A media monitoring process was conducted to collect relevant outputs from Czech media sources, using the Mediaboard tool to retrieve media content and for further analysis. Searches were conducted using Boolean operators (AND, OR) with predefined keywords such as "Evropské hlavní město kultury", "České Budějovice 2028", and "ECoC 2028". Media outputs were included if they contained at least one direct reference to "Evropské hlavní město kultury 2028" or "České Budějovice 2028" and were published between 1 January 2023 and 31 December 2024. The process of media monitoring, including the use of Boolean operators, is visualized in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1 Scheme of Media Monitoring Process



Source: Elaborated by Authors

The final dataset comprised 124 media outputs from print and online newspapers, magazines, and radio broadcasts. Each output was manually screened for relevance to the research aim, and duplicates were excluded.

Following the retrieval, the media outputs were examined using qualitative thematic and content analysis in order to identify key themes, narratives, and attitudes present in the coverage of ECoC 2028. Frequency analysis of keywords was used to generate a quantitative overview of the most occurring words and then visualized using a word cloud.

In addition to the thematic analysis, a statistical analysis was also conducted using the chi-square goodness-of-fit test. This test served to verify whether the individual thematic frames in media outputs are represented evenly or whether significant deviations exist in the frequency of their occurrence. The observed frequencies of thematic categories were compared with a hypothetical uniform distribution, which represents a situation in which all themes would have an equal chance of being covered by the media. This directly addresses Research Question 1 and the hypotheses H_0 and H_1 .

To complement the quantitative findings two focus groups were conducted:

- Focus Group 1 (FG-1): 38 students of tourism with prior coursework on cultural tourism and familiarity with the ECoC concept.
- Focus Group 2 (FG-2): 12 professional journalists, tourism experts and authors specialising in tourism and hospitality.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that they provided informed opinions and had a contextual understanding of the topic. A common selection criterion for both groups was a familiarity with the city of České Budějovice, either through residency, study, or regular professional visits. This ensured that all respondents were capable of reflecting on the city's cultural, social, and tourism context in an informed and experience-based manner.

Each session followed a semi-structured discussion guide based on themes emerging from the economic expectations, cultural legacy, urban development, and social impacts.

A correlation analysis using Pearson's correlation coefficient was also utilized to assess the degree of agreement between two respondent groups. In this study, the coefficient was applied to compare the responses of two focus groups to an identically defined set of items that reflected the perceived impacts of the European Capital of Culture project. Each item constituted a paired

data point, allowing for the calculation of similarity in value estimates between the two groups. The resulting coefficient indicates the extent to which the responses align in terms of trend or systematic differences. The coefficient was calculated by following formula:

$$r = \frac{\sum (x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum (x_i - \bar{x})^2 \sum (y_i - \bar{y})^2}}$$

Participants were also asked to rate the impacts of the ECoC project on a five-point Likert scale from Strongly positive to Strongly negative. To quantify respondents' attitudes, the Likert scale was converted into a numerical score ranging from +2 ("strongly positive") to -2 ("strongly negative"). The resulting evaluations were processed using a weighted mean sentiment score, where each category was assigned, a weight based on the percentage of participants selecting it within a given focus group. The formula used was as follows:

$$\bar{x} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (v_i \times p_i)}{\sum_{i=1}^n p_i}$$

In addition to the weighted mean sentiment score, a weighted sentiment variance was calculated to quantify the level of opinion dispersion within each group. A higher variance indicates greater diversity of views among respondents. The sentiment variance was calculated using the following formula:

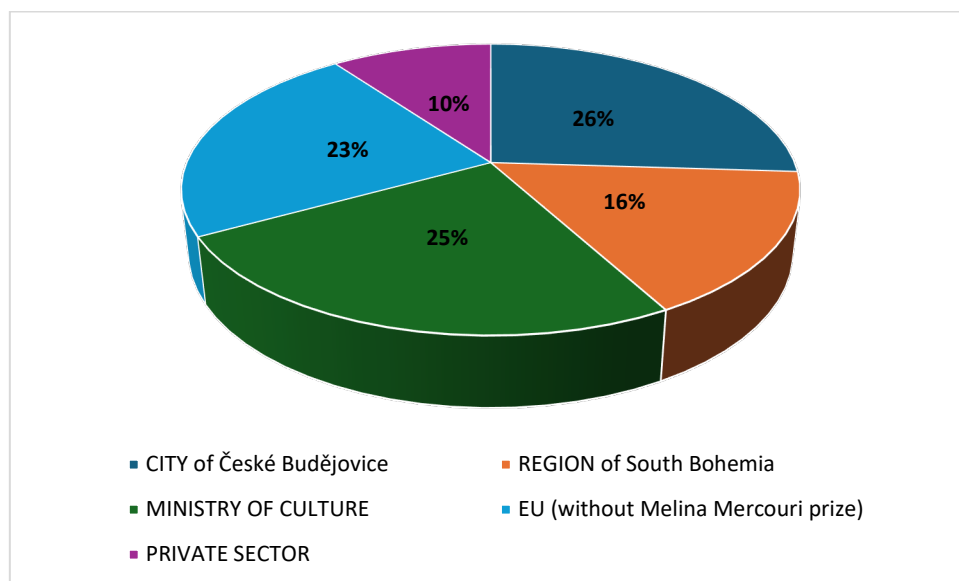
$$s^2 = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n p_i (v_i - \bar{x})^2}{\sum_{i=1}^n p_i}$$

4. Results

4.1 Analysis of the ECoC 2028 “Bid Books”

The analysis of the total operating budget, amounting to EUR 31 883 000, reveals a diversified funding structure. The structure is visualised in Fig 2. The most significant contributions come from the City of České Budějovice, with EUR 8 333 000 (26%), and the Ministry of Culture, with EUR 8 000 000 (25%), reflecting strong local and national support. The European Union, excluding the Melina Mercouri prize, provides EUR 7 200 000 (23%), demonstrating significant international backing. The Region of South Bohemia contributes EUR 5 000 000 (16%), while the private sector accounts for EUR 3 350 000 (10%), indicating potential for further development in private partnerships. This balanced distribution underscores the project's broad institutional endorsement and highlights opportunities to strengthen engagement with private stakeholders.

