

SZIGET FESTIVAL AS THE (FALSE) GATEWAY TO GLOBAL POPULAR MUSIC MARKET

Introduction: The Festivalization of Youth

Sziget Festival is one of best-known post-communist Eastern European summer festivals, organized for the 27th time in 2019.* To sustain its prominent status, it has increasingly catered for the taste and values of global youth community and as such had a significant role in the festivalization of popular music culture which is understood both as 'the process by which cultural activity, previously presented in a regular, on-going pattern or season, is reconfigured to form a 'new' event' (Négrier, 2015:18) and the arrangement of cultural events according to the festival calendar. The process is closely linked to commodification, as the ever-increasing weight of the experience industry suggests, and it also signals the growing appeal to the ideas of cosmopolitanism, communitarianism and openness, which "is part of a prevailing trend towards affordable escapism" (Morey et. al 2014: 252), of hedonism, the cult of youth, alternative ways of expressing identity. All this is based on the desire for the experience of fluidity which is informed by both 'a psychosocial need for intensity, evanescence, and a carnival-like suspension of routine of everyday life' (Szemere, 2017:16) and the demand to accentuate one's lifestyle and identity and be receptive to other lifestyles and identities. By focusing on the promotional perspective of the festivalization process, the aim of this paper is to show what market forces and societal visions shaped Sziget-experience to its present form and how it negotiates between local and international dimensions of popular culture.

Sziget Festival – Historical Trajectories

Initiated by Péter Müller Sziámi, a writer and underground rock legend and Károly Gerendás, a cultural intermediary and the founder of Sziget Kulturális Menedzseriroda Kft. (Sziget Cultural Management Agency Ltd.), the first festival, Diáksziget (Student Island), featured mainly Hungarian and Eastern European bands. The maturation of the festival was aided by a global transformation of the music industry. Since the late-1990s, records sales have constantly decreased due to illegal file sharing and, later, streaming. Consequently, musicians have become increasingly dependent on live performance. Since festivals allow for both the concentration of experience and the optimalization of resources, with the right business model they could become profitable. Aksel Tjora's claim that 'the festival – as community – is constantly being developed and (re-)created by its participants and ... [while] organisers can only shape the festival by attempting to influence the actions and patterns of action of its participants' (Tjora 2016:69) well suited the initial years of the festival populated by bohemians looking for a week-long house party allowing for free expression and coexistence of different subcultures. Nevertheless market forces, geopolitical factors and an agile management led to the transformation of the event from a post-communist cultural initiative founded on DIY ethics into a professionally executed mega-festival. From the late 1990s organizers swiftly adapted the market logic of consumer capitalism and with ever-increasing ticket prices began put up a financial barrier and limit the equal opportunity to participate. With Hungary's accession to the European Union in 2004, the management geared up its promotion in Western Europe, increased its musical variety with the inclusion of jazz, world music and Roma music and branded the festival as a week-long cultural event offering entertainment activities of a wide range. Károly Gerendás attributes this success to the multi-genre entertainment quality:

these days almost every festival offers an almost identical line-up, we have to position ourselves by being a spectacularum ... This approach became an international trend (Kollár, 2018)

Kálmán G observed that 'with the increase of purchase power of consumer goods and entertainment services,

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adolescents become active participants of the market at a younger age' (Gábor 2004:239) and also recorded how for this middle-class group 'consumer values became more important than traditional and other ideological values' (Gábor 2004:241). Whereas in the early 2000s consumption-conscious youth participants at the festival were dominantly liberal-minded Hungarian, in the years to follow and as a result of the increasing sponsorship of multinational companies and rising ticket prices Sziget became less affordable for locals and gradually transformed into a fancy brand catering for Western European festival tourists.

Branding the Sziget-Experience in Television Spots

Sziget's gradual transformation into a carnivalesque celebration of consumerism and cosmopolitanism but also the contradictions this carried are well-illustrated by television spots and their strategies of branding festivalized popular culture. My investigation focuses on how the core values of the event were reinvented from time to time, in what ways they subscribed to local and international contexts and to what degree the Sziget-experience is maintained by a brand-community subscribing to young people with middle-class consumer attitudes.

Early television promotion with the tagline "We need a week together!" followed the classic structure of multimodal cinematic discourse¹⁴³ characteristic of movie trailers. The TV spots contained images of the venue, people dancing together, musical fragments of songs, and a voice-over describing the cultural and musical variety of the event. Catchphrases like "Europe's largest party" (from 1997) identified festivalgoers as a group dedicated to extravagant activities, people of different subcultures and lots of live music. In addition, the brand value of Sziget remained fixed on the hype delivered by the star-status of performers.

