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WORLD'S FAIRS IN THE SERVICE OF NATIONAL BRANDING – THE STATE OF RESEARCH, KEY ELEMENTS OF EXHIBITORS' PRESENTATIONS, EXEMPLIFICATION OF IMAGE-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

World's fairs (Expos) are nowadays perceived as so-called mega events, which are attended mainly to build a desired image of exhibiting countries. The article aimed at exploring literature to determine the extent to which the concept in question has been examined by researchers. Furthermore, the author's intention was – based on experience gained during participation in the last Expo editions – to identify the main presentation components which have a bearing on image-related effects. This constitutes a practical implication of this work. Marketing activities performed during universal exhibitions were exemplified based on the exhibition activity of Poland. A literature review demonstrated that Expo did not receive a lot of researchers' attention – especially in terms of creating the image of exhibiting countries. Therefore there is a research gap which should be closed, in particular, in the context of combining expo participants' activity with experience marketing.

Keywords: world's fairs, Expos, national branding, experience marketing, presentation of Poland.

1. INTRODUCTION

The industrial revolution and rapid economic transformation in the 19th century paved the way for an initiative to organise exhibition events enabling to present the past achievements of mankind on a large scale and with the participation of many exhibitors and visitors. The first event of this sort was the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations. It was held in 1851 at the Crystal Palace, a building which could be visited in those times in Hyde Park in London, but which does not exist anymore. Since then, every couple of years and at irregular intervals, various countries have hosted exhibitions devoted to a review of worldwide achievements – both of the entire civilisation and individual countries. The history of world exhibitions began in London, with Expo 2020 Dubai, an event held between October 2021 and March 2022 in the United Arab Emirates (the exhibition was postponed by one year due to the Covid-19 pandemic), being the last one so far.

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Throughout 170 years' history, world exhibitions have been changing their functions, over time becoming – as can be seen while visiting the grounds of contemporary Expos – an important place for building countries' images. Hence this article aims to determine whether the aforesaid function of exhibitions has been reflected in the scholarly literature. Based on the literature review, possible directions for future explorations were identified. In addition, to demonstrate the nature of marketing activities performed during world exhibitions, Poland's exhibition activity was exemplified. Also, means used for building desired images of countries were presented. Furthermore, the author reflected on the usefulness of exhibitions to national branding in the era of further development of electronic communication – in times when countries' offers are presented on the Internet and hence can be quickly and thoroughly analysed.

2. ESSENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF WORLD EXHIBITIONS

World exhibitions last nowadays six months. They are usually attended by almost 200 countries and international organisations, as well as around 20 million visitors. Since 2000, the event has been held every five years. As already mentioned, the universal exhibition is currently hosted in Dubai, whereas the next event of this sort will be held in Osaka in 2025. The following cities are competing for the right to host the 2030 Expo: Busan, Moscow, Odessa, Riyadh, and Rome. The right to host Expo is granted by the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE), an organisation comprised of 170 member countries. Poland was one of the 31 founding members of the organisation in 1928. So far, 35 universal exhibitions have been held. The name "Expo" was popularised only after more than one hundred years of organising world exhibitions – for the first time in 1958, when the event hosted in Barcelona was referred to by using a combination of the abbreviated name "Expo" and a year. As regards the importance of world exhibitions to national branding activities, it must be noted that nowadays they are considered to be in the top three global events – next to the Summer Olympics and the FIFA World Cup. They are referred to as mega-events in scholarly literature (Sun, Ye, 2010; Lamberti, Noci, Guo, Zhu, 2011; Lee, Kang, Lee, 2013; Deng, Poon, Chan, 2016).

Apart from universal exhibitions, there are also three other types of events held under the auspices of BIE, where exhibitors and visitors from all around the world can meet. The most important of them includes the so-called "Small Expo", i.e. Specialised Expo, which lasts three months, is smaller and its main theme is more homogeneous than during universal exhibitions. The last specialised event was organised in Astana (currently Nur-Sultan) in 2017, whereas the next one will be held either in 2027 or 2028. Five countries have submitted competing candidatures to organise the next Specialised Expo: Belgrade, Malaga, Minnesota, Phuket, and San Carlos de Bariloche. The two other cyclical events arranged by BIE, whose appeal is definitely not so powerful for the image of exhibiting countries, are: Horticultural Expos and Triennale di Milano (both being arts and design exhibitions).

