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Cross-comparing the Concept of “United in Diversity” as Expressed by European Capitals of Culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the conceptualization and expression of cultural diversity and unity within the European Capitals of Culture (ECOC) initiative using a case study approach. Previous case studies have examined the impacts of the programmes from a single-city perspective and used quantitative and economic-focused approaches to evaluate impact. However, the ECOC initiative was intended to showcase the diverse cultures in Europe rather than focus on economic outcomes. A cultural discourse analysis was applied to eight winning cities between 2015 and 2019 (preceding the onset of COVID-19) to answer the question: are ECOC focusing on expressing their national or regional diversity and identities or are they communicating a more generalized European perspective? The results showed that in the past five-year ECOCs have chosen to engage in more diverse and localized forms of cultural expression in their events, but not in their visual communications. Based on the analysis, a series of recommendations for future programme development are made (also published as a separate policy brief) to enhance ECOC's ability to balance the communication of their diversity with their connection to Europe.

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European capitals of culture; cultural expression; discourse analysis; cultural programmes; citizen participation; cultural tourism; cultural heritage

Introduction

In the past 10 years, the European Capitals of Culture (ECOC) initiative has emphasized a commodification of European culture and the title is being treated as an economic opportunity for future investment into the creative industries with a technological focus. However, the original intent behind the European City of Culture initiative, launched in 1985 by the Council of Ministers, was to bring the citizens of European Union (formerly the European Community) closer together. The ECOC is often pointed to in the EU's conceptualization of and recent scholarly debates on a “European identity.” The present-day ECOC initiative aims 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, and foster the contribution of culture to the development of cities” (ECOC, 2021). The aim of balancing the local diversity and the unitedness of the so-called “European dimension” within the European Commission's eligibility and evaluation criteria influence the ECOC's programme design, visual communications, and the citizens' and visitors' experiences.

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This paper examined the ECOC initiative through eight case studies to determine which aspects (i.e. themes) of cultural diversity are communicated, if and how the European dimension of culture is presented, and the formats of creative expression. Considering these aims, this paper also traces the shift in the ECOC's focus from showcasing diversity towards economic development (e.g. gentrification, increasing tourism, building new arts and cultural infrastructure). Previous formal evaluations of the ECOC case studies have focused on how well each city fulfilled the EC's selection criteria and scholars have mostly examined the impacts of the programmes from a single-city perspective and using quantitative and economic-focused approaches. Rather than examining tourism metrics or economic prosperity of individual ECOC-winning cities, this paper contributes a communications-focused approach to the cultural discourse on how European identity is expressed in eight title-holding cities (proceeding the onset of COVID-19). The qualitative results show which aspects of national and/or regional culture ECOCs choose to express about their diversity and individual identities compared to how (e.g. which media and themes) they draw upon to communicate a wider European perspective to fulfil the EC's vague "European dimension" requirement? The results also informed a series of recommendations for policymakers, published in a Policy Brief (Basaraba, 2022), about modifying the selection criteria and provided marketing and communications protocols set by the European Commission for future ECOCs.

Overview of the ECOC Initiative

Originally instigated by Melina Mercouri, she is quoted to have said in 1983: "the determining factor of a European identity lies precisely in respecting these diversities with the aim of creating a dialogue between the cultures of Europe" (Poiein Kai Prattein, n.d.). At the time, Mercouri pushed for a recognition of diversity to create a dialogue between cultures to fill a gap in European affairs which was prioritizing a focus on the economy. As summarized in Figure 1, the ECOC initiative's implementation has followed a series of "trends" starting with a focus on "high culture" in the designation of the cities holding the title in the 1980s, which were already renowned for their culture (e.g. Athens, Florence, Paris). Then in the 1990s, the bidding process moved to the economic-based focus of "cultural regeneration" (i.e. gentrification), which was closely followed by 2005's focus on investing in urban infrastructures (Lähdesmäki, 2014, p. 489). The 2020–2032 ECOC bidding guide emphasizes considering local city objectives while keeping in

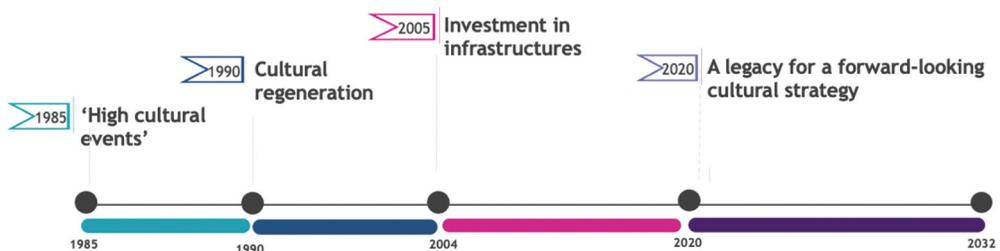


Figure 1. The foci of cultural identity in ECOC programme bids over the years.

line with European “standard criteria” and “EU level objectives” so a “legacy” can be reported after the title year (ECOC 2022 to 2033, p. 4).

The “European dimension” was one of the most quoted phrases by the bid evaluation panel members, in an analysis of 11 pre-selection reports for the ECOC between 2013 and 2019, but it was not clear what was evaluated as a successful implementation of these criteria (Nechita, 2015, p. 110). Since 2007, these four objectives have been evaluated by the European Commission (EC) according to 14 “core result indicators” of which 11 are quantitative measures and three are qualitative (Fox & Rampton, 2019: 27–30). The focus on quantitative measures influenced the shift towards economic-focused outcomes and resulted in a lack of transparency on the qualitative requirements to fulfil the “European dimension” the European Commission seeks in ECOC bids. Nechita’s study (2015) concluded that the involvement of universities leads to positive reviews of by the ECOC evaluation committee, involving people outside the city centre helps avoid gentrification and the spatial distribution of culture, and that there must be a balance of “local cultural heritage and European identities, art sectors and social inclusion” (p. 112–114). Scholarly literature and EC’s reports focus on top-down cultural and development planning, governance issues, creative industries, and place branding (Ooi et al., 2014, p. 425). Most studies on ECOC have focused on the economic effects driven by the costs and potential benefits of the bidding process, but few studies look at the less tangible cultural and social impacts (Richards & Marques, 2016: 182). There are few studies on how culture is communicated in the ECOC’s thematic choices, event types, and promotional materials or overall how citizen involvement may influence the ECOC title holder’s expression of more localized cultural diversity. Ultimately, the “poetics and politics are intertwined” when it comes to the ECOC project (Ooi et al., 2014, p. 421) and both aspects need to be considered together. While the European Union’s (EU) rhetoric appeals to a “common cultural heritage” and a “European identity,” these concepts are not explicated, and the EU’s official slogan “Unified in Diversity” is vague and ambiguous (Lähdesmäki, 2014, p. 15). The origins of “European identity” is attributed to the Declaration on European Identity signed in Copenhagen in 1973, but in the 1980s the discourse shifted from European identity towards a diversity of individual European identities (Lähdesmäki, 2014, p. 15). Sassatelli (2008) argues that the “EU keeps concepts such as identity and culture implicit” and that the possible political intent behind the EU’s slogan, and the ECOC initiative is “the EU’s most direct attempt at creating a European cultural space” (p. 226). How this is communicated in the visual and marketing discourse within the ECOC programmes has been examined by only a few scholars to date.