The spots for the 2000 marketing campaign openly addressed this by imitating a movie trailer [that of the horror film *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie, 1997)]. Interestingly main stage performers were referred to as "stars" without naming such acts as Apollo 440, Chumbawamba, Bad Religion, Bloodhound Gang, Clawfinger, Die Ärzte, Guano Apes, HIM, Lou Reed, Oasis, Suzanne Vega. The strategy to remain silent about the superior line-up implied that stars have become natural features of the Sziget-brand, and also suggested that brand building was increasingly dependent on international trends of popular music.

From the late 1990s promotional campaigns hoped to mobilize the youth and pointed to the experience that could not be overlooked and missed by brand-conscious consumers.¹⁴⁴ The commitment to both the brand and non-conformism was reflected in the 2001 campaign which drew satirical parallels between the adult's world and the values of young people. In one of the TV spots a P.E. teacher is telling off his students claiming that they are undisciplined, overtly self-assured and free spirited. As a warning he asks: "Do you know what grade you deserve?"¹⁴⁵ A boy, obviously thinking of his festival ticket, makes a satisfied grin. Here, both the line-up and the event's name remain unspoken, suggesting that Sziget has become a central reference point for young people. The self-reflexivity of these spots lays in the high reputation of the brand that was best promoted by pretending not being promoted at all.

Since the millennium, the main target group has become that of middle-class consumers. Therefore, the campaign featured a carefree cartoon figure, Little Cow (Kistehén), symbolizing members of the middle-class youth who made their choices independently, resisted paternalism, exploited possibilities and managed risks. In the years to follow, the televisual promotion of Sziget foregrounded artistic heterogeneity, abstraction, reflexivity, and critical thinking as qualities of the target audience. Highlighting these intellectual agencies implied that the brand was not unaware of the social status of consumers and hoped to become the brand of the more educated classes, especially the middle-class, for whom Hungary's accession to the EU in 2004 represented an historic opportunity to recover from post-communist apathy and embrace a European identity. According to this logic, one advertisement ended with the famous line from Mihály Kertész' *Casablanca*, 'This is the beginning of a beautiful friendship'.

The positioning of the Sziget-experience as a form of mediation between Hungary and Europe emphasized

¹⁴³ According to Carmen D. Maier, who explores film trailers through the interdependencies of semiotic modes, "trailers are mixed promotional genre characterised by a distinct generic structure in which each functional stage fulfils a specific communicative purpose through multimodal means" (Carmen D. Maier 141).

¹⁴⁴ Until 2001 the brand-name Pepsi was included in the videos with increasing visibility.

¹⁴⁵ In Hungarian the words "grade" and "ticket" are homonyms.

the superior quality of international trends over national popular culture but also arranged them hierarchically, emphasizing the . The television campaign in 2005 and 2006 featured celebrities of elite culture (including Miklós Jancsó, Attila Till, Gabriella Jakubcsék) who either spoke of the cultural excellence embodied by the festival or listed names of the star-ridden line-up, who were, without exception, international performers. Interpreting the Sziget-experience for lower-end media users, these opinion leaders simply acknowledged the organizers' musical choices and neglected, possibly rejected, the achievements of Hungarian popular culture. Either way, the target audience of these ads was the outward-looking, Eurocentrist middle-class.

The 2007 campaign, featuring a character in the likes of David Attenborough and calling into mind the style of natural history documentaries, offered a promotional discourse relying on the language of ecology (with terms like "habitat", "symbiotic existence", "call of nature") and described the event as "the most open ecosystem that will involve you more than any expedition". As playful visual evocations of travel journals, the videos included exotic and excessive images of partying festival-goers. The simultaneous ecologization and ethnographization of the festival experience claimed that it was a modern tribe that awaited to be discovered but at the same time played down the importance of local culture.

While the previously mentioned advertising strategies described and performed the Sziget-experience as cultural enrichment through the consumption of western musical trends, liberal values and a sense of belonging to Europe, yet another conceptual approach in branding was adopted in 2008 under the creative direction of Dávid Ráday. According to Ráday, the concept was to hold up a mirror to antagonistic judgments about the festival voiced by people who never actually visited the event. The parodic reversal of ill-willed criticism came through as an intellectual reply to ideological attacks.

Featuring actor and stand-up comedian Janklovics Péter, the character of the protagonist in these commercials mixes traits of the aspiring gangster, the deadbeat chatterbox and the urban jackass who slanders the festival. In the 2009 video, that became the most popular television promo in the history of Sziget with over 1,5 million Youtube downloads, he is wearing a vest, trainers, sunglasses, badly-executed tattoos and a thick gold chain with a cross around his neck: an apparent reference to the ghetto style.