3. WORLD EXHIBITIONS IN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Expos were analysed in scholarly literature in a variety of contexts. Scholars' attention was directed not only to their history in general (Findling, Pelle, 2015), but also to individual exhibitions (e.g. Auerbach, Hoffenberg, 2008; Pluvinge, 2008). World exhibitions were set in a broad economic context (Sun, Ye, 2010). Studies focused on how the organisation of

Expos stimulated the tourist industry (Jauncey, Nadkarni, 2014) and demonstrated their impact on citizens living in host cities (Lamberti, Noci, Guo, Zhu, 2011; Wang, 2014; Vij, Upadhya, Vij, Kumar, 2019]. The analysis also covered the architecture of individual national pavilions (Martínez Calzón, Castañón Jiménez, 2010; Yang, Chen, Jiang, Lu, 2012; Seo, 2017, to name but a few) and of other facilities which have become the symbols of host cities over time (Yang, Chen, Jiang, Lu, 2012). Furthermore, Expo's impact on the growth of such cities was examined (Meyer-Künzel, 2007; Vita, 2022), as well as their revitalisation was discussed (Deng, Poon, 2012; Deng, Poon, Chan, 2016). Focus was placed on the management of exhibition participants' flow (Houdart, 2012; Gu, Xu, Fang, Shi, Lv, Peng, Wang, Song, Xie, 2013) and the organisation of municipal transport (Zhou, Wang, Huang, Sun, 2009; Zhu, 2012). Scholars also examined correlations between exhibitions and sustainable development in the context of the "green cities" concept (Zhang, 2013) and infrastructure built to address exhibitors' and visitors' needs (Zhe, Li, Jing, 2011; Deng, Poon, 2013).

Scholars' attention was concentrated on the marketing aspects of Expos occasionally. Only very few articles referred to the multidimensional nature of the image of exhibitions (Deng, Li, Shen, 2015), their effect on the image of host cities (De Carlo, Canali, Pritchard, Morgan, 2009; Jing, Rong, 2010; Yu, Wang, Seo, 2012; Xue, Chen, Yu, 2012; Lins, Carmo dos Santos, Gotardo, 2018) and host countries (Chen, 2012; Lee, Kim, Lee, Kim, 2014). The motives for participation in exhibitions (Lee, Kang, Lee, 2013) and visitors' experiences (Björner, Berg, 2012) were also discussed. The promotional activity of commercial entities – BIE's partners and exhibition sponsors also attracted scholars' interest (Tran, 2021). However, there were very few scientific publications devoted to marketing. Hence a need arises to conduct further in-depth research into the potential of world exhibitions in relation to various marketing dimensions, including, first and foremost, in the context of creating the image of exhibiting countries taking part in such events.

Polish scholarly literature provides coverage of universal exhibitions, yet only to a limited extent. They were considered merely in a few contexts: a historical context (Drexlerowa, Olszewski, 2005; Jedlińska, 2015), the architecture of exhibition pavilions (Świątek, 2012; Sykta, 2014a; Sykta, 2014b), an organisational context (Sykta, 2014c), the synergy of exhibition grounds and spatial structures of host cities (Sykta, 2017). Furthermore, the marketing dimension was mentioned in these publications very scarcely, whereas the central focus was directed to the symbolic meaning of expositions (Gębarowski, 2018), dominant themes running through national presentations (Gębarowski, 2016), visitors' experiences (Gębarowski, 2019) and the effects of participation (Gębarowski, 2014).

A review of scholarly literature points to the conclusion that there are no publications relating directly to the usefulness of Expos to the performance of national branding tasks. Hence there is a need to explore the issue in question. This paper identifies the directions of possible research.

4. EVOLUTION OF WORLD EXHIBITION FUNCTIONS

Having analysed information contained in the books and articles included in the bibliography, describing respective world exhibition editions, it may be claimed that over the decades of their organisation, the format in which these events are held has evolved,

their scope has been extended and they have adapted to changing economical, social and political conditions.

