

Article

Cultural Dimensions of Trade Fairs: A Longitudinal Analysis of Urban Development and Destination Loyalty in Thessaloniki

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Abstract

Trade fairs are not only commercial platforms but also catalysts for urban development, city branding, and international engagement. This longitudinal study analyzes data from trade fair exhibitors from China, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Germany to examine how cultural differences influence their experiences, satisfaction, and destination loyalty within the urban landscape of Thessaloniki. By adopting Social Exchange Theory (S.E.T.) as a framework, this research applies a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and in-depth interviews conducted over multiple years (2017–2024) at the 82nd, 86th, and 88th Thessaloniki International Fair (T.I.F.). The empirical material consists of 226 survey responses (116 from China, 44 from the UAE, and 84 from Germany) and 52 semi-structured interviews, analyzed using descriptive and non-parametric statistics, alongside thematic interpretation of qualitative data. Findings reveal distinct exhibitor expectations. These cultural distinctions shape their perceptions of Thessaloniki's infrastructure, services, and overall urban experience, influencing their likelihood to revisit or recommend the city. This study underscores the long-term role of trade fairs in shaping urban economies and offers insights into how cities can leverage international exhibitions for sustainable urban growth. Policy recommendations highlight the need for tailored infrastructural improvements, strategic city branding initiatives, and cultural adaptations to enhance exhibitor engagement and maximize the economic impact of global events.



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Keywords: urban development; destination loyalty; social exchange theory; M.I.C.E. tourism; exhibitor satisfaction; trade fairs

1. Introduction

Trade fairs have historically played a central role in the development of host cities and their tourism potential. The Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (M.I.C.E.) sector—of which trade fairs are a vital component—has become a significant force in global tourism [1]. Trade fairs stimulate infrastructure investments, enhance cultural exposure, and shape international perceptions [1,2]. Historical accounts [3] position fairs not only as commercial events but also as catalysts for cultural memory and urban regeneration, thereby reinforcing their transformative roles in host cities.

The Thessaloniki International Fair (T.I.F.) organized by TIF-HELEXPO, with its long-standing tradition since 1926, is a prime example of this dynamic evolution. Originally conceived to boost economic ties, T.I.F. now functions as a multifaceted platform for tourism promotion, cultural diplomacy, and urban branding [4,5]. Held annually in September, the fair typically runs for nine days and hosts over 1000 exhibitors from Greece and abroad,

attracting upwards of 200,000 visitors. T.I.F. has long functioned as an international exhibition of geopolitical and commercial significance. Over the decades, it has consistently attracted foreign exhibitors and visitors, reinforcing Thessaloniki's role as a regional gateway. However, in recent years, the fair has deepened its strategic orientation toward economic diplomacy, city branding, and cultural soft power—especially following the introduction of the Honored Country program in 2016, which institutionalized bilateral showcases and amplified media and political engagement. Recent studies have observed that trade fairs serve as instruments of sustainable urban development by engaging with diverse stakeholder groups, including citizens and policy makers [6].

The introduction of the “Honored Country” concept at T.I.F. further illustrates how cultural exchange through trade fairs can expand tourism markets and strengthen geopolitical relationships. This approach, which ties national prestige with commercial diplomacy, aligns with broader global events practices [7]. For example, during China's participation as the Honored Country at the 82nd T.I.F., over 74% of Chinese exhibitors expressed willingness to revisit Thessaloniki—a clear indication of the program's robust impact on tourism and cross-cultural engagement [4].

Moreover, the interaction between trade fairs and destination loyalty can be understood through the lens of Social Exchange Theory. Early formulations of this theory [8] and subsequent developments [9,10] suggest that positive social and cultural exchanges benefit all stakeholders. Exhibitors' evaluations of their interactions with host cities extend beyond measurable economic outcomes to include aspects such as cultural immersion, hospitality, and infrastructure quality [5,11]. Further empirical evidence supports that satisfaction with both the trade fair experience and the host city services translates into enhanced destination loyalty, as demonstrated by positive revisit intentions and favorable word-of-mouth [12,13].