The “European dimension” was examined in promotional materials of 30 ECOC title holders from 2005 to 2011 (Aiello & Thurlow, 2006). Aiello and Thurlow (2006) found that there are no specific visual guidelines on what imagery concept needs to be produced, but the ECOC requires the production of a logo for a city to “brand itself” while still being easily recognized under the ECOC candidature (p. 151). Common visual motifs used in the ECOC promotional materials were cityscapes with stock images of happy people and children who could be from anywhere in the world; maps of the city’s location; visual representations of high culture focused on “snippets of buildings” in classical European architecture that are not recognizably specific to a certain local context (Aiello & Thurlow, 2006, pp. 154–158). Aiello and Thurlow (2006) concluded that the

concept of “Europeanness is stylised and performatively reinscribed for a cross-cultural audience through the repetition of generic cultural details or identity markers” (p. 160). This also confirms Lähdesmäki’s (2014) assertion that some common ground for “European identity” has been identified through urbanity, historical environments, and architectural styles (p. 64). Therefore, the “European dimension” in ECOC visual discourse often appears symbolically and through infrastructure that lacks expressions of cultural diversity.

Scholars have argued that the “European dimension” cannot be perceived in the contents of the ECOC programmes or their cultural events (Lähdesmäki, 2014, p. 20). Although ECOC designation aims to decrease the division between the “East” and West’ in Europe, the promotional texts often still communicate that the “East” aims to become like their Western counterparts (e.g. Pécs2010; Turku2011; Tallinn2011); while the “West” has tried to broaden the notion of European cultural identity by narrating socialist history and heritage (Lähdesmäki, 2014, p. 70). The ECOC process does not allow for diversity because it “homogenizes the cultural offering in Europe due to the structure of the initiative which expects the cities to follow the top-down imposed criteria, reflect the current regeneration and development values and trends, and compete against other cities for the designation” (Lähdesmäki, 2014, p. 71). For example, Pécs2010 perceived a European “spatial identity” through top-down EU symbols, such as the EU flag, plaques rather than through the events, and many survey respondents noted that Europeanness was homogenizing and should not supersede Hungarian identity (Lähdesmäki, 2014, pp. 198–200).

The concept of a collective European identity, under the “United in Diversity” tagline, poses a challenge to the ECOC programme design because the cultural values and history are more deeply rooted than the modern-day conceptualization of “Europeanness” (as inspired by EU integration). Looking historically, there was an artistic aspiration for “romantic nationalism” in Europe (1800–1850), which focused more on high and “regionalised culture,” especially where the language and culture were previously part of a different country prior to the world wars (Leerssen, 2013). I argue that if culture is conceptualized regionally rather than by modern-day country borders, there may be a stronger historical undercurrent that could lead to a more collective or shared cultural heritage that translates into a broader sense of Europeanness. For example, Timisoara (Romania) and Novi Sad (Serbia) decided to cooperate transnationally to rejuvenate the historically Byzantium Banat regional identity, which also includes parts of modern-day Hungary, for their European Capitals of Culture 2021 (Rădoi, 2020). Leerssen (2006) explains that European cultural nationalism is based on cross-border sharing of ideas, intellectual initiatives, and network, and it needs to be studied on a comparative supra-national level rather than individually by country (p. 559). This supports the rationale for this paper for cross-comparing ECOC title holders rather than examining a single case study. Fundamentally, culture and its cultivation are based on language, discourse through literature and learning, material culture, and immaterial cultural practices (Leerssen, 2006, p. 569). These aspects of culture are bottom-up, generated by the literate professional and middle classes, and often perpetuated by top-down funded activities overseen by authorities or state-controlled institutions (Leerssen, 2006, p. 572), such as the EC in the case of the ECOC initiative. Socio-political analyses of nationalism have focused on modernization processes rather than philology, folklore, and traditionalism,

which has resulted in single-country case studies that marginalize the transnational dynamics of ideas that came from other lands and were expressed in different languages (Leerssen, 2006, p. 574). Therefore, the following study examines if the most-recently completed ECOCs have moved towards national and regional perspectives of their diverse cultures (e.g. how involved are citizens in the process) and how wider European perspectives appear in the programming and strategy for a cultural “legacy” (as of 2020 see, Figure 1).

Methodology: Discourse Analysis

The goal of this study was to conduct supranational cross-comparative mode of inquiry (Carbaugh, 2007) to describe and interpret how is culture is expressed in the context of the identities at three different levels, namely as individual ECOC cities, wider nations/regions, and at a European level corresponding to the ECOC’s requirement to include a “European dimension”? This study applied a mixed methods approach to investigate the research questions of: (1) what was communicated to be unique about each ECOC city, (2) which creative formats they used to communicate/brand the city’s culture, (3) how was the “European dimension” communicated, and (4) how involved were citizens in programme development (i.e. a bottom-up approach to cultural identity formation)?

The mixed methods approach was used to provide three layers of analysis, namely a macro-level cultural discourse analysis, a meso-level critical discourse analysis, and micro-level digital ethnographic study. The first layer draws upon cultural discourse analysis, because it is used to examine culturally distinctive communication practices as they occur in everyday context and cross-cultural analyses of the meanings (Carbaugh, 2007). One of the primary outcomes of this study was to develop a series of recommendations to enable future ECOC programme developers and policymakers to more systemically express different aspects of European cultures and identities (see Conclusion for details). This paper and its companion Policy Brief (Basaraba, 2022) serve as resources for improving our understanding of the dynamics between differently positioned communities of actors, including the authors and subjects of policy initiatives (Rudnick et al., 2018, pp. 254–255). This aligns with the recent scholars who have used cultural discourse analysis to make applied recommendations (Molina-Markham et al., 2015; Rudnick et al., 2018; Witteborn & Sprain, 2020). Cultural discourse analysis is often used to analyse people’s communications linked to issues of identity under questions, such as “how is this communication practice put together? What are its main cultural ingredients, elements or features?” (Carbaugh, 2007, p. 169). However, this study does not focus on “self-identity” of individual people, but instead examines how the concept of city, national and European identities are communicated or absent from published ECOC materials. This brings in the second meso-layer of applying a critical discourse analysis methodology to enable a cross-comparison of the wider cultural communications across different media at a collective level. Thus, instead of using community-based ethnography with members of the public (as is common in cultural discourse analysis), a digital ethnographic approach was used to examine the representation of culture of individual cities through the various modalities of communication that are publicly available online. Publicly available content was used because ECOC programmes are

aimed at city residents, regional/national visitors, and international tourists and this is the information they are presented with.

Digital ethnography is a method of “representing real-life cultures through combining characteristic features of digital media with the elements of story” (Underberg & Zorn, 2013, p. 10). In this study, the elements of culture expressed in the various digital media for the ECOC programmes help form a “story” of each city’s culture and identity within the wider context of Europe. This study examined all years of the ECOC initiative since its inception at a high level but focused a micro-level content analysis on the selected eight case studies for which a codebook was developed – as detailed in the section on “The coding process” (Krippendorff, 2018; Pauwels, 2012). Digital ethnography involves processing a collection of texts and graphics available on digital media and engaging in making sense of the meanings portrayed therein (Kaur & Gill & Dutta, 2017, p. 2). The digital data collected was used to examine how the eight selected ECOCs choose to communicate either their unique culture or more European-focused aspects of culture through their curated programme of activities and in their marketing materials (as per the research questions stated above). Digital ethnography also allows for the crossing of geographic boundaries and divisions of space and societal structures of power (Kaur & Gill & Dutta, 2017, p. 2). In summary, this study applied a micro-level digital data analysis to see how the ECOC communicate/express their culture on a city level, a meso-level analysis was done to allow for the cross-comparison of the eight ECOC cities form a more community-focused “European dimension” of cultural expression, and the macro-level approach to the analysis looked at the implications of these findings at a European policy level, which resulted in a series of the recommendations for the continued development of communicative clarity in the ECOC initiative going forward (Basaraba, 2022).