As already noticed, the organisation of the first event in London was the consequence of industrial revolution and major transformations taking place in production methods. At every consecutive edition of the exhibition, current economic achievements were presented – not only in respect of individual countries, but also globally. The exhibitions started to be regarded as places where the latest inventions, being sometimes a real breakthrough for the development of humanity, were showed. It was the visitors of universal expositions that for the first time saw a big wheel, a zip, a moving pavement, electricity, a typewriter, a hand-powered washing machine, a dishwasher, a record player, X-ray equipment, a telephone, to name but a few. As several historians consider it, the “golden age” of world exhibitions coincided with the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. In those times, presentations took the form of national pavilions showing representations of individual countries on a micro scale (Bruno, 2020). In the first half of the 20th century, exhibitors not only continued to display economic and scientific achievements, but also referred to political concepts prevailing in respective countries. The second half of that century was marked by the absence of the former Communist bloc countries (including Poland), resulting from the policy of the Cold War. The last decade of the 20th and the beginning of the present century is the time of presentations orientated mainly towards creating the images of exhibiting countries by references to unique distinctive natural and cultural features, as well as informing that countries are open to foreign visitors (tourists, investors, new inhabitants). Such an approach has been seen until now, however, many presentations made during previous world exhibitions were in line with experience marketing assumptions, providing remarkable long-lasting experiences. With every consecutive edition, exhibiting countries are becoming more and more multimedia-oriented and they appeal to visitors’ senses to a greater and greater extent.

In the context of the present Expo, it must be emphasised that, as intended by the BIE, the event is expected to serve important social functions. Its purpose is to raise key issues relating to sustainable development, including to the need for effective environmental protection. The pivotal role of national presentations is gradually changing. Now the attention of politicians, journalists, economic operators and ordinary people is being directed to issues which are of relevance to the future of our generation. This shift has been determined by the official mottoes of previous exhibitions. The slogan for the Shanghai Expo was “Better City – Better Life”, whereas for the Milan Expo – “Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life”. The motto used during the event hosted by the United Arab Emirates was: “Connecting Minds, Creating the Future”. The exhibition motto for the event which will be organised in Osaka will be “Designing Future Society for Our Lives”.

5. WORLD EXHIBITIONS AS PLACE FOR CREATING COUNTRY IMAGE – CORE ELEMENTS OF PRESENTATIONS AND EXEMPLIFICATION

In the context of national branding, three elements of national presentations having importance to image-related effects achieved by exhibiting countries must be identified. They include: the external appearance of pavilions, their interior design, and events taking place as part of exhibitions. The architecture of national pavilions is of paramount importance, as it is the original and intriguing appearance of these buildings that encourages

exhibition attendees to visit a given exposition, as well as it inspires journalists to publish numerous media reports. A pavilion prepared for a universal exhibition serves a role of a huge showpiece. An average Expo participant is not able to see all presentations, therefore exhibitors have to effectively compete for visitors' attention – which they can achieve, first and foremost, through an original appearance of pavilions. The interior design of pavilions is also important – e.g. multimedia installations and expositions activating all visitors' senses. The third vital element of presentations is the organisation of diversified, often spectacular, events during national presentations – taking place both inside and in the immediate vicinity of pavilions.

As an example of activities performed at Expos with a view to promoting a country image, the exhibition activity of Poland will be presented. The history of Poland's participation in world exhibitions is not long. This was not only for political reasons, but also due to event rules. From the first event organised by the BIE, it was decided that only national teams were permitted to exhibit. At the initial stage of exhibition development, Poland did not have its statehood. Consequently, domestic artists and creators wishing to participate in exhibitions represented other countries until Poland regained its sovereignty and the Second Polish Republic was proclaimed. Poland had the first opportunity to present itself in Chicago in 1933. That first attempt was a modest beginning of participation in world exhibitions. Nevertheless, Poland built its first structure, which was designed to allow the country to present itself, four years later in Paris. After the Second World War, due to the political situation, Poland did not attend many world exhibitions. This stemmed not only from tensions caused by the Cold War, but also from the fact that in those times Expos were never hosted by Communist countries – the event was organised by such cities as Brussels (1958), Montreal (1967), Osaka (1970). That situation changed in 1989 – the time of transformations. After several decades of Poland's absence, it took part in the 1992 exhibition in Seville, whereas its first independent pavilion was set up in Hanover in 2000. Following that event, Poland presented itself, using its individual structures, in every consecutive universal exhibition, hosted by: Aichi (2005), Shanghai (2010), Milan (2015), Dubai (2021).

The Polish pavilion in Germany had open walls and was supported by steel columns on which a structure made of steel, glass and aluminium was suspended. During the exhibition hosted by Japan, Poland set up a national pavilion whose façade was made of white wicker. Nevertheless, particularly during the last three Expo editions, Polish pavilions, due to their original, unique structures, were among those most frequently visited by exhibition goers and attracted considerable attention of media representatives (fig. 1).