Additionally, recent research has highlighted elements such as trust, the quality of local services, and perceptions of authenticity significantly influence visitor evaluations [12,13]. Studies across Honored Country editions reveal that cultural differences mediate these evaluations, providing critical insights for refining trade fair planning strategies and urban development policies [4,5,11]. Studies focusing on urban governance also affirm that incorporating bottom-up perspectives from residents can further maximize the socio-economic benefits of trade fairs [14]. However, despite this growing body of research, there remains a lack of comparative, cross-cultural analyses examining how exhibitors from different cultural backgrounds experience and evaluate trade fairs within a consistent urban context.

In summary, the evidence suggests that trade fairs are not only economic drivers but are also essential to the sociocultural fabric and sustainable urban development strategies of host cities. By merging insights from case studies, Social Exchange Theory, and urban renewal literature [2,6], this study contributes to the growing scholarship on the evolving role of trade fairs as instruments of urban diplomacy, tourism diversification, and international branding. Unlike most existing studies, this research adopts a longitudinal approach, drawing on three distinct trade fair editions (2017, 2022, 2024) to track changes in exhibitor perceptions over time and across cultural contexts. In Thessaloniki, the fair's transformative impact is not only historical but also contemporary, manifested in elevated international visibility, infrastructural investment, and new forms of cultural exchange driven by programs like the Honored Country initiative. It further emphasizes the importance of integrating cultural and economic dimensions into city branding and tourism development strategies in Thessaloniki and beyond [8]. While previous studies have explored exhibitor perspectives from different countries [4,5,11], the present study conducts a comparative analysis. By systematically examining cross-cultural variation

in satisfaction, perception, and loyalty indicators within a unified framework, this paper contributes new interpretive insights.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Exchange Theory in Tourism Research

Social Exchange Theory (S.E.T.), introduced by Homans [8], posits that human interactions are driven by the pursuit of rewards and the avoidance of costs. Blau [15] extended this framework to explore how trust and reciprocity operate in social systems, making S.E.T. highly applicable to tourism studies. Ap [9] adapted S.E.T. to explain how residents evaluate tourism based on perceived benefits and costs. Emerson [16] emphasized the psychological motivations behind exchanges, while Levi-Strauss [17] approached exchange from a structural anthropological lens, supporting its applicability in complex intercultural tourism contexts. Nash [18] also applied S.E.T. concepts to tourism's sociopolitical dimensions, describing it as a vehicle of soft power.

In event tourism, Adongo et al. [11] emphasize the significance of trust, reciprocity, and perceived fairness in shaping visitor satisfaction and loyalty. Harris and Goode [19] identify trust as a pivotal element in the formation of customer loyalty in service contexts, a principle equally relevant to how trade fair exhibitors relate to host destinations. Within M.I.C.E. tourism, S.E.T. is particularly useful for understanding how trade fair exhibitors interpret their engagement with a destination. Exhibitors weigh not only economic returns but also intangible benefits such as local hospitality, ease of communication, and cultural resonance. Trust, in this context, includes perceptions of reliability, professionalism, and transparent procedures, while fairness relates to equitable treatment, access to services, and responsiveness across national groups. These intangible, relational elements significantly influence the perceived value of participation. Studies like Nunkoo and Ramkissoon [20] and Kourkouridis et al. [11] confirm the theory's utility in modeling event-based relationships, showing how positive exchanges, both transactional and interpersonal, foster emotional attachment and loyalty. The S.E.T. framework also allows for comparative cross-cultural analyses, essential for multi-national trade fair settings, where expectations, communication norms, and trust dynamics may vary.

2.2. Destination Loyalty in M.I.C.E. Contexts

Destination loyalty is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct encompassing tourists' intentions to revisit, recommend, and speak positively about a destination. This notion is well documented in tourism literature, where behavioral loyalty (e.g., repeat visitation) and attitudinal loyalty (e.g., recommendation or advocacy) are considered core components [13,21–23]. In M.I.C.E. settings, loyalty is influenced by both the quality of the event and the overall destination experience. Bigné et al. [12], Yoon and Uysal [13], and Artuğer et al. [23] argue that satisfaction, trust, and perceived value are key predictors of repeat behavior and advocacy. Prayag and Ryan [22] also highlight the importance of emotional attachment and perceived quality in forming loyalty. Harris and Goode [19] elaborate on how loyalty formation in service encounters progresses through stages, with trust playing a pivotal role.