In another television spot he catches sight of a billboard advertisement for the festival and starts commenting the line-up in a patronizing tone even though he can hardly pronounce the names of performers and his imitation of their songs' lyrics is gibberish. Mockery becomes self-mockery while his sense of superiority comes through as a comic personification of ignorance. The advertisements – with the tagline "Have you gone bananas?" (Elmentek otthonról?) – gained popularity due to their witty portrayal of the uneducated and politically incorrect deadbeat whose high-octane temperament, fast-speech and hilarious slang nevertheless called forth the intensity of the Sziget-experience. Featuring a character who in his musical preferences, values and attitudes represents the very antidote of the potential festival-goer was a calculated act of creating ambiguity and controversy. The following year's promotional campaign revives the character; only this time he accidentally finds of a box of festival tickets and decides to sell them through his own marketing campaign. In Janklovics' rendering of the overambitious but incompetent businessman type¹⁴⁶, all the negative prejudices about the festival were acted out but also revealed as stereotypes and, thus, neutralized.

Janklovics also starred the 2012 campaign, impersonating a television magician who performed his "special powers" on people with "disabilities" – an old man, a person lacking dance skills and another with amnesia. After receiving their festival wristband, they were automatically "upgraded" to festival mode. The evolution of the Janklovics-character from city bumpkin to a television show-host accentuated the social vision of organizers to position the event as middle class. Furthermore, the comic appeal to the artificially upbeat atmosphere of television game shows offered a caricature of media's ability to create hypes, which therefore made these ads examples of self-reflexive promotion. The creative team made sure that viewers identified the festival as a prestigious hype, one appealing to the affluent Western European representatives of the middle class.

Acknowledging the event's ultimate dependence on foreign festivalgoers, the promo videos have lost their unorthodoxies and integrated into well-established international trends, putting emphasis on cosmopolitanism, the carnivalesque atmosphere and youth culture that relegated the local context into a secondary position. Having said that, the 2013 ad referred to Sziget as a Festival Republic, "A country where everything and everyone looks

¹⁴⁶ A major mobile service provider hired the actor to do a commercial for them playing the same character.

gorgeous”, emphasizing independence and individualism, furthermore called into mind a self-contained space disconnected from daily drudgery, regulations and intolerance: the very qualities that created appeal for the event at its outset. The festival’s anthem, ‘Szabadon (Na-Na-Na)’ [‘Freely’(Na-Na-Na)], played by the Hungarian band Punnany Massif, foregrounded these qualities with charisma, cool, freedom, free will, forever free being resounding words of the lyrics.

In the following years, both television spots and festival anthem videos celebrated freedom in the context of youth culture. The new cosmopolitan image of the festival invited people to a nation within a nation, a republic without borders where one could embrace the youthful spirit, form romances, dance all night and get dirty (drunk) without constraints. Furthermore, videos presented images of exclusively young, sexy looking people, adopting the MTV visual style (short takes, lots of cuts, emphasis on kinetic energy) young generations find appealing. The dynamic exchange of low and high camera angles with birds-eye views of pyrotechnic shows, stage antics and ecstatic crowds accentuated the carnivalesque side of the festival. These videos no longer provided information about the line-up or included verbal commentaries: the Sziget-experience was visualized, performed through colourful and unique compositions of partying youngsters. The somewhat psychedelic logo of the Island of Freedom situated the festival at the centre of this experience.

The anthems of the years 2014, 2015 and 2016 prefigured the campaign buzzwords – Budapest, magic, love, summer, freedom, happiness – as well as its tagline that linked the cult of freedom with the cult of youth. In 2018, the 50th anniversary of both the Paris student protests and the Woodstock Festival, a new branding label appeared, positioning the event in the spirit of ’68. The title of the 2017 anthem “Love Solution” by Mary PopKids was rephrased as “Love revolution”: the tagline for the 2018 festival spot that, beside accentuating the values of the 60s youth culture, also integrated the exhibitionism of post-millennial youth culture. In this era of branding freedom, art, love, chic and sexiness were celebrated but also promoted as the experience of consumption-centred global youth culture.

Conclusion

In the marketing mix of Sziget festival, television spots make effective use of the multimodal telecinematic discourse to accentuate the values of festivalized youth culture. The visuals and slogans create both intellectual and emotional engagement with in an experience that is both musical and communal. My overview of the history of television campaigns rendered legible how the Sziget-experience became a popular commodity of youth culture and subscribed to neoliberal narratives of cultural openness, social tolerance and cosmopolitanism. However as a consequence of rising costs of attendance, these narratives became increasingly elusive for Hungarians participants for whom independence and freedom remained nothing more than a bleak reminder of Eastern European populations’ financial inferiority.

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