In China, the building with the Polish exposition looked from the outside like a sheet of paper folded several times – resembling a paper ornament, a traditional folk art paper cutting. It was of symbolic importance and embraced motifs well-known not only to Poles, but also the inhabitants of the host country (paper was invented in China and the art of making paper ornaments has a centuries-old tradition there). At night, the illuminated façade resembled a patterned lantern. The Polish pavilion, because of its original appearance, became one of the most recognisable symbols of the 2010 Expo. Its photograph was showed on posters promoting the exhibition (among very few other selected architectural structures). The pavilion could be also often seen in the press and other media. After the end of the exhibition, the structure was awarded a silver medal for the most creative presentation.



Expo 2010 (Shanghai)



Expo 2015 (Milan)



Expo 2020 (Dubai)

Figure 1. Appearance of Poland's pavilions during last three editions of world exhibition

Source: author's own photographs.

In Italy in 2015, Poland's pavilion appeared to be built of several hundreds of wooden apple crates. The motif of crates was also used at stalls put up in front of the pavilion and on the open area – there was some space to sit down under umbrellas showing apple trees in bloom and people entering the exhibition area were welcomed by a board reading: "Enchanted Apple Land". Those who were resting in that place could taste apple juice. The

exhibition route for visitors was exceptional – it started on the first floor, where they had to go through a “magic garden” with plants growing in Polish meadows and orchards including apple trees.

The building erected for the 2020 Expo in Dubai was designed as an open, modular structure, expanding upwards. Visitors entering the pavilion could see a symbolic installation fitted over their heads – a kinetic sculpture representing a flock of birds flying above the ground. The migrating birds were a theme common to the cultures of many nations, including also those living in the Arabian Peninsula. However, the most important aspect of a visit was an invitation extended to Expo visitors to the “Polish table” – the one and only multimedia artistic installation made of raw materials typical of Poland – copper, glass, wood, ceramics and carbon fibre.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The above conclusions, referring to the changed functions of world exhibitions, and the key exposition elements identified in this article are based on the review of literature and direct observations made by the author during the last Expo editions. Nevertheless, they need to be proved empirically by quantitative and qualitative research carried out not only among exhibitors – to examine objectives (which marketing activity at Expos is to reach) and the effectiveness of measures employed (falling within each of the three groups of the aforesaid national presentation elements). Exhibition visitors should also be covered by such research. It seems that crucial importance should be attached to the exploration of how visiting individual expositions affects the image of exhibiting countries. As for visitors, it will be necessary to determine what they expect exhibitors to do – whether e.g. to provide – to a greater extent – entertainment, escapism (immersion), information or aesthetic values. Referring exhibitions to the concept of an exceptional place where experiences are provided should be a particularly interesting research aspect. In scholarly literature on experience marketing, such space is termed *experiencescape* (cf. Blumenthal, Jensen, 2019; O'Dell, 2005, to name but a few).

What appears to be of relevance is to examine how the recipients of countries' marketing activities currently perceive world exhibitions, given the fact that people are nowadays well anchored in cyberspace. In fact, it is not clear what is the future of Expos in times of the ongoing development of fast, cheap and global electronic communication, when offers of individual countries can be seen on the Internet. However, such communication, when juxtaposed with face-to-face meetings perceived as an intrinsic quality of all exhibition events, must be considered “flat”, as it activates only two senses (sight and hearing) of the recipients of marketing activities. In this case, the hybridisation of exhibition events may provide a special context of exploration. The growing phenomenon of combining traditional meetings with a virtual communication platform was accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. It may turn out that in post-pandemic times hybrid (syncretic) exhibition events will become an important (or even a dominant) form of meetings between exhibitors and visitors (Gębarowski, 2021).

In times when the Internet was developing extensively, certain scholars raised doubts over the sense of participating in exhibition events (Jones, 2009; Drab, 2011; Ermer, 2013). However, the organisation of universal exhibitions still requires considerable efforts of many people and the provision of substantial funds by exhibiting countries. Indeed, it seems that in marketing nothing can replace direct contact with the other person and his or her

offer, irrespective of whether such an offer concerns ordinary goods, services or territorial products; the contact which is established in the atmosphere of an exceptional feast, with all exhibition event participants' senses being engaged holistically and substantially, often creating memorable experiences.

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