Recent research by Abbas et al. [24] explores the post-pandemic dynamics of tourism recovery, highlighting the role of emotional connection and destination resilience. Meanwhile, perceived value and satisfaction are key drivers of destination loyalty, influencing both revisit intentions and recommendations. This relationship is extensively documented in tourism research, particularly within the M.I.C.E. sector [13,25]. Artigas et al. [26] also emphasize the role of destination image and trust as critical antecedents of loyalty. Nam et al. [27] further demonstrate that locals can significantly influence loyalty develop-

ment through social engagement. In trade fair environments such as T.I.F., satisfaction with urban infrastructure, cultural access, and service quality plays a decisive role in shaping exhibitors' future intentions, even more than the commercial outcomes of participation.

2.3. Urban Branding and Cultural Identity Through Trade Fairs

Trade fairs contribute significantly to city branding by offering platforms to showcase local identity, economic potential, and intercultural engagement. Richards and Palmer [28] conceptualize event-led development as a central feature of “eventful cities”. Events have been shown to strategically shape perceptions of city image and quality of life while also serving as catalysts for economic regeneration [28,29].

Thessaloniki's Honored Country initiative exemplifies this, fostering bilateral engagement and increasing international visibility. Kourkouridis et al. [4] and Kourkouridis and Salepaki [5] argue that this strategy not only strengthens diplomatic ties but also embeds the city in the collective memory of global visitors. Trade fairs and mega events have been recognized as instruments of urban diplomacy, contributing to the enhancement of a city's soft power and economic stature [30]. Liu et al. [31] demonstrate that exhibition branding is a critical factor influencing exhibitor satisfaction and loyalty, highlighting the strategic importance of brand perception in fostering long-term engagement within trade fair settings. M.I.C.E. tourism has been recognized for its significant macroeconomic contributions and its role in enhancing the international reputation of host cities, thereby advancing urban development objectives [32,33].

While trade fairs are frequently cited as economic catalysts and tools for urban regeneration, their positive impacts are not automatic. As several scholars note, the benefits of event-led development depend on strong local linkages, inclusive planning, and long-term investment in infrastructure and human capital [14,28]. Potential leakage effects—such as revenues captured by international firms or imported service providers—can diminish returns at the local level, especially in the absence of community involvement or sustainability planning. Moreover, scholars have raised concerns about the displacement of public resources and environmental impacts related to energy consumption, transportation, and waste generation during large-scale events [14]. A growing body of research argues that to maximize long-term benefits, trade fairs should align with circular economy goals, prioritize local procurement, and adopt inclusive governance frameworks [28].

2.4. Cultural Differences and Exhibitor Satisfaction

Cultural background shapes the expectations and satisfaction of trade fair participants. Hofstede's [34] dimensions—such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance—explain how different nationalities prioritize aspects like hierarchy, planning, and communication. Although various studies have investigated exhibitor satisfaction and loyalty in M.I.C.E. tourism, there is a notable lack of comparative research examining how cultural background influences expectations and perceptions among international trade fair participants. Empirical insights into how exhibitors from culturally distinct regions, such as East Asia, the Middle East, and Western Europe, evaluate factors like hospitality, professionalism, and service quality remain scarce. This study helps address this gap by offering a cross-cultural analysis of exhibitors from China, the UAE, and Germany participating in the Thessaloniki International Fair.

At T.I.F., studies by Kourkouridis et al. [4,11] and Kourkouridis and Salepaki [5] have shown how exhibitors from China, the UAE, and Germany express divergent preferences regarding hospitality, infrastructure, and interpersonal interactions. Culturally appropriate accommodations—such as halal food options, multilingual support, and culturally familiar amenities [35,36], are increasingly recognized as vital to enhancing satisfaction among

international visitors. Moreover, factors such as clear communication, structured service, and relationship-oriented interactions are particularly valued [37]. These preferences suggest that cultural sensitivity in trade fair design can foster inclusiveness and deepen engagement across diverse nationalities.

As such, adapting trade fair environments to the cultural norms of diverse exhibitors can significantly enhance satisfaction and foster long-term loyalty. Trade fairs that incorporate cultural intelligence into their operational planning stand to benefit from deeper engagement, stronger brand loyalty, and increased return participation.