Fig. 2 Budget Structure of České Budějovice 2028



Source: Elaborated by Authors based on České Budějovice 2028, p. 78

The capital expenditure budget, totalling EUR 136 717 664, is predominantly financed through public sector contributions. The city of České Budějovice stands out as the primary contributor, providing EUR 55 642 489, which represents 41% of the total capital income. This substantial municipal investment demonstrates the city's strong ownership and leadership of the project. The Region of South Bohemia contributes EUR 33 000 000 (24%), indicating solid regional support. National government funding amounts to EUR 26 000 000 (19%), while the European Union provides EUR 22 075 175 (16%), spread across several years, most notably in 2023 and 2025. The data reflect a strong reliance on public funding sources, with no current indication of private sector involvement in capital expenditures, pointing to a potential area for strategic diversification in future funding approaches. As seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Source of Income for Capital Expenditure

Budget in EUR	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	%
EU			747 851	8 505 214	4 298 003	8 505 214		
TOTAL EU in EUR	22 075 175							16
NATIONAL Government	14 000 000			6 000 000	2 000 000	4 000 000		
TOTAL NATIONAL Government	26,000,000							19
South Bohemia Region			9 000 000			24 000 000		
TOTAL South Bohemia Region	33 000 000							24
City České Budějovice		606 310	11 053 524	7 047 833	33 924 754	2 975 105	34 963	

TOTAL City České Budějovice	55 642 489	41
TOTAL AMOUNT	136 717 664	100

Source: Elaborated by Authors based on České Budejovice 2028, p. 79

In its published Bid Book ECoC České Budějovice 2028 is aiming at the 4 main segment of visitors with a set international outreach strategy:

- The Tripoint Region – The culturally engaged public from the Czech Republic, Upper Austria and Lower Bavaria will be reached through existing partnerships and proven cross-border collaboration.
- Post-Socialist Countries – Shared historical ties with Poland, Slovakia and Hungary will shape a deeper cultural dialogue within the V4 narrative.
- ECoC 2028 Countries – Cooperation with fellow ECoC 2028 cities, Bourges and Skopje, will boost joint promotion and European cultural outreach.
- Countries of Shared Interest – Visitors from culturally connected countries like Germany, France or the UK are increasingly including ECoC events in their travel plans.

4.2 Benchmarking of ECoC 2028 Cities

The comparative overview of the three ECoC 2028 cities, České Budějovice, Bourges, and Skopje, highlights both shared values and distinctive approaches, forming a solid foundation for meaningful collaboration. Each city demonstrates a clear commitment to inclusivity, cultural participation, and sustainability, embedding cultural strategies within broader social and environmental frameworks.

České Budějovice's guiding motto, *PERMAculture is the way of life*, reflects a holistic vision that integrates cultural vitality with well-being, sustainability, and community care. The special program structure, CARE, CONNECT, CREATE, emphasizes dynamic relationships among institutions, individuals, and environments, both human and non-human, creating opportunities for co-creation and long-term impact. Important are also the common projects in the matrix of Bourges, proposed by France, in which the ECoC 2028 cities cooperate. In total, the awarded cities cooperate on 12 projects; ten are in cooperation between France and the Czech Republic, and two are between France and North Macedonia.

All three cities report active involvement of local populations and meaningful engagement of underrepresented groups. Notably, České Budějovice has forged 10 direct collaborative projects with Bourges, with further multilateral initiatives involving Skopje, highlighting a strong matrix of cooperation. Shared milestones (2023–2029) and planned ex-post evaluations (e.g., Skopje in 2030) demonstrate strategic alignment across the cities.

In sum, the data underscores a deeply interconnected and forward-thinking network of ECoC 2028 cities, in which České Budějovice plays a proactive and creative role, rooted in both local context and European collaboration. As seen in Table 2

Table 2 Benchmarking of ECoC 2028 in selected items

	CZ – České Budějovice	F - Bourges	NM - Skopje
Motto	(PERMA) CULTURE IS THE WAY OF LIFE, IS THE MINDSET, IS THE SLOGAN ITSELF, IS THE FUTURE OF BUDWEIS	TERRITORIES OF THE FUTURE	CULTURE OVER DIVISION
Special programmes	<p>CARE: Projects of caregivers stimulate inclusive and playful space for all. Communities, institutions, places. Dynamic links between accessibility, trust and diversity.</p> <p>CONNECT: Projects of connectors delve into European cultural heritage and examine the relationship between local residents and European guests. Narratives, traditions, perspectives. Dynamic links between sense of belonging, engagement and openness.</p> <p>CREATE: Projects of creators bring together scientists and artists to tackle current European topics and celebrate creativity. Safe spaces, laboratory, celebrations, natural, physical, digital environment included revolving audience. Dynamic relations with the aim of co-creation, attractiveness and mindset.</p>	<p>Lots of neighbours: local and European with non-human – environment and nature.</p> <p>Language of Europe: Low carbon transport, New transport networks, Strong protection of the last wild river in Europe,</p> <p>On a human scale: Participatory policymaking, innovative cultural practices with citizen governance,</p>	<p>Art4Hope: Skopje and cultural creative events</p> <p>Togetherness: CreArt a network of European medium-sized cities</p> <p>rECOvering: The greenery in the surrounding residential buildings, Green Design Community, Transforming abandoned and illegally occupied spaces into green public havens</p> <p>CreARTing: Conferences of young entrepreneurs, exhibitions, immersive programs, international forums and role of women in creative industries CreARTing</p>
Cultural, economic and social impacts	yes	yes	yes
Annual milestones	2023-2029	2023-2029	2023-2029
Ex-post evaluation	-	-	2030
Common Projects in Matrix of Bourges	CZ-F 10	F-CZ+NM 12	NM-F 2
Involvement of the local population	yes	yes	yes
Participation opportunities for less privileged groups	yes	yes	yes