Case study selection

The selection of case studies was narrowed down by some societal factors that impacted the ability to conduct this analysis. Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the ECOC 2020 events and many title-holding cities from 2020 onwards had not fully planned their annual programmes at the time this study was conducted. Secondly, the World Wide Web became available to the public in 1997, which allowed for the collection of digital records. Thirdly, since a systematic evaluation process was established in 2006, it increased the ease of cross comparing the ECOC winners post 2006. Finally, Palmer/Rae Associates’ (2004) report showed that the ECOC programme is a powerful tool for city change, but that the cultural dimension had been “overshadowed by political ambitions and other non-cultural interests” which raised questions about the sustainability of impact (p. 25). This report led to an increased EC’s focus on the “legacy” of the ECOC after the city’s respective designated year. Subsequently, this research paper examines the ECOC post 2004, and provides further insights into the programmes that were completed between 2014 and 2019 from a qualitatively culture focused approach rather than an economic-based impact assessment. Therefore, the case study selection process started with finding and collecting the ECOC official websites from 2019 backwards in time and two cities were selected from each region of Europe, namely, Northern, Southern, Eastern/Central, and Western, up until 2014. In total nine cities held the

Table 1. Selected ECOC case studies and associated websites.

City	Year	Country	Region of Europe	ECOC or Tourism Website
Matera	2019	Italy	Southern	matera-basilicata2019.it/en
Plovdiv	2019	Bulgaria	Eastern/ Central	plovdiv2019.eu/en
Valletta	2018	Malta	Southern	valletta2018.org
Leeuwarden	2018	The Netherlands	Western	avisitleeuwarden.com/en/explore/european-capital-of-culture-2018
Aarhus	2017	Denmark	Northern	aarhus2017.dk/en
Wrocław	2016	Poland	Eastern/ Central	wroclaw2016.strefakultury.pl
Mons	2015	Belgium	Western	awallonia.be/en/news/mons-2015-european-capital-of-culture (archived: http://www.mons2015.eu)
Umeå	2014	Sweden	Northern	bumeå2014.se/en

aNote: These are not official ECOC websites, but are single webpages on national and tourism websites.

bNote: Pages from the umeå2014.se/en were retrieved using the Wayback Machine.

ECOC title between 2014 and 2019, but since three of the nine cities were from Southern Europe, the two most-recent cities were chosen to maintain a sample of two cities from each European region (see, [Table 1](#)).

Data sources

Three data sources were consulted to gather information on how each of the eight ECOC cities communicated their local culture versus Europeanness. The websites were examined first because they often function as a primary orienting space for locals and visitors to the cities, so it was deemed a crucial form of media and a communication/marketing tool for this cultural-focused analysis. The ECOC websites also act as part of the cultural “legacy” and digital historical record of the ECOC title years. The websites were also used as a primary communication medium to determine aesthetically how the culture is portrayed about each city (to answer sub-question 2). The programme PDF documents were used to gain an overview of which types or categories of culture were focused on (to answer sub-questions 1, 3 and 4). Finally, the EC’s ex-post evaluation reports were used to examine which aspects of the programme the EC prioritizes including the more recent focus on the “legacy” aspect in the title-holding city after the year’s events have been completed.

The coding process

Each city’s visual communications were analysed through its website by looking at its logo, semiotic emphasis in the colours, subject-matter of the imagery, and the overall look-and-feel according to a “first impression” analysis based on Pauwel’s (2012) methodology for analysing website content. Next, the textual marketing rhetoric was examined in terms of the ECOC theme, tagline/motto, and programme design of each ECOC was reviewed. The event programmes for each ECOC were analysed in English based on the downloaded PDF documents for *Matera2019*, *Plovdiv2019*, *Valletta2018*, and *Aarhus2017*; the website for *Aarhus2017* – the only city that had the full programme

archived as individual webpages; and the PDF programmes on the ISSUU website for Umeå2014, Mons2015, Wrocław2016, and Leeuwarden2018.

The events for each of the eight cities' programmes were coded into categories based on two sources. The 13 categories used by Palmer/Rae Associates (2004) provided a general starting point, but each city presented their programmes differently so more categories were added to cover all "events," "activities," and "projects." The total number of categories for each city was determined based on a pre-analysis of the terminologies used by the eight cities within their programmes either in the event title or description (when the title was not sufficient to determine the event type). A set of descriptive categories were established and re-used across cities for consistent cross-comparison of event types. For example, an "open-air festival" was coded as an event that took place outside and included multiple different activities; an "art exhibition" could be indoors or outdoors (e.g. street art installations) and focused specifically on artworks; and a "museum exhibition" was coded as an indoor event and could include other material culture that was not specifically art (i.e. paintings, sculpture or photographs), such as jewellery, unearthed human-made artefacts or animal remains. The total categories (#) for each city were: Wrocław2016 (9); Mons2015 (18); Leeuwarden2018 (20); Matera2019 (23); Aarhus2017 (25); Valletta2018 (27); Umea2014 (32); Plovdiv2019 (38).¹

Finally, the EC Ex-post Evaluation reports were reviewed to see if what was communicated during the ECOC title year met the overall objectives of the ECOC initiative, according to the EC, and to examine how success was measured and reported. Reviewing the evaluation reports lastly allowed the cultural data gathered to serve as the primary source for the research findings, which were then further contextualized within the overall objectives and wider discourse of comparing the European versus more diverse cultural identities related to the ECOC initiative.

Findings and Discussion

How do ECOCs communicate culture through event types?

The published PDF programmes were used to tally the total number and types of events held. Some ECOCs did not include all events and activities in the PDF programmes; thus, a lower number of events were coded by type compared to the number of total events reportedly held (see, [Figure 2](#)). While this limited the potential scope of this analysis, the sampled events coded still provide an indication of how the culture was expressed by each city. It is also a notable finding because if ECOC are analysed quantitatively rather than qualitatively (as is common in the EC post-evaluation reports), the ability to cross-compare the total number of events hosted throughout the designated year of culture contributes to the EC's assessment of impact, as a primary funding body, but also for the public to understand the scope of the events and where public or private funds are being allocated. The public communications of the ECOC title holders (the focus of this analysis) is markedly different than the full scope of the implemented programmes could impact public opinion if they, or local governments, are not pleased with the political contexts of these events.