3. Research Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework and prior research, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: *There are statistically significant differences in exhibitor satisfaction across the three national groups.*

H2: *Cultural background significantly influences perceptions of Thessaloniki's infrastructure and services.*

H3: *Higher satisfaction with the trade fair is positively associated with destination loyalty (revisit intention and likelihood to recommend).*

These hypotheses guide quantitative analysis while allowing room for exploratory interpretation through qualitative data.

4. Materials and Methods

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to explore cultural differences in satisfaction, perception, and destination loyalty among exhibitors at the Thessaloniki International Fair (T.I.F.). Thessaloniki, Greece's second-largest city with a population of approximately 1.5 million residents, serves as a major cultural and economic hub in the Balkans. The city's rich cultural activity [38] and long-standing tradition in hosting exhibitions have played a significant role in shaping its urban development and international visibility. The city of Thessaloniki experienced significant impacts from both the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic [39]. Nevertheless, the exhibition activity has shown strong signs of recovery [40], reaffirming its strategic importance to the local economy and city branding efforts [41].

Drawing from Social Exchange Theory (S.E.T.), the present analysis is based on data collected during three editions of the fair: the 82nd (2017), 86th (2022), and 88th (2024), each of which featured a different Honored Country: China, the UAE, and Germany. These years were selected to enable structured comparison across distinct national and cultural backgrounds while maintaining consistency in event location, infrastructure, and organizational conditions.

A total of 226 structured questionnaires were collected on-site through face-to-face administration with official exhibitors from the respective Honored Countries: 116 respondents from China, 44 from the UAE, and 66 from Germany. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals with direct experience as exhibitors at the T.I.F. All respondents voluntarily participated in the study and were informed of the research purpose and anonymity of their responses.

The survey instrument was designed by the authors to reflect key themes from the literature on trade fairs, city image, and destination loyalty. It included structured questions on satisfaction with fair organization, infrastructure, tourism services, and the overall

urban experience. Respondents were also asked about their likelihood of revisiting or recommending Thessaloniki. While not based on a pre-validated scale, the survey was refined through pilot testing at earlier fair editions to ensure clarity, relevance, and cross-cultural appropriateness. Core items were repeated across all three editions for consistency. Specifically, the questionnaire, administered in English, consisted of items grouped into four thematic categories: (a) sociodemographic and company background; (b) evaluation of the trade fair, including overall satisfaction and perceived participation effectiveness; (c) perceptions of Thessaloniki's infrastructure, services, local residents, and price–quality relationship; and (d) indicators of destination loyalty, such as revisit intention, post-fair impressions, and willingness to recommend the city. Most evaluative questions were measured using 5-point ordinal Likert-type scales, while behavioral items were captured through binary or nominal responses.

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28. Descriptive statistics were first calculated to summarize respondent characteristics and general patterns. Cross-group comparisons were then conducted using Kruskal–Wallis H tests for ordinal variables and Chi-square tests for nominal variables. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was adopted for all inferential tests. Where relevant, mean ranks were examined to determine the directionality of observed effects.

In addition to structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive subsample of exhibitors who agreed to provide deeper insights into their experiences. A total of 20 Chinese exhibitors (2017), 14 UAE exhibitors (2022), and 18 German exhibitors (2024) participated in these interviews. All interviews were conducted on-site during the final days of the fair. The same interview protocol was applied in all three editions to ensure methodological consistency. A consistent interview guide was used across years, covering expectations, perceptions, and feedback on both the fair and the host city. Interviews were transcribed and thematically coded using a deductive–inductive approach to identify cross-cutting themes and culturally specific insights. These qualitative findings were used to enrich and contextualize the quantitative results. Interview questions focused on perceptions of the event's organization, local infrastructure and hospitality, business outcomes, and the overall tourism experience in Thessaloniki. These qualitative insights were used to complement and contextualize the quantitative findings, particularly regarding exhibitors' satisfaction and destination loyalty.

It is important to note that the three country groups were surveyed in different years (China in 2017, UAE in 2022, and Germany in 2024) coinciding with their respective Honored Country status. While this temporal separation introduces a potential time-based confounder, the fair's consistent organizational framework, stable location, and relatively unchanged infrastructure across editions support the interpretation of results as primarily culturally driven. Nonetheless, this limitation is acknowledged and discussed further. To ensure consistency over the multi-year study period, data collection was supervised by the same principal investigator, and all team members followed standardized protocols using an identical questionnaire and interview guide across all three editions.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the demographic and professional characteristics of the sample. The majority of respondents were from China (51.3%), followed by Germany, and the UAE. Most exhibitors were male, aged between 25 and 50, and held staff or managerial positions. Participants represented a diverse range of sectors, with trade, services, and production being the most common.