Source: Elaborated by Authors based on Bid Books

4.3 The Framing of ECoC České Budějovice 2028 in Media

The selection of České Budějovice as the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) for 2028 represents a significant milestone in the cultural policy of the Czech Republic. Following Prague (2000) and Plzeň (2015), České Budějovice becomes the third Czech city to receive this prestigious title. Media coverage of this development has been particularly concentrated around the announcement of the selection results, although publicity surrounding the project continues, particularly at the regional level.

An analysis of 124 media references, comprising 122 articles and two radio interviews, reveals that the coverage of the ECoC 2028 project unfolds across several thematic levels:

1. Symbolic Significance and Public Expectations
2. Scepticism and Critical Voices
3. The Voice of the Cultural Sector

Media coverage of the ECoC 2028 project in České Budějovice presents a dual perspective: on one hand, it highlights the symbolic value of the title as a means to elevate the city's visibility in Europe and boost cultural tourism and infrastructure development; on the other, it includes critical voices warning of bureaucratic risks and a possible disconnect from local needs. Expert commentary, such as that from a local gallery director, emphasises the necessity of long-term cultural continuity and strategic planning to ensure lasting impact beyond the event itself.

The thematic analysis focuses on identifying the main content domains and narrative frameworks appearing in media coverage of the České Budějovice – European Capital of Culture 2028 project (hereafter ECoC 2028). The analysis is based on 124 media outputs (including online articles, press releases, and news reports), complemented by a radio interview broadcast on Czech Radio Plus (22–23 August 2023).

1. Celebratory Narrative and Positive Expectations

A substantial portion of media output presents the project as a strategic success for the city, likely to attract increased tourist interest, international visibility, and investment in cultural infrastructure. Frequently used terms include “visibility”, “prestige”, “opportunity”, and “opening up to the world”. This narrative highlights the economic and symbolic benefits associated with the title, often framing the cultural dimension as a tool for urban and tourism development. České Budějovice has the chance to become a cultural centre of Europe and to demonstrate its value beyond the region.

2. Critical Discourse and Sceptical Frames

Alongside celebratory framing, critical perspectives are evident in the discourse, questioning the long-term impact of the title on the city. These include concerns about the risk of “one-off” programming, i.e., that cultural activities in 2028 may remain isolated events with little lasting influence on the city's cultural landscape. Additional concerns are raised regarding excessive bureaucratisation, an over-reliance on external experts who may lack a meaningful connection to the local context, and fears that most of the money will be swallowed up by bureaucrats and cultural sector experts.

3. Local Voices and Cultural Continuity

A notable category within the discourse includes “local voices,” especially cultural actors with longstanding ties to the city. This theme is articulated in radio interview, which stresses the importance of conceptual and sustained cultural work, cautioning against the short-lived “hype effect” of the ECoC title. This perspective underscores the significance of organic cultural development rooted in community engagement and professional practice.

4. Regional Identity and the Notion of Peripherality

A recurrent motive is the attempt to redefine the regional identity of České Budějovice within a European cultural context. The media often frame the ECoC title as an opportunity to “step out of the periphery” and become a cultural actor of supraregional significance. This framework balances pride and ambition, while simultaneously suggesting the need for self-representation and increased professionalisation of the city’s cultural offering. The Occurrence of the Key Themes is demonstrated in Table 3.

Table 3 Frequency of Occurrence of the Key Themes

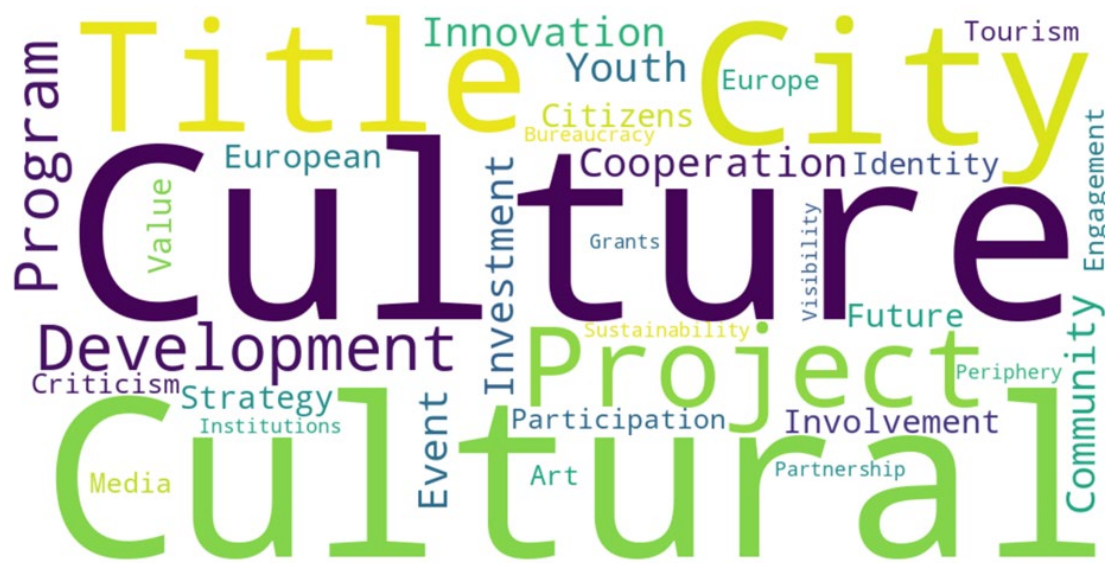
Theme	Number of Occurrences	Percentage Representation
Symbolic Significance and Expectations	78	62.9%
Local Voices and Continuity	52	41.9%
Critical Discourse and Sceptical Frames	45	36.3%
Regional Identity and Peripherality	39	31.5%