A cross-comparison of the categories of culture showed that music is the most-frequent cultural event in the ECOC programmes for four of the eight case studies and

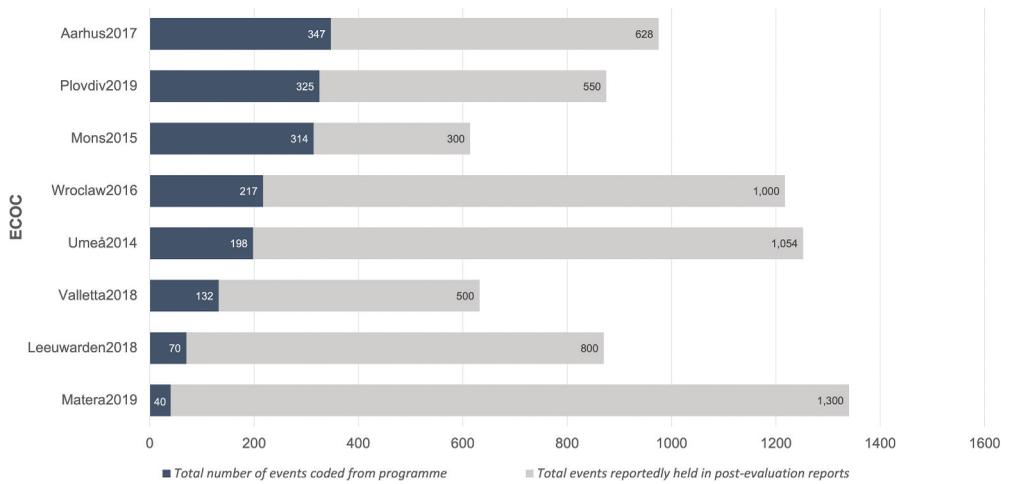


Figure 2. Number of events coded (as sourced from publicly available information) versus number of events reportedly held.

the second most common artform is art exhibitions (see, [Table 2](#)). This cross-comparison highlighted a regional difference in these case studies because the two cities located in Western Europe focused on different aspects of culture compared to ECOCs located in other regions. Leeuwarden2018 had the most art exhibitions followed by architecture/ infrastructure design events, while Mons 2015 focused on multi-expression festivals² and museum exhibitions (see [Table 2](#)).³ In these case studies, there was a de-emphasis on theatre events (only 3%) compared to 64% in events from 1995 to 2003 (Palmer/Rae Associates, 2004). As noted in Plovdiv2019’s programme book and in many other communications from other ECOC, music is considered the “most accessible artform” (Plovdiv Foundation, 2019: 143). The sentiment behind this is that the listener does not need to understand the local language or related to the subject-matter of the song to partake in enjoying the artform, which could be extended to artworks as well. Recent ECOCs are focusing more on art than theatre, which is arguably an artform that gives more space and depth for expressing localized narratives in the city’s primary language, compared to music, which has a wider mass appeal. Jones (2020) argues that quantitative tallies of the categories of cultural events and the EC reports do not reflect what made the programming unique to the city, but instead focuses on the economic impact of the “mega-event” from an EU perspective and city development perspective. The

Table 2. Most common category of culture coded for ECOC 2015–2019 programmes.

ECOC	Most-popular (# of instances coded)	Second most popular (# of instances coded)
Wroclaw2016	Music (69)	Art (40)
Aarhus2017	Music (45)	Film (34)
Valletta2018	Music (33)	Theatre (14)
Umeå2014	Art (24)	Music (18)
Plovdiv2019	Art (47)	Music (25)
Leeuwarden2018	Art (14)	Infrastructure (11)
Matera2019	Open-air (5)	Art (3)
Mons2015	Festivals (72)	Museum events (42)

quantitative data in this sample of eight case studies showed that music and art were the most common forms of cultural expression, which were most often organized as a performance or exhibition and thus they left little room to facilitate a “dialogue between the cultures of Europe,” as Mercouri lobbied for.

The “European dimension”: Global cultural incorporation or outward expression?

As Nechita (2015) explained, the “European dimension” is not defined by the EC, thus how these eight cities chose to address this criterion was examined. In these case studies, the EU Japan Fest appeared in four out of eight ECOC programmes, which speaks more to “global culture” being integrated into European events rather than “European culture” outwardly being featured. On the other hand, Leeuwarden2018 chose to designate a “European dimension champion” who ensured this aspect was considered during meetings with project leads and the programme had several themes on common European issues including social inclusion, migration, minority languages, urban/rural pressures, and the environment, which resulted in 1,600 international collaborations – five times the targeted amount (Fox & Rampton, 2019, p. 84). This discrepancy in ECOC approaches demonstrates a lack of clarity on which events are considered to satisfy a “European dimension.”

Overall, there were few cultural events included in the ECOC programmes that focus on heritage, customs, and traditions of the local city or region compared to the number of music and open-air festivals which arguably have a broader appeal. The descriptions of the cities serving as background to the EC Ex-post Evaluation Reports provided an overview of the history, heritage, and UNESCO statuses of the selected cities, however this information (including photography) was largely absent from the ECOC websites and programme documents. The ECOC programmes that communicated the more unique aspects of the local culture through the events were Plovdiv2019, Aarhus2017, Matera2019, and Umeå2014. To highlight just a few examples, Plovdiv2019 included multiple food-related events (13 tallied), such as a focus on bread making. Aarhus2017 included many museum exhibitions (31 tallied) with a focus on local jewellery and festivals of light since it is a northern-located city which experiences a lack of sunlight during winter months (as featured in the website design). Matera2018 emphasized its historic location with many open-air festivals being sea based due to transportation and the crossing of people in the past and their ambassador programme notably travelled outside Italy to draw in visitors. For Umeå2014, the Sámi are EU’s “only indigenous people”, so the aim was to raise EU awareness about the Sámi people while reflecting upon the common challenges of local and migrant minorities in Europe (Monitoring and Advisory Panel for the ECOC 2014, 2013). These unique aspects of local culture make the ECOC events more memorable and communicate their local and regional culture to visitors and a celebration amongst locals.

The EC evaluations of the “European dimension” focus mostly on transnational cooperation, which often involves the movement of or collaboration with international artists within or outside Europe. Future ECOC bid books could look at incorporating the concept of “shared heritage” as a common thread of a “European dimension” within the programmes because through historical events, locations of shared local language(s) or dialects, and common cultural practices (such as food and religious celebrations) could

allow locals to find common ground and see connections between their culture and how it unites them to other Europeans through co-identified shared values, understandings, and rituals. This would encourage programme developers and EC evaluators to look beyond the format of top-down cultural expression (e.g. music performance, contemporary art) and dig deeper into the true essence (or in Mercouri's words "the soul") of the city, region, country, and connection to wider European shared culture and heritage using a bottom-up approach by connecting with residents' skills, customs, and interests. Visual communication in digital mediaA visual analysis of each ECOC website was documented to provide some qualitative insight into what each city chose to curate and feature. An unexpected finding was the similarity in the design choices for the ECOC logos and websites considering that they are all from different regions of Europe and are not given specific brand guidelines from the EC, other than they must create a logo. For example, the custom city logos were either red, EU blue, or multicolour and there is an inconsistency in terms of a common European Capital of Culture branding (see, Figure 3). Neither is there any consistency based on the title years, indicating that the EC does not require the subtext of "European Capital of Culture" to appear in the logo. Five⁴ ECOC cities included the European Capital of Culture logo with the EU flag in the footer area, except Wrocław2016 which placed it in the sidebar and selected subpages, and Aarhus2017 which integrated it into the city's custom logo.

Aarhus2017 and Plovdiv2019 provided design concept rationales (e.g. the arches reflect Plovdiv's architecture), but the six other cities did not include a public rationale behind their choices of red or multicolour. This is a missed communication opportunity as other mega-event hosting cities have used colours in branded materials that have meaning. For example, Coventry used blue in its branding as the UK City of Culture 2021 because it was historically a major industrial centre of blue-coloured textile production.