Table 1. Sociodemographic and company background of exhibitors.

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Country	China	116	51.3%
	UAE	44	19.5%
	Germany	66	29.2%
Gender	Male	128	56.6%
	Female	98	43.4%
Age group	Under 25	25	11.1%
	25–35	78	34.5%
	36–50	76	33.6%
	Over 50	47	20.8%
Position in the company	Top Executive	43	19.5%
	Director/Manager	69	30.5%
	Staff	109	49.3%
	Production	37	16.4%
Field of activity	Trade	54	23.9%
	Services	50	22.1%
	Science and Technology	33	14.6%
	Other	42	18.6%

Table 2 summarizes exhibitors' prior travel experience in Greece and Thessaloniki. Over 80% of participants were visiting Greece for the first time, and nearly 87% were first-time visitors to Thessaloniki. This underscores the fair's role in attracting new international audiences to the city.

Table 2. Visit behavior of exhibitors.

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
First time in Greece	Yes	179	80.3%
	No	44	19.7%
First time in Thessaloniki	Yes	192	86.9%
	No	29	13.1%

As shown in Table 3, most exhibitors engaged in local leisure activities during their stay. The most popular experiences included dining at restaurants and bars (69.9%) and visiting archaeological sites (61.1%). Cultural and entertainment activities were less frequently attended, indicating potential areas for development in cultural programming.

Table 3. Participation in local activities during stay in Thessaloniki.

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Visited Archaeological Resources	Yes	138	61.1%
	No	88	38.9%
Went shopping	Yes	126	55.8%
	No	100	44.2%
Visited Restaurants/Bars	Yes	158	69.9%
	No	68	30.1%
Attended Cultural Activities	Yes	62	27.4%
	No	164	72.6%
Attended Entertainment Venues	Yes	48	21.2%
	No	178	78.8%
Other Activities	Yes	23	10.2%
	No	203	89.8%

5.2. Comparative Statistical Analysis

The Kruskal–Wallis H test was conducted to assess statistically significant differences in exhibitors' evaluations across the three country groups (China, UAE, Germany), with results summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Kruskal–Wallis results.

Variable	Mean Rank China	Mean Rank UAE	Mean Rank Germany	Chi ²	p-Value
Rate T.I.F. overall	118.46	83.05	123.45	13.294	0.001
Rate T.I.F. effectiveness	114.76	81.20	131.14	17.433	0.000
Thessaloniki as tourist destination	115.46	103.91	93.72	5.990	0.050
Infrastructure: Transportation	108.69	99.73	114.05	1.540	0.463
Infrastructure: Accommodation	124.35	103.14	89.44	15.173	0.001
Infrastructure: Entertainment	115.67	94.05	97.17	6.237	0.044
Infrastructure: Tourism	114.00	90.86	108.17	4.921	0.085
Infrastructure: Bars–Restaurants	133.88	88.75	79.25	44.731	0.000
Infrastructure: Shopping	126.68	79.50	92.27	26.141	0.000
Infrastructure: Other services	94.63	92.84	111.27	4.236	0.12
Residents: Hospitality	100.41	111.18	123.26	8.043	0.018
Residents: Friendliness	104.73	105.73	119.82	4.293	0.117
Residents: Professional Attitude	103.33	90.75	130.36	14.775	0.001
Residents: Willingness to assist	105.13	109.77	116.47	1.762	0.414
Residents: Communication	113.42	97.66	110.98	2.290	0.318
Price/Quality: Hospitality	101.90	125.41	125.95	8.476	0.014
Price/Quality: Food and Drinks	110.98	106.57	120.80	1.648	0.439
Price/Quality: Shopping	104.18	105.25	131.71	9.129	0.010
Price/Quality: Taxi	92.71	128.57	132.00	21.419	0.000
Price/Quality: Accommodation	110.85	118.59	111.29	0.539	0.764
Price/Quality: Entrance Fees	98.38	121.14	126.15	10.016	0.007
Would visit again	119.20	104.32	104.58	3.308	0.191
Impression after T.I.F.	103.06	111.59	128.34	10.253	0.006
Recommend to others	120.06	105.84	101.75	4.579	0.101