Source: Elaborated by authors

To assess whether the individual themes in media coverage are evenly represented, a chi-square goodness of fit test was performed. This test compares the observed frequencies of thematic frames listed in Table 3 with the expected frequencies corresponding to a uniform distribution across the four thematic categories. The total number of occurrences was 214, resulting in an expected frequency of 53.5 for each theme. The resulting test statistic was $\chi^2 = 16.54$ with a p-value of 0.00088. This result is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), allowing us to reject the null hypothesis of even representation of all themes representation. Thus, the media coverage of ECoC 2028 is thematically unbalanced, with certain narrative frames, particularly those that are positive and symbolic, receiving significantly more attention than others.

A word cloud was generated to visualise the frequency of keywords within the analysed texts (as seen in Figure 3), graphically representing the frequency of individual keywords. The word cloud visually reinforces the quantitative data. The larger the word in the graphic, the more frequently it appeared in the analysed texts. This method not only highlights dominant concepts but also facilitates intuitive orientation within the project's complex thematic structure. The table with frequency of keywords is attached in Appendix 1.

Fig. 3 Word Cloud - Frequency of Keywords



Source: Elaborated by authors

The most frequently occurring word was "Culture" (144 occurrences), closely followed by its adjectival form "Cultural" (120 occurrences). These terms confirm the dominant thematic focus on culture, aligning with the context of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC). The prominence of terms such as "City" (99), "Title" (87), and "Project" (79) also reflects the institutional and programmatic dimensions of the ECoC, particularly the designation of cities and the implementation of cultural projects.

Further notable frequencies include "Development" (69), "Program" (63), and "Cooperation" (60), indicating the importance of developmental and cooperative aspects within ECoC initiatives. Interestingly, terms such as "Innovation", "Event", "Investment", and "Youth" (each with 60 occurrences) appear with equal frequency, suggesting a broader impact of the project, including the involvement of young people and support for innovation.

Equally significant is the representation of terms related to participation and community engagement, such as "Community" (59), "Involvement" (56), "Participation" (46), and "Engagement" (45), confirming the frequently discussed civic participation dimension of the ECoC.

4.4 Focus Groups on Impacts of ECoC

Furthermore, a qualitative survey was conducted in two focus groups within a managed (guided) discussion on a specific set of questions. A quota selection of respondents guaranteed knowledge of the issue of destination tourism management. The first FG-1 was created by tourism management students at the university. In the second group, FG-2, professional journalists and authors who focus their work specifically on tourism and hotel management expressed their opinions. The results of this survey can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4 The Opinion of Focus Groups on Impacts of ECoC

Indicators		Strongly positive	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Strongly negative
Increase in attendance of tourists and visitors during 2028	FG1	❖				
	FG2	❖				
High attendance tourists and visitors in the following years as well	FG1	❖				
	FG2		❖			
Economic benefit for the city	FG1	❖				
	FG2	❖				
Economic benefit for local business	FG1	❖				
	FG2	❖				
Investments in infrastructure that will also be used by local people in the years to come	FG1		❖			
	FG2		❖			
Starting the systematic development of culture	FG1		❖			
	FG2		❖			
One-time boom and then nothing	FG1			❖		
	FG2			❖		
A lot of people and uncleanliness in the city	FG1				❖	
	FG2			❖		
Price increase in restaurants	FG1					❖
	FG2					❖
Increase in real estate prices	FG1				❖	
	FG2			❖		
Increase in night noise	FG1				❖	
	FG2				❖	
Increase in crime	FG1			❖		
	FG2			❖		

Source: Elaborated by authors

Focus groups (FG-1 and FG-2) expressed their opinion on the ECoC's positive impacts with a minimum deviation of 1.2%. The total average of positive impacts of 70% was assessed by FG-2 and FG-1 at 68.9%. Only FG-2 expressed a neutral opinion at an average value of 30%. Both FGs perceived the negative impacts of ECoC at a relatively comparable average level. The difference was 4.7%. FG-2 also expressed higher average values in the evaluation of negative impacts at 28%, and FG-1 confirmed an average value of 23.3%.

The most substantial difference is seen in the expectation of continued high visitor numbers in the future (-46.6%), with FG-2 being far less optimistic than FG-1. This suggests that FG-2 may have stronger reservations about the long-term sustainability of increased tourism.

A significant positive difference is noted in the perceived start of systematic cultural development (+36.7%), where FG-2 expressed far greater belief in cultural benefits than FG-1. This could reflect FG-2's professional insight into cultural policy or sector trends. The increase in restaurant prices also stands out, with FG-2 rating this issue 60% higher than FG-1. This

sharp contrast may indicate greater sensitivity among professionals to economic side effects impacting local residents and tourists alike.

Standard deviations were also calculated for the focus groups which reflect the percentage responses of the individual focus groups regarding various impacts of the ECoC 2028 project. The sample standard deviation for FG 1 was 34.14%, while for FG 2 it reached 39.88%. These results confirm the greater variability of opinions within the group of professionals. The higher standard deviation in FG-2 points to a more diverse range of perspectives on both positive and negative impacts of the ECoC project, whereas the views expressed by FG-1 were more consistent and centred around more optimistic expectations. The impacts of the ECoC project were also rated on a Likert scale as seen in Figure 3.