The similarity between the designs is more clearly demonstrated in the website homepages, which appear side-by-side in Figures 4–7. For example, Aarhus2017 and Plovdiv2019 have website designs that are nearly indistinguishable when viewed side-by-side (see, Figure 5). Across the eight ECOC in this sample, cultural diversity is not communicated through the design of the logos, websites, and selected photography. In addition to this, the taglines and themes for each ECOC are not prominently featured on the homepages, which further homogenizes the representation. In terms of comparison,



Figure 3. ECOC logos for eight selected case studies 2014–2019.

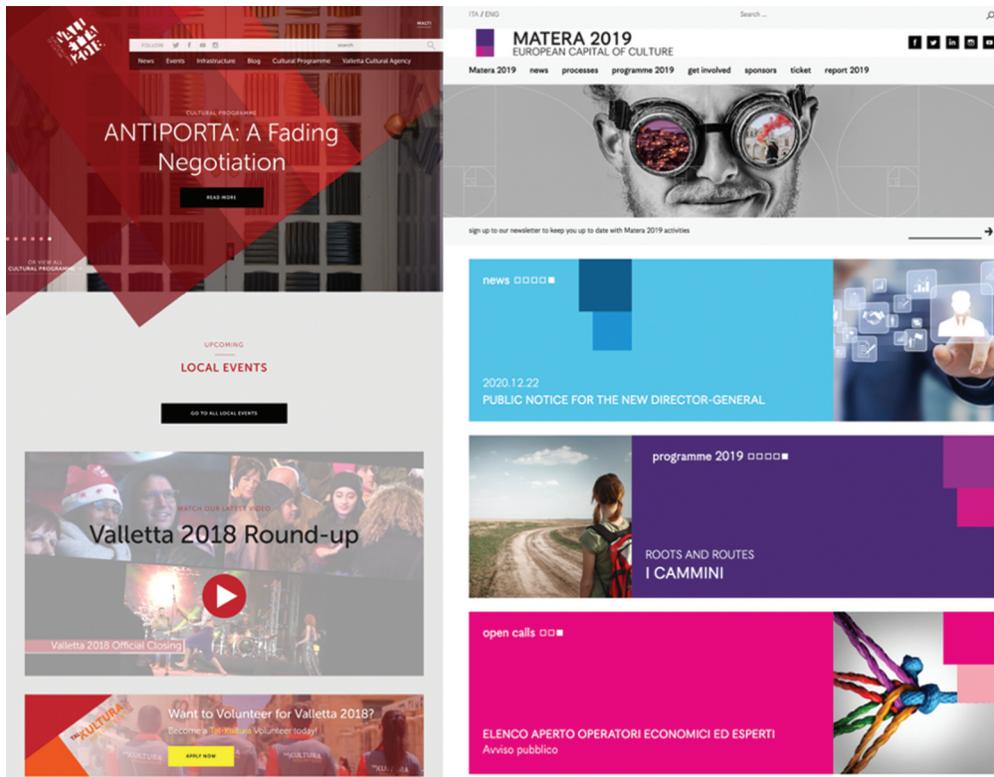


Figure 4. ECOC websites for Valletta2018 (left) and Matera2019 (right).

none of the ECOC website designs use a similar colour palette or branding to the city's local tourism websites, which reiterates their design similarities to other ECOCs. The overall “look and feel” of the ECOC websites is generically corporate and professional due to the use of sharp edges, shapes, and the organization of the information based around the events. For instance, Valletta2018 mentioned “island life” as a key concept in the programme, but this is not immediately communicated through the visual rhetoric of the sharp red website design rather than selecting something like waves from water or trees indigenous to the island. While Matera2019 emphasizes its historic location throughout the programme, it uses what appears to be stock photography on the homepage (e.g. ropes, male clicking an icon), which does not maximize the potential of using a photo of the city to communicate its historic culture/location. Therefore, the website design as part of the overall visual rhetoric does not add value in communicating the diverse cultures or uniqueness of each city's programme and is a missed opportunity of cultural representation/celebration.

The use of multiple languages or giving priority to a local language also speaks to how internationally versus locally oriented the ECOC communications are. All eight cities included an English version of the website in addition to the primary language spoken by city residents. Two cities also provided a third language for the ECOC website to capture the attention of their neighbouring country, namely Leeuwarden2018 and Aarhus2017 included a German-language version. Interestingly, the Mons2015 website was only

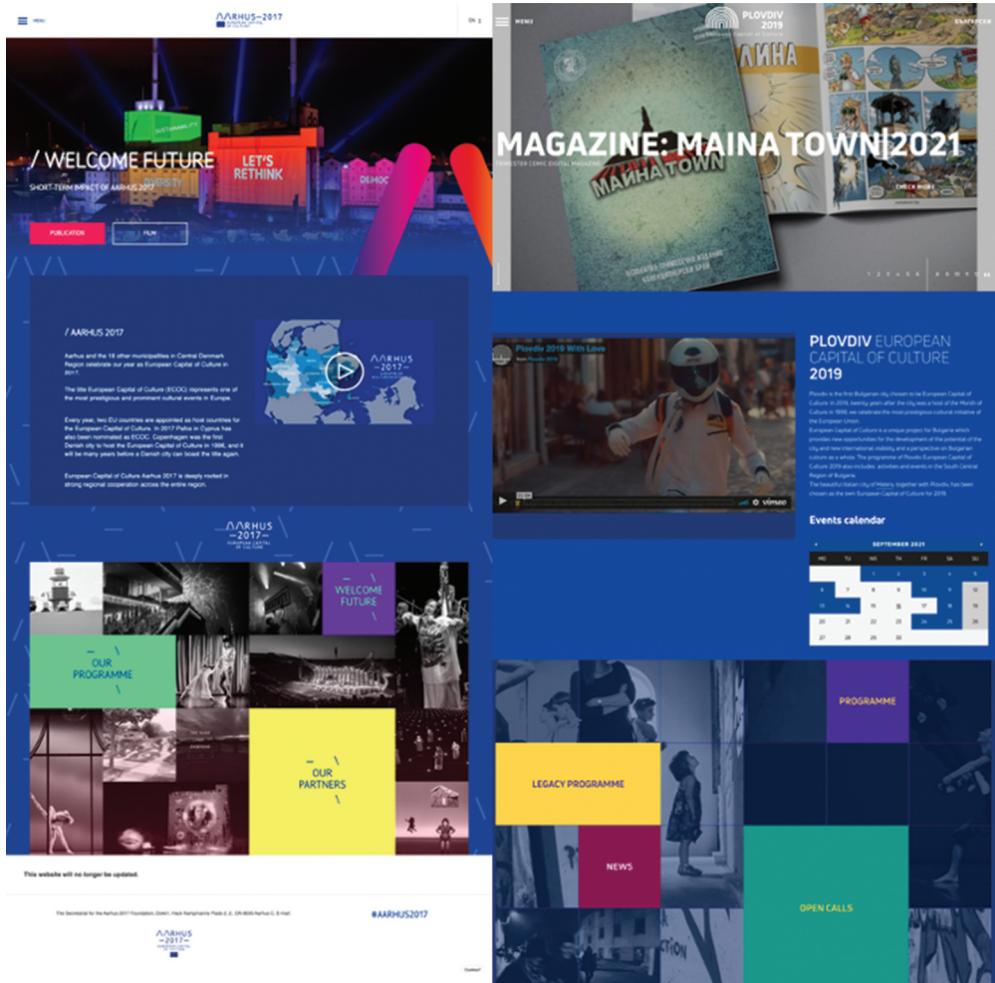


Figure 5. ECOC websites for Aarhus2017 (left) and Plovdiv2019 (right).

available in French and English, although Dutch and German are official languages of Belgium. Providing ECOC programming information on the website in multiple languages is one method for the cities to demonstrate a “European dimension” (rather than through homogeneous web designs) because they are targeting potential visitors from nearby language-speaking communities that could possibly connect with the cultural programme. ECOC Programme Themes: A Localized or International Focus? The overarching theme or tagline used by each ECOC was used to infer how each city chose to communicate their culture in title year to investigate whether it speaks to the city, wider region/country, or Europe. The ECOC thematic choices were compared individually, regionally between Western, Central/Eastern, Southern, and Northern Europe to note any possible commonalities, and cross-compared for the wider European dimension.