Findings reveal that perceptions of the T.I.F. varied significantly by nationality. Chinese and German exhibitors rated the overall event significantly more positively than their Emirati counterparts ($\chi^2 = 13.294$, $p = 0.001$), with Germany having the highest mean rank (123.45), followed closely by China (118.46). German participants also reported the highest satisfaction with the effectiveness of their participation ($\chi^2 = 17.433$, $p < 0.001$), while Chinese exhibitors also showed favorable evaluations. This suggests a strong alignment between expectations and outcomes for both groups, in contrast to the lower ratings from UAE participants.

Concerning perceptions of Thessaloniki as a destination, statistically significant differences were observed ($\chi^2 = 5.990$, $p = 0.050$). Chinese exhibitors had the highest mean rank (115.46), followed by UAE (103.91) and Germany (93.72), indicating greater enthusiasm for the city's overall appeal among Chinese participants.

Country-based variation was also evident in evaluations of specific aspects of urban infrastructure—most notably in bars–restaurants ($\chi^2 = 44.731$, $p < 0.001$), accommodation ($\chi^2 = 15.173$, $p = 0.001$), entertainment ($\chi^2 = 6.237$, $p = 0.044$), and shopping services ($\chi^2 = 26.141$, $p < 0.001$). In all four cases, Chinese exhibitors reported the highest satisfaction (mean ranks: 133.88 for bars–restaurants, 124.35 for accommodation, 115.67 for entertainment, and 126.68 for shopping), followed by UAE, with Germany showing the lowest evaluations. These patterns may reflect differing baseline expectations, levels of familiarity, or cultural preferences.

Differences also emerged in interpersonal dimensions, particularly in perceptions of resident professionalism ($\chi^2 = 14.775$, $p = 0.001$), where German exhibitors reported the highest ratings (130.36). Other resident-related dimensions, such as friendliness and willingness to assist, did not show significant variation.

Significant variation was further noted in the perceived price–quality relationship of specific services, such as hospitality ($\chi^2 = 8.476$, $p = 0.014$), shopping ($\chi^2 = 9.129$, $p = 0.010$), taxi services ($\chi^2 = 21.419$, $p < 0.001$), and entrance fees for tourist attractions ($\chi^2 = 10.016$, $p = 0.007$). In these categories, German and UAE exhibitors often reported more favorable perceptions, especially for taxi and hospitality services, where China had the lowest

mean ranks. These findings underscore how cross-cultural economic perceptions shape satisfaction with service delivery.

Most importantly, while the variables directly associated with revisit intention (Would visit again, $\chi^2 = 3.308$, $p = 0.191$) and recommendation behavior (Recommend to others, $\chi^2 = 4.579$, $p = 0.101$) did not reach statistical significance, the mean ranks suggest a directional trend. Chinese exhibitors had the highest mean ranks for both items (119.20 for revisit, 120.06 for recommendation), indicating relatively stronger loyalty tendencies. Additionally, the variable impression after T.I.F. did yield a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 10.253$, $p = 0.006$), with Germany having the highest mean rank (128.34), followed by UAE (111.59) and China (103.06). This reinforces the connection between a positive event experience and enhanced destination loyalty, even if not all loyalty indicators have reached statistical significance.

These patterns emphasize the importance of tailoring trade fair and urban tourism strategies not only to meet expectations but to foster deeper emotional and cultural engagement, particularly if repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth are central policy goals.

Chi-square tests were conducted to examine associations between country of origin and various nominal variables related to exhibitor behavior and perceptions (Table 5). The Chi-square tests in Table 5 were applied only to respondents who reported participating in each respective activity, in order to assess variation in satisfaction levels across the three national groups. Results revealed statistically significant differences across nationalities for several key variables.

Table 5. Chi-Square test results.