The results of correlation analysis indicate a strong positive correlation that is also statistically significant ($p < 0,05$) with $r = 0.73$ and a p -value of 0.0029). This suggests that while the two groups may differ in their level of optimism or scepticism, the general trend in their evaluations is similar. In other words, if FG-1 considers a particular impact to be significant, FG-2 tends to assess it similarly, and vice versa. This alignment supports the reliability of the qualitative findings in this part of the study. The bases for these calculations can be seen in Appendix 2

Table 5 The Level of Similarity of Evaluation of Indicators by both Focus Groups

Indicators	Share of discussed indicators
Strongly positive Increase in number of tourists and visitors during 2028 FG1, FG2 Economic benefit for the city FG1, FG2 Economic benefit for local business FG 1 FG 2	75%
Positive Investments in infrastructure that will also be used by local people in the years to come FG 1, FG2 Starting the systematic development of culture FG 1, FG 2	100%
Neutral One-time boom followed by stagnation FG 1, FG 2 Increase in crime FG 1, FG 2	50%
Negative Increase in night noise FG 1, FG 2	33%
Strongly negative Price increase in restaurants FG 1, FG 2,	100%

Source: Elaborated by authors

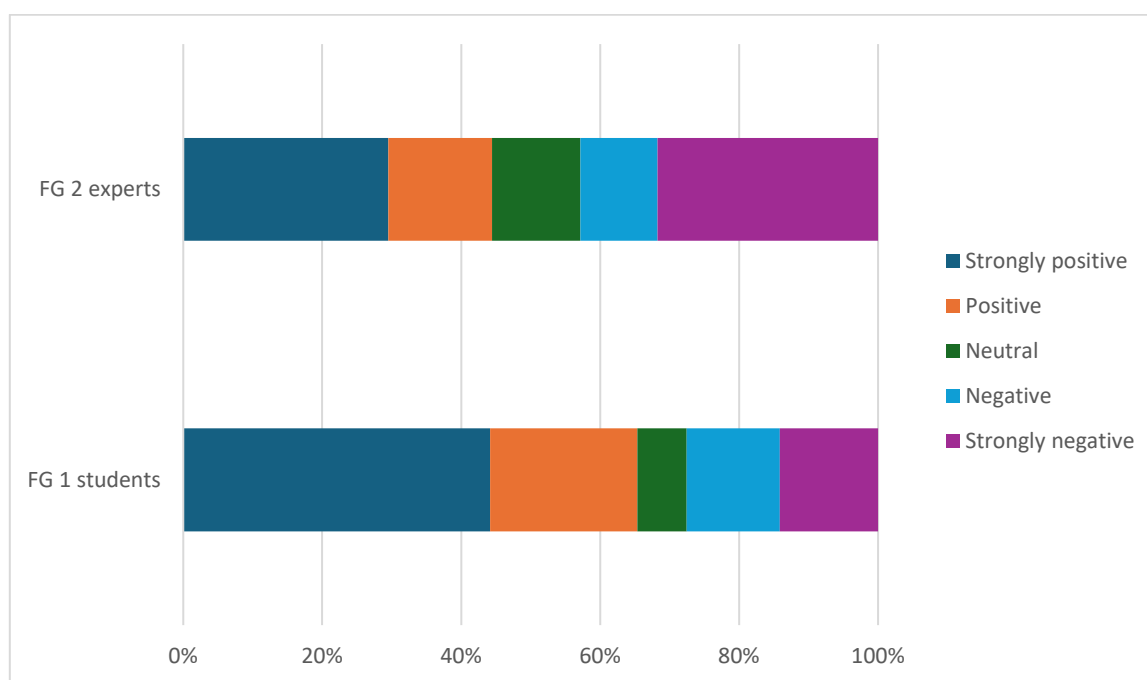
Both focus groups expressed relatively consistent views regarding the evaluation of the positive impacts of the ECoE on the city of České Budějovice (as seen in Table 5). Specifically, 100% of the total number of positive indicators were assessed as having positive impacts, and

75% were regarded similarly in terms of strongly positive impacts. Both focus groups clearly identified a minimal strongly negative impact in only one selected indicator.

Differences emerged in the evaluation of neutral positions. In selected indicators, Focus Group 1 applied a stricter assessment and rated them as negative, whereas Focus Group 2 adopted a neutral stance.

These positions are also reflected in the Likert scale used, where the highest weighting (3) was assigned to strongly positive and strongly negative indicators. A weighting of 2 was used for positive and negative evaluations of indicators, and the lowest weighting (1) was assigned to neutral responses. The evaluation of impacts can be seen in Figure 3.

Fig. 4 Evaluation of Impacts of the ECoC Project on a Likert Scale



Source: Elaborated by Authors

The weighted mean sentiment score was calculated for each focus group (based on Appendix 2). FG-1, composed of tourism management students, expressed a predominantly positive outlook on the expected impacts of the ECoC initiative, with a weighted sentiment score of +1.19. The FG-2 consisting of professional journalists and tourism experts, also showed a positive outlook, with a mean sentiment score of +0.95.

In addition to weighted mean sentiment score, weighted sentiment variance was calculated to assess the internal consistency of each group's responses. FG-1 demonstrated a lower sentiment variance of 1.74, indicating a relatively homogeneous set of opinions. Conversely, FG-2 exhibited a higher variance of 2.05, suggesting a broader spectrum of views and a more polarised perception of the potential benefits and drawbacks of the ECoC project. Which was already indicated by their higher standard deviation. These results point to a divergence not only in general attitude but also in the cohesion of group perspectives.

Qualitative research in two focus groups created opportunities for the final phase of interpreting our questions on the established themes. The scope of research focused on focus groups can create a basis for future quantitative data collection. Similarly, findings from focus groups survey can create a basis for future quantitative data collection and future research.