The Western European ECOC strived for key messages of collective/community growth. Mons2015’s tagline “Growing Together” was organized under the four seasons, which were not rationalized in the PDF programme. However, Van Gogh’s artwork was

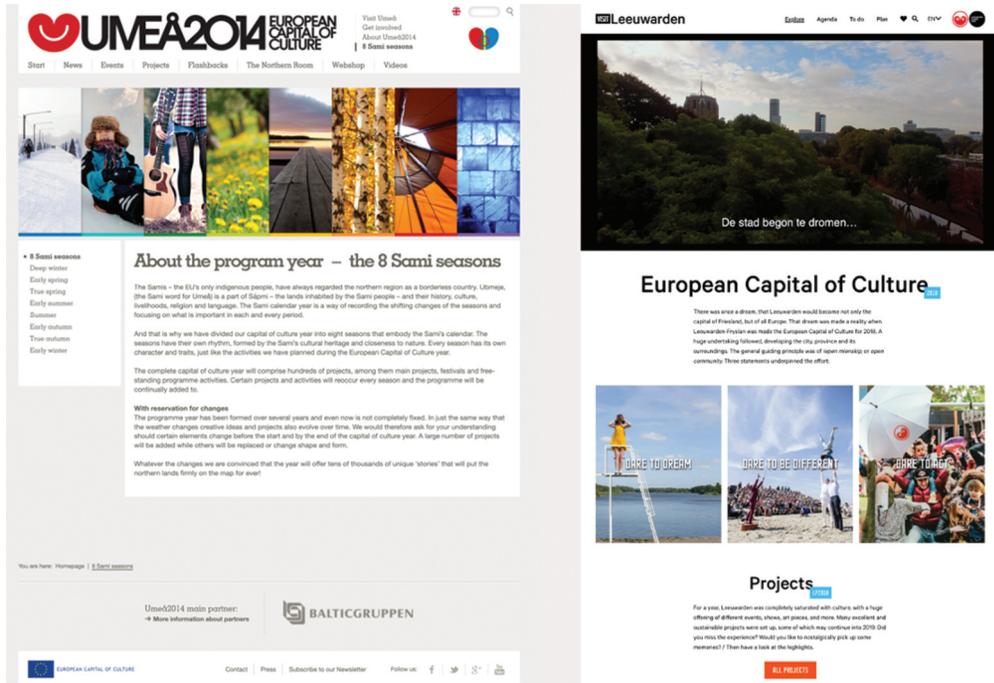


Figure 6. ECOC websites for Umeå2014 (left) and Leeuwarden2018 (right).

mentioned and featured in the main opening events for each of the four thematic seasons (Foundation Mons, 2015). The cultural or historical link to Van Gogh was not explicated and therefore visitors from The Netherlands (Van Gogh's birthplace) and the south of France (Van Gogh's residence and inspiration for his landscapes) may wonder why Van Gogh appears so prominently in Mons2015's cultural programme.⁵ It also noted that Mons' bid was under the motto "where culture meets technology," but this aspect was not fully realized in the final programme as reported by Fox and Rampton (2015). Therefore, the text-based rhetoric is not consistent or strongly communicative of Mons2015's cultural programme. For Leeuwarden2018 choose a locally meaningful motto, "iepen mienskip," meaning "open community" (Visit Leeuwarden, 2021). The highlighted events for Leeuwarden2018⁶ were story/myth-based and specific to the region (e.g. a museum exhibition on a Friesland woman and the street theatre performance of giant marionettes).

The ECOC located in Central/Eastern Europe in this sample both organized their programme under four themes and incorporated Japanese culture. Plovdiv2019's tagline was "For a together that matters" under the four themes of: "Fuse" for projects on the integration of ethnic and minority groups; "Transform" to revive forgotten/abandoned urban spaces; "Revive" culture and cultural heritage preservation; and "Relax" theme promoted sustainable living (Plovdiv Foundation, 2019). Thus, the tagline and themes make logical sense and communicate the fusion of people working towards activities that "matter" or have social impact. Plovdiv2019's partnership with EU Japan Fest⁷ led to 15 projects featuring Japanese culture, which communicates global culture within Plovdiv

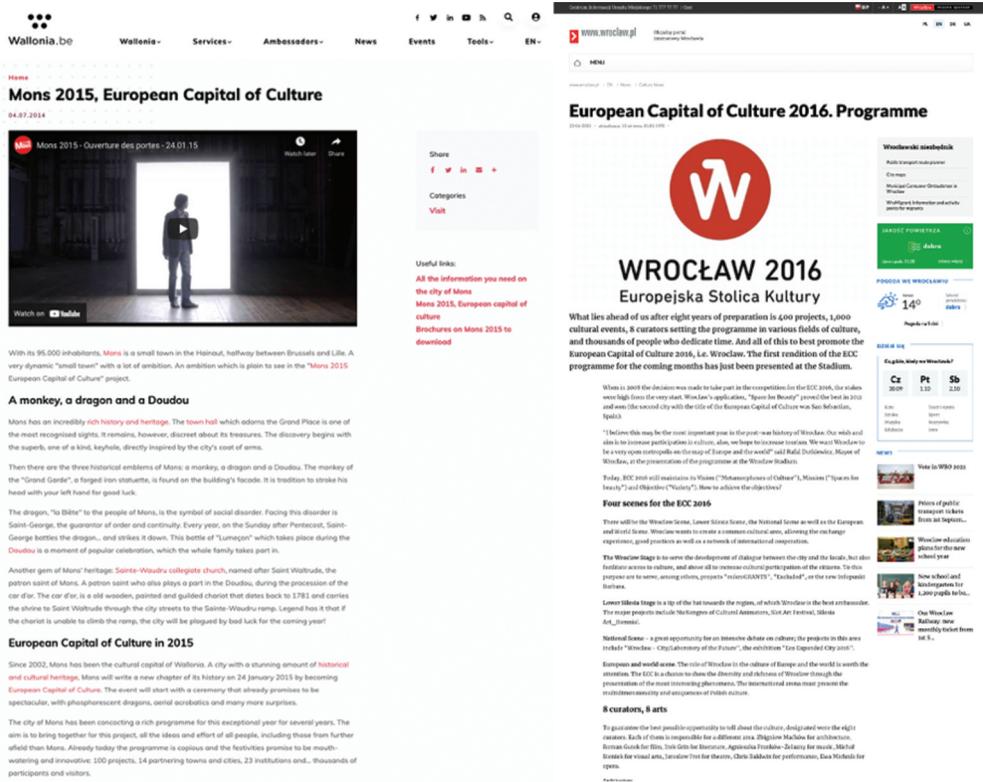


Figure 7. ECOC website for Mons2015* (left) and Wrocław2016 (right).

rather than a focus on European cultural diversity or dialogues. Wrocław2016 organized the programme into the Wrocław Stage, Lower Silesia Stage, Polish Stage, and European and World Stage. The latter two included events associated with EU Japan Fest, such as the Shogi Festival (i.e. “Japanese chess”). These thematic stage labels by region inherently communicate the origin of the artists/performers, unlike the less meaningful general verbs used in Plovdiv2019’s programme, albeit the verbs carried more socio-cultural impact in the nature of the events.