5. Findings

The city of České Budějovice, having been awarded the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) title for 2028, is strategically positioning itself both locally and internationally

The media representation of the ECoC 2028 project in the Czech Republic is thematised but uneven. A content and frequency analysis of 124 media outputs revealed a dominant celebratory narrative, portraying the title as a great success that brings visibility, prestige, and development opportunities to the city. This symbolic framing appeared in nearly 63% of all analysed outputs.

However, critical perspectives were also present. These included concerns over bureaucratization, fears of a "one-off cultural boom," and skepticism towards the long-term cultural and infrastructural legacy. Some reports voiced apprehensions that external consultants might lack local sensitivity and that public funds could be misallocated.

A third notable narrative emerged from local cultural voices, advocating for continuous, community-based cultural development rather than short-lived spectacles. The media also frequently referenced the city's regional identity, with an ambition to transcend its peripheral status and become a key European cultural player. Thematic imbalance in media coverage was statistically confirmed using a chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 16.54$, $p = 0.00088$), rejecting the hypothesis of equal theme distribution.

A word cloud analysis further highlighted that terms such as "*culture*," "*city*," "*development*," and "*cooperation*" were the most prominent. Notably, words such as "*youth*," "*innovation*," and "*participation*" also featured prominently, underlining the multifaceted aspirations of the project.

To the answer, the Q1: media coverage largely revolves around a celebratory narrative, highlighting the project's symbolic and economic value. However, critical voices raise valid concerns about bureaucratisation, short-lived benefits, and lack of local setting. Themes of regional identity and local engagement are also present but less frequent.

Two focus groups were conducted to explore the anticipated impacts of ECoC 2028. One consisted of tourism management students, while the other included professional journalists and tourism experts. Both groups predominantly expressed positive expectations, particularly concerning increases in tourism, economic benefits, and infrastructural investments that would provide long term benefits for the local residents.

While both groups saw the title as a significant opportunity, some differences in perspective emerged. The expert group (FG-2) was notably more cautious about long-term tourist interest and potential negative externalities, such as rising restaurant prices and gentrification. Conversely, students (FG-1) were more optimistic about sustained visitor numbers and long-term impacts.

Quantitatively, both groups scored highly on positive sentiment: FG-1 had a weighted sentiment score of +1.19, while FG-2 scored +0.95. However, variance and standard deviation were higher in FG-2 (2.05 vs 1.74; SD: 39.88% vs. 34.14%), indicating a more diverse range of opinions among professionals.

The correlation between the two groups' evaluations ($r = 0.73$; $p = 0.0029$) was statistically significant, indicating a general agreement in trends despite varying degrees of optimism. Both groups identified a strongly negative impact only in the category of restaurant price increases.

The survey conducted with focus groups provided insights into Q2, which can be summarized as follows: Both focus groups view the expected impacts as predominantly positive, especially in terms of tourism growth, economic benefits, and infrastructure development. However, the group of experts is more cautious, particularly concerning long-

term outcomes and potential negative side effects, such as price increases. Overall, the sentiment is optimistic, but there are nuanced and varied opinions among professionals.

Discovered data related to financial conditions published in the Bid Book outlines a balanced funding structure with robust contributions from local (City of České Budějovice, 26%) and national authorities (Ministry of Culture, 25%), as well as significant support from the European Union (23%) and the South Bohemian Region (16%). Private sector contributions remain relatively modest at 10 %, revealing the potential for greater engagement with non-public actors. This information was not published in media. Media should communicate these very important financial facts to the public.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

The findings of this study highlight how the mediatization of culture, as conceptualised by Hjarvard (2008) and Birkner (2024), manifests in the Czech context through the coverage of the ECoC 2028 project. Media do not merely report cultural events; they actively construct their meaning and social relevance. Our analysis of 124 media outputs confirms that the Czech media predominantly employ a celebratory framing, emphasising prestige, visibility, and economic benefit. This finding supports earlier studies (e.g., Garcia, 2017; West, 2022) that demonstrated how ECoC narratives often evolve into symbolic success stories, reinforcing civic pride and destination branding.

At the same time, the presence of critical and sceptical voices highlighting bureaucratic overload or short-term impacts resonates with Liu's (2016) observations on Liverpool 2008 and with O'Boyle & Gallagher's (2023) claim that cultural institutions must navigate media visibility strategically. In this sense, the Czech case illustrates how media logic (Hjarvard, 2008) becomes a governing factor shaping institutional behaviour long before the event takes place. From our perspective, this confirms that mediatization not only reflects but also conditions the policy and communication environment of cultural projects.

The statistically significant imbalance of thematic frames further underlines the dominance of symbolic narratives. This finding echoes Manovich's (2002) idea that media reconstruct reality through selective representation. The prominence of words such as culture, city, and development in our keyword analysis suggests that media discourse constructs the ECoC 2028 primarily as a story of urban transformation rather than as a process of participatory cultural growth. Such a focus risks overshadowing the more complex cultural and social dimensions of the event, an imbalance that Biedermann et al. (2024) also identified when arguing for multidimensional evaluation frameworks.

The focus group results provide a complementary perspective to these media findings. Both students and professionals shared predominantly positive expectations, particularly regarding the growth of tourism and infrastructure development. However, professionals were more cautious about sustainability and long-term effects. This pattern aligns with Nermud et al. (2021), who emphasise that the economic effects of ECoC events tend to be temporary, while their cultural legacy depends on local ownership and continuity. Similarly, Dogramadjieva & Tylko (2023) and Nelaeva & Iermolenko (2024) highlight that meaningful cultural participation often matters more to residents than economic returns, a sentiment reflected in the experts' greater emphasis on systematic cultural development.

These convergences suggest that media discourse and expert expectations mutually reinforce one another. Media narratives emphasising opportunity and prestige may amplify optimism among professionals, while expert statements then circulate back into media outputs, legitimising the celebratory tone. In our interpretation, this cyclical interaction illustrates the

matrix of mediatization proposed by Birkner (2024), which involves the blurring of boundaries between media, institutional communication, and public perception.

For policymakers and ECoC organisers, the findings suggest that effective communication strategies should prioritise thematic balance and transparency. While positive narratives are vital for public mobilisation, ignoring critical voices may undermine credibility. The study recommends fostering two-way communication with local stakeholders, integrating expert feedback into media outputs, and actively promoting community participation in storytelling processes.

Furthermore, greater emphasis should be placed on communicating the financial and social dimensions of the project, including the role of private partnerships, to strengthen trust and accountability. As the Bid Book data reveal, the low share of private investment (10%) presents both a challenge and an opportunity to diversify funding through improved visibility and public-private dialogue.

This study, therefore, contributes to ongoing discussions on the European Capital of Culture as a communicative and evaluative project (Perrin & Turşie, 2020; Pirri Valentini, 2023). We argue that the success of the ECoC depends on the interplay between media representation and professional interpretation. If these two spheres converge too closely, the risk arises of reproducing an overly optimistic narrative detached from lived experience. Conversely, a balanced dialogue between media, experts, and communities can support the creation of an authentic and sustainable cultural legacy.

From a theoretical perspective, the integration of RQ1 and RQ2 confirms the relevance of linking mediatization with evaluation frameworks of cultural events. Empirically, our findings indicate that the symbolic power of media coverage precedes and influences evaluative perceptions, even before the implementation phase. This relationship necessitates longitudinal research that tracks the evolution of these early narratives throughout the ECoC cycle and their impact on post-event legacies, as suggested by Veselinovič (2024).

This study is not without limitations. The media dataset focused primarily on national and regional Czech media, excluding European and international media, which may convey alternative narratives. Similarly, the focus groups involved a limited number of participants and represented specific professional segments. Future research could therefore expand the sample, include long-term monitoring of media framing throughout the implementation period, and conduct comparative analyses with other ECoC 2028 cities such as Bourges and Skopje.

In conclusion, the ECoC 2028 České Budějovice can be viewed not only as a cultural or economic initiative but also as a discursive arena where media, institutions, and experts negotiate the meanings of culture, identity, and development. The project's long-term value will depend on whether this communication becomes a genuine platform for inclusive dialogue or remains a celebratory performance aimed at visibility. Addressing this challenge requires a continuous effort to balance mediatization with participation, and promotion with reflection, a balance that lies at the core of sustainable cultural policy in Europe today.

References

- Basaraba, N. (2023). Cross-comparing the Concept of “United in Diversity” as Expressed by European Capitals of Culture. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 52(4), 357–378. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2022.2155865>
- Biedermann, A. M., Muñoz López, N., Santolaya Sáenz, J. L., Asión-Suñer, L., & Galán Pérez, F. J. (2024). Methodological Framework for Integrating Cultural Impact in Sustainability Assessments of Cultural Events. *Sustainability*, 16(16), 6893. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16166893>
- Bílková, L., Černý, L., Hořejší, A., Hrivnák, T., Peřinka, P., Rachačová, K., & Vlašánek, M. (n.d.). *Bid book – BUDWEIS FOR EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE 2028*. <https://www.budejovice2028.eu/files/bidbook-web.pdf>
- Birkner, T. (2024). The matrix of mediatization. *Journalistik*, 7(2), 130–151. <https://doi.org/10.1453/2569-152X-22024-14238-en>
- Bourges 2028. (2023). *Territories of the Future: Bourges 2028 European Capital of Culture – Bidbook*. <https://bourges2028.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/bidbook-numerique-en.pdf>
- Bowdin, G., O'Toole, W., Allen, J., Harris, R., & McDonnell, I. (2006). *Events Management* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780080457154>
- Delio, C., & Angela, P. (2020). The Impact of European Capital of Culture on Tourism and Local Involvement: Matera 2019 Case Study. In V. Katsoni & T. Spyriadis (Ed.), *Cultural and Tourism Innovation in the Digital Era* (s. 79–88). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36342-0_6
- Dogramadjieva, E., & Tylko, K. (2023). European Capital of Culture Plovdiv 2019: Effects through the lens of the local community. *Journal of the Geographical Institute Jovan Cvijic, SASA*, 73(1), 49–63. <https://doi.org/10.2298/IJGI2301049D>
- Edwards, L. (with Bourne, C., Cabañes, J. V. A., & Castro, G.). (2024). *The Sage Handbook of Promotional Culture and Society* (1st ed). SAGE Publications, Limited.
- European Commission. (2025, January 7). *European Capitals of Culture*. Culture and Creativity. <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/european-capitals-of-culture>
- Fan, T., & Lin, Z. (2022). Toward Tourists–Media–Cities Tourism: Xi'an as a Wanghong City. *Sustainability*, 14(19). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su141911806>
- Garcia, B. (2017). ‘If everyone says so ...’ Press narratives and image change in major event host cities. *Urban Studies*, 54(14), 3178–3198. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098016674890>
- Gerland, C. (2023). *EU Capitals of Culture: A place-based policy to improve economic development*. Bertelsmann Stiftung. <https://bst-europe.eu/investment-budget/eu-capitals-of-culture-a-place-based-policy-to-improve-economic-development/>
- Grosso, F. O., Rodriguez-Molina, M. Á., & Castañeda-Garcia, J. A. (2024). The impact of destination-brand social media content on consumer online brand-related activities (COBRAs). *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 51, 101239. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2024.101239>
- Hjarvard, S. (2008). The Mediatization of Society A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change. *Nordicom Review*, 29.
- Horváth, M. (2011). Komunikačný model aplikovateľný v žurnalistike a jeho komponentová analýza. In *ŽURNALISTIKA, MÉDIÁ, SPOLOČNOSŤ # 1* (pp. 9-21). STIMUL.