In Southern Europe, Valletta2018 and Matera2019 also included events from the EU Japan Fest but focused more inward on location-specific cultural traditions and themes. Valletta2018’s programme emphasized a celebration of local island life through the “Maltese festa,” described as an open-air festival that offers a “360-degree exploration of contemporary Maltese and Gozitan life” (Valletta 2018Foundation, 2017, p. 3). The three vague programme themes were declared as “Island Stories”, “Future Baroque”, and “Voyages” (Valletta 2018Foundation, 2017, pp. 16–17), but there were no descriptive examples specific to Valletta. Matera2019’s five programme themes communicated the city’s location, history and its aspirations of moving forward despite past challenges, such as the identity of Sassi UNESCO World Heritage site and collective therapy on facing the shame of the city; and mobility culture through annual cattle herding and different peoples moving through the region over the years. Thus, Matera2019 explicitly

communicated the “Unity in Diversity” concept as an important historical convergence point for the movement of people.

In Northern Europe, the themes of Aarhus2017 and Umeå2014 emphasized more generalized creative thinking towards the future of its citizens. Aarhus2017’s motto, “Let’s Rethink”, described as a mindset for “change, innovation and for thinking and acting smarter in the future” (European Commission, 2018a, p. 21). The programme was structured into four seasons, three core values, three “Rethinking” concepts, and four motivations for a total of 10 keywords (European Commission, 2018a: 23). This multi-layered strategy becomes too complex for general public comprehension and leads to an unfocused and more high-level approach to cultural expression. Umeå2014’s slogan was “Curiosity and Passion,” which had three implicit objectives and was based on eight seasons of the Sami calendar (Fox & Rampton, 2015, p. 15). Similar to Aarhus2017, the multiple themes, objectives and seasons, created a complex programme that lacked some more tangible cultural grounding compared to other ECOCs in this study. However, the 54 Sami-projects aimed to raise EU awareness about the Sami people and reflect on common challenges of local and migrant minorities in Europe (Monitoring and Advisory Panel for the ECOC 2014, 2013).

In terms of cross comparing the rhetoric of the city branding within the ECOC programme themes, the taglines for these case studies were aspirational and relatively broad concepts that could theoretically apply to any city, country, or initiative because they rarely related to the history and culture of the location. The taglines often emphasized the concept of “unitedness” in the EU’s tagline of “United in Diversity,” particularly for Mons2015, Aarhus2017, Leeuwarden2018, and Plovdiv2019, which featured openness, togetherness, growth, and forward thinking. The events communicated different levels of “diversity” or “unity” in terms of the “European dimension.” A wider European focus was seen in Mons2015 and Aarhus2017 took a more “mega event” marketing approach that appealed to international audiences while Wrocław2016 and Valletta2018 communicated the public entertainment value of the ECOC events more to locals. Taking a more balanced approach, Plovdiv2019’s and Matera2019’s programmes were both locally contextualized while still connecting to the broader European unity. Umeå2014 and Leeuwarden2018 focused the most on local cultural diversity by involving citizens into developing the programmes which reflected the more unique character of these cities.

Reflections on the Programme Development Process

Bottom-up Citizen Participation in ECOC Programme Development

It can be summarized that within these eight case studies, there were three levels of citizen participation ranging from heavy involvement, more controlled involvement, to minimal involvement. Starting with the most citizen driven, Leeuwarden2018, was largely co-created by members of the public with 700 of its 800 projects in the “open programme,” indicating that they were developed by citizens (Fox & Rampton, 2019, p. 82). This bottom-up citizen approach to co-creation led to a cultural programme that “covered a wider range of themes, provider types, locations and issues than most other ECOC” (Fox & Rampton, 2019, p. 83). It included events that focused more on diverse

social issues that encouraged locals to participate. Leeuwarden2018 distinguished between the quality of citizen-run (i.e. amateur) programme events and those run by professionals, but an exclusively high-quality (top-down) cultural programme would have missed the point of “mienskip principles” of an open community (Fox & Rampton, 2019, p. 88). Similarly, Plovdiv2019’s programme was based “almost entirely on targeted open calls for project proposals, with only 10% of the ECOC cultural content being produced by the Foundation itself” and it developed a successful volunteer programme that was continued after the title year (Fox et al., 2020, p. 56). Umeå2014 also took an “Open Source” approach regarding the contemporary expression of Sami culture (Fox & Rampton, 2015, p. 27), but there was some early concern about avoiding “Disneyfication” of the Sami culture, and the post-evaluation reports showed that some residents of Umeå did not connect with or feel represented by the Sami culture. Thus, although the intention was to connect with citizens and express local culture, there were some local tensions that may have not been optimally balanced or communicated by the programme designers.

Three title cities took a more controlled approach to citizen involvement in programme development. Matera2019 had a strategic approach with citizens being involved in specific projects that were targeted to different groups including migrants and refugees, prison detainees, people with disabilities, and students (Fox et al., 2020, p. 30). The open call for citizen projects resulted in 27 out of the 80 submissions being accepted into the programme (Fox et al., 2020, p. 31). Aarhus2017 included newly built “cultural infrastructure” projects and installations that were intended for citizen enjoyment (rather than involvement), citizens could voluntarily participate in a few performances (e.g. light procession, dancing), some educational events for children and young people, and the “Rethink the Village” project where citizens offered ideas to redevelop and future proof the countryside. Mons2015 encouraged citizen participation mainly through two initiatives, namely the youth programme focused on “artistic activities” which was separate from the main cultural programme and a digital programme where citizens created an artistic alternative to Google Street View for Mons and cultural, social, and educational events through Café Europa (Fox & Rampton, 2019, pp. 34–36).

The two title cities with little citizen involvement in the programme design were Valletta2019 and Wrocław2016. For Valletta2019, “most of the new projects in the cultural programme were directly developed or commissioned by the Valletta Foundation or developed in collaboration with other public bodies” and “very few projects were selected through open calls” (Fox & Rampton, 2019, p. 40). As a result, some stakeholders thought the programme was too heavily focused on “Malteseness” and was insufficiently European (Fox & Rampton, 2019, p. 60). Similarly, Wrocław2016’s programme consisted mostly of “high culture” events because it was designed by professionals in the respective artforms, but they did encourage public participation through different types of volunteering (e.g. on-site at events, as an ambassador, every-day work tasks, or online work).