- Lemmetyinen, A., Nieminen, L., Aalto, J., & Pohjola, T. (2025). Enlivening a place brand inclusively: Evidence from ten European cities. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 21(1), 67–80. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-024-00362-5>
- Lesensky.cz. (n.d.). *Marketingový slovník*. <https://www.lesensky.cz/sk/marketingovy-slovník>
- Lian, J. & Liang, D. (2024). Construction of Evaluation Indicator System of Festival Tourism Activity Effect Based on FAHP Method. *Applied Mathematics and Nonlinear Sciences*, 9(1), 2024. <https://doi.org/10.2478/amns-2024-1481>
- Liu, Y.-D. (2016). Cultural Event and Urban Regeneration: Lessons from Liverpool as the 2008 European Capital of Culture. *European Review*, 24(1), 159–176. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798715000265>
- Manovich, L. (2002). *The Language of New Media*. The MIT Press.
- Mavrin, I. (2024). European Capital of Culture and Sustainable Tourism: Challenges, Trends and Perspectives. *Tourism*, 72(1), 20–34. <https://doi.org/10.37741/t.72.1.2>
- MediaGuru. (2025, April 6). *Media projekt se od roku 2027 změní, zapojí digitální data*. <https://www.mediaguru.cz/clanky/2025/02/media-projekt-se-od-roku-2027-zmeni-zapoji-digitalni-data/>
- Nelaeva, A., & Iermolenko, O. (2024). Do we hear the voices of local citizens when we arrange cultural megaprojects for them? A case of the European capitals of culture. *Cities*, 152, 105227. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2024.105227>
- Nermod, O., Lee, N. and O'Brien, D (2021) *The European Capital of Culture: A review of the academic evidence*. London: Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, London School of Economics and University of Edinburgh. Available from: <https://www.pec.ac.uk/discussion-papers/the-european-capital-of-culture-a-review-of-the-academic-evidence>
- Nunan, D., Birks, D. F., & Malhotra, N. K. (2020). *Marketing Research: Applied insight* (Sixth Edition). Pearson.
- O'Boyle, N., & Gallagher, A. (2023). Sports Organizations and Their Defensive Mediatization Strategies: The Sports Journalist's Perspective. *Journalism and Media*, 4(2), 665–678. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia4020042>
- Perrin, T., & Turşie, C. (2020). *Assessing the social and cultural impacts of the European Capital of Culture programme in cross-border regions. A research agenda*.
- Pirri Valentini, A. (2023). A Roadmap for Measuring the Local Impact of Culture from a Legislative Perspective—Normative, Regulatory, and Technical Mechanisms. *Land*, 12(8), 1492. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land12081492>
- Politehnica University Timisoara, & Ciurel, D. (2024). Visual rhetoric in city branding: The case of Timisoara ECoC 2023. *Professional Communication and Translation Studies*, 17, 13–22. <https://doi.org/10.59168/UTVA4117>
- Sethi, D. (2022). *Impactful Communication: Communicate to Conquer*. SAGE Publications Pvt. Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9789354792922>
- Skopje 2028. (2023). *European Capital of Culture 2028: Bid Book*. https://skopje2028.mk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Bid_book_Skopje2028_ECoC2028.pdf
- Udden Babar, Z., Yupei, Z., Mingxing, L., & Khan, A. (2025). Indigenous Destination Image and Tourists Post Behavior: A Comprehensive Approach to Generational Media Consumption

in Pakistan. *Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism*, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1528008X.2025.2462990>

Veselinovič, J. (2024). European Capital of Culture title as a driving force of urban transformation: The case of Novi Sad. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2024.2437872>

West, T. (2022). Liverpool's European Capital of Culture legacy narrative: A selective heritage? *European Planning Studies*, 30(3), 534–553. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2021.1959725>

World Tourism Organization (UNTO) (2024), *Quantifying tourism in city destinations – Towards a better understanding of urban tourism*, UN Tourism, Madrid, <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284425341>.

Appendix 1 – Frequency of Keywords

Keyword	Frequency
Culture	144
Cultural	120
City	99
Title	87
Project	79
Development	69
Program	63
Cooperation	60
Event	60
Innovation	60
Community	59
Investment	59
Youth	59
Involvement	56
European	55
Future	54
Value	50
Citizens	49
Strategy	49
Identity	47
Participation	46
Tourism	46
Art	45
Engagement	45
Europe	45
Criticism	44
Media	44
Sustainability	44

Partnership	43
Institutions	42
Grants	40
Bureaucracy	39
Periphery	39
Visibility	38

Source: Elaborated by authors

Appendix 2 – Focus Groups

Element- items	FG - 1	FG – 1 %	FG - 2	FG– 2 %	Difference (FG-2 – FG1) %
Increase in the number of tourists and visitors during 2028	13	86,6		100	13,4
A high number of tourists and visitors in the following years as well	10	66,6		20	-46,6
Economic benefits for the city	15	100		90	-10
Economic benefits for local businesses	12	80		90	10
Investments in infrastructure that will also be used by local residents in the years to come	7	46,6		50	-3,4
Starting the systematic development of culture	5	33,3		70	36,7
POSITIVE Average		68,9		70	1,1
One-time boom followed by stagnation		0	3	30	30
NEUTRAL Average	1	0		30	30
An increased number of people and uncleanliness in the city	3	20	0	0	-20
Price increase in restaurants	6	40	10	100	60
Increase in real estate prices	2	13,3	0	0	-13.3
Disruption of nighttime quiet hours due to increased noise levels	3	20	4	40	20
Increase in crime	0	0	0	0	0
NEGATIVE Average		23,3		28	4,7

Source: Elaborated by authors

Appendix 3 – Weighted mean of the Focus Groups

Weighted Mean	FG 1 students	12,5	6	2	3,8	3,5
	FG 2 experts	9,3	4,7	4	4	10

Source: Elaborated by authors