Evidently, the “citizens dimension” is interpreted and incorporated quite differently across ECOC title holders. Each citizen participatory approach also comes with its own benefits and challenges. For example, in Leeuwarden2018 (arguably the most citizen-driven) the EC post-evaluation report noted a lack of “quality” and thematic focus in the programme design and final delivery because it was so heavily developed by locals who

lacked event management experience. On the other hand, Wrocław2016's programme (the least citizen-driven) was highly structured and organized, which made public attendance and understanding of the nature of specific events easier. The case studies with heavy to moderate citizen involvement led to the most culturally diverse event programmes that targeted locally relevant topical issues, which leads to a cultural projects style approach over a focus on mega-events and more generalized entertainment.

The Legacy of ECOC Title Holders: Evaluating impact

In summarizing the overall impact of the title year, previously published scholarship and the Ex-post Evaluation Reports have placed more emphasis on the “development of cities” portion of the ECOC initiative. This is also true considering the “legacy dimension,” which came into effect as of 2020. The “legacy” is also open-ended like the “European dimension” to allow individual title holders to develop their own method of achieving these requirements. In this case study, three cities (Plovdiv2019; Matera2019; Leeuwarden2018) allocated a substantial amount of funding to create opportunities for continued programming after the title year, three others organized large events and/or further programmes (Mons2015; Wrocław2016; Aarhus2017), and two cities focused more on the newly built cultural infrastructure as a tangible legacy (Umeå2014; Valletta2018). The EC took the decision in 2014 that ECOCs from 2020 to 2033 must carry out their own evaluations of the results of the title year which speak to the Commissions' common guidelines and indicators and these reports are due to be published on the Commission's website (European Commission, 2018b). The aim of this self-evaluation mandate is to address some of the challenges mentioned throughout this case study in terms of cross-city comparison and “especially its medium-to-long term cultural, social and economic legacy in host cities” (European Commission, 2018b, p. 5). If the original intent of the ECOC initiative was to showcase the diversity of Europe, create dialogue, and referring to Mercuri's (1983) words, express that “culture, art and creativity are not less important than technology, commerce and the economy,” then it is slightly contrary that the legacy (as it is written in EC documentation) focuses on a plan for continual economic investment and commercialization of cultural events.

Conclusion, Recommendations and Future Research

This paper investigated how culture was expressed through local, regional, and European perspectives in eight of the most recently completed ECOC. The analysis revealed minor differences between European regions in terms of cultural expression rather than a substantial East/West divide as noted by Lähdesmäki (2014). However, Western ECOCs chose to focus on different cultural formats besides music and art events. The visual communications were homogenous, emphasizing the “European dimension” rather than cultural diversity. The vagueness of the taglines and multiple programme themes again spoke more to a general European focus. From a regional perspective, Leeuwarden2018, Mons2015 and Umeå2014 engaged the nearby areas by marketing to the people and/or hosting events in locations farther outside the city centre (i.e. commuting distance). The higher level the citizen participation, led to the most diverse and locally focused ECOC programmes that mostly addressed social issues through participatory cultural projects rather than a celebration of certain professional or “high culture” artforms.

Based on the findings of this research, the following summarized recommendations were also published in a Policy Brief (Basaraba, 2022). The recommendations centre on ways the EC could give more space for cities to focus on expressing cultural diversity and engaging in cultural dialogues rather than focusing on the economic outcomes and the sustainability/legacy of the programme. For future reporting, it is recommended that the sociocultural impact of the title year on both locals and visitors to ECOC cities is evaluated through qualitative interviews that are conducted in partnership with local universities' researchers. Evaluation reports that rely on tourism statistics (e.g. visitors to hotels and event attendance) do not provide qualitative information on how the ECOC programme impacted residents nor further insights into which aspects of culture were highlighted, discussed, or debated. This analysis also demonstrated the challenge of cross comparing the cultural expression of each ECOC and it raised several questions on how the EC assesses the success of each programme. It is recommended that the EC creates a comprehensive digital archive for the ECOC title city's website, programme, and produced marketing materials. This archive would assist researchers, future ECOC programme developers, and serve as a legacy archive capturing the cultural materials produced. To facilitate the communication of a European dimension but also allow for city diversity to be visually represented, it is recommended that the EC develop ECOC branding assets and guidelines to distribute to title cities, and the programme committees could then adapt it into their unique theme.

One method for ECOCs to identify their unique local cultural practices is to involve citizens and who can help consider what might be shared with, or similar to, their regional and international neighbours. However, it is recognized that this conceptualization could be a sensitive process depending on how it is handled. It is recommended that ECOCs try to incorporate a moderate-to-high level of citizen participation to allow for a "shared heritage" to be co-created and more inclusive and representative of different levels of the local experience. Even if it the results of citizen participation were controversial, it would spark cultural dialogue among residents and/or visitors. ECOC event(s) could foster discussions and debates about culture which would fulfil the Mercuri's original mission of focusing on culture as an important aspect in European affairs. This would bring greater depth to the ECOC initiative beyond a focus on entertainment and economic growth to allow for a more collective European understanding of the tagline "United in Diversity" through the selected cities. Finally, based on the wider research done on the ECOC process over time, it is recommended to reconsider the process of pre-selecting nations four or more years in advance to host in a particular year due to the potential misalignment with the current political and economic situations within a city or nation. The case study review showed that changes in governmental leadership can greatly impact how a city's ECOC programme is developed or carried out in the years after the original bid if a new party comes into office for example. On the other hand, there can also be missed opportunities to host the title during culturally significant anniversaries that would have large celebrations/events planned which could be included in an ECOC programme.

In terms of future research directions that could build on this more intercultural communications focus of the ECOC initiative, scholars could conduct more interviews with members of the programme development team for different cities to identify the challenges they face when making decisions about which aspects of culture they choose

highlight through the events and marketing materials. An area for further investigation would also be into the educational background or professional experience of the local ECOC programme development team members. It is hypothesized that many are not trained in cross-cultural communications, creating public communication campaigns (Matusitz, 2022), city branding, or local/regional/national history, for example. In this case, the ECOC programme committee members may miss opportunities to communicate the local cultural heritage and the uniqueness of the city in balance with the aspects that connect the specific place to Europe more broadly. Another avenue of future research would be to compare how ECOC cities communicate their city's uniqueness and diversity with other city of culture programmes in other countries and regions, for example, the UK City of Culture initiative (GOV.UK, n.d) and Capital Americana de la Cultura/The American Capital of Culture (19982022). Although these types of cultural city initiatives have different funding models and societal purposes, the expression of a city's culture could be cross compared from communications and marketing perspectives.

Notes

1. Plovdiv was the first case study analysed because it had the most categories of cultural events and activities and it was used as the foundational codebook that was re-used for the other ECOC cities.
2. Festivals were coded when the event did not primarily focus on music, but many festivals included a musical portion.
3. Museum exhibitions were coded when the event did not primarily focus on art, but on history or curated cultural artefacts.
4. It is unknown whether or where the logo appeared on the Leeuwarden2018 website since a visual archive of the event website was not found online.
5. Van Gogh spent some time as a missionary in Southern Belgium before he focused on painting.
6. The Leeuwarden-Friesland 2018 ECOC programme did not include a full listing of programme events, so the website was used to gain an overview of the featured events.
7. EU-Japan Fest Japan Committee was formed after the government of Belgium approached Japan to participate in the events of the European Capital of Culture Antwerp1993 (EU Japan Fest, 2010, <https://www.eu-japanfest.org/n-english/n-committee/aboutus.html>).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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