Variable	China (%)	UAE (%)	Germany (%)	χ^2	<i>p</i> -Value
Visited: Archaeological Resources	67.2	54.5	54.5	3.828	0.148
Visited: Shopping	44.8	72.7	63.6	2.415	0.002
Visited: Restaurants–Bars	55.2	77.3	90.9	26.947	0.000
Visited: Cultural Activities	22.4	36.4	30.3	3.504	0.173
Visited: Entertainment	15.5	27.3	27.3	4.664	0.097
Visited: Other	13.8	27.3	3.0	13.533	0.001
Attractive: Local Culture	64.7	63.6	78.8	4.520	0.104
Attractive: Shopping	26.7	68.2	39.4	23.189	0.000
Attractive: Restaurants–Bars	25.9	63.6	72.7	43.242	0.000
Attractive: Local Food	19.0	81.8	84.8	94.558	0.000
Attractive: Entertainment	18.1	22.7	48.5	20.033	0.000
Attractive: Nearby Destinations	39.7	50.0	51.5	2.912	0.233
Attractive: Archaeological Sites	48.3	45.5	69.7	9.370	0.009
First Time in Greece	71.7	72.7	100.0	23.065	0.000
First Time in Thessaloniki	79.3	86.4	100.0	15.601	0.000

In terms of visitor activities during their stay in Thessaloniki, statistically significant differences emerged in several areas. German and UAE exhibitors were much more likely to report visiting restaurants and bars (90.9% and 77.3%, respectively) compared to their Chinese counterparts (55.2%) ($\chi^2 = 26.947$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, shopping was more frequently reported by UAE (72.7%) and German participants (63.6%) than by Chinese visitors (44.8%) ($\chi^2 = 12.415$, $p = 0.002$). A significant variation was also found for visits to “Other” locations, where UAE exhibitors (27.3%) were more engaged compared to Chinese (13.8%) and especially German participants (3.0%) ($\chi^2 = 13.533$, $p = 0.001$).

Other activity-based variables, such as visits to archaeological resources, cultural activities, and entertainment venues, did not show statistically significant differences. However, Chinese exhibitors were somewhat more likely to visit archaeological sites (67.2%) than UAE and German participants (both 54.5%), though the difference did not reach significance ($\chi^2 = 3.828$, $p = 0.148$).

When asked about what made Thessaloniki attractive, strong country-based variation was observed. The most striking contrast appeared in relation to local food, which was cited as an attractive feature by over 84% of German and UAE exhibitors but only by 19% of Chinese participants ($\chi^2 = 94.558$, $p < 0.001$). Similar trends emerged for restaurants and bars (72.7% Germany, 63.6% UAE, 25.9% China; $\chi^2 = 43.242$, $p < 0.001$), entertainment (48.5% Germany vs. 18.1% China; $\chi^2 = 20.033$, $p < 0.001$), and shopping (68.2% UAE vs. 26.7% China; $\chi^2 = 23.189$, $p < 0.001$). German exhibitors also valued archaeological sites more highly (69.7%) than Chinese (48.3%) or UAE (45.5%) participants ($\chi^2 = 9.370$, $p = 0.009$).

In contrast, no significant differences were found in perceptions of local culture or nearby destinations, with moderate to high approval across all groups (e.g., 64.7% of Chinese and 78.8% of Germans endorsed local culture as attractive).

Finally, responses regarding prior familiarity with the destination revealed clear and statistically significant differences. All German exhibitors reported it was their first time visiting both Greece (100.0%) and Thessaloniki (100.0%), indicating no prior exposure to the destination. In contrast, a notable share of Chinese and UAE participants had already visited Greece (28.3% and 27.3%, respectively) or Thessaloniki (20.7% and 13.6%, respectively). These differences were statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 23.065$ and 15.601 , respectively, both $p < 0.001$), suggesting that German exhibitors were encountering the host city and country for the first time, while Chinese and UAE participants had relatively higher levels of prior familiarity. This may have influenced their expectations and shaped their satisfaction with the event and destination experience.

Taken together, these findings provide compelling evidence of how cultural background shapes both the experiential choices and evaluative perceptions of international trade fair participants. They underscore the importance of designing tourism experiences that are responsive to differing expectations, familiarity levels, and cultural preferences.

5.3. Qualitative Insights from Exhibitor Interviews

In addition to the structured survey data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of exhibitors to explore their deeper perceptions of the fair, the host city, and their intentions regarding future engagement. Interviews were conducted during the final two days of each fair edition, using a consistent protocol across all three years. A total of 20 Chinese exhibitors (2017), 14 UAE exhibitors (2022), and 18 German exhibitors (2024) participated.

Across the three national groups, participants highlighted various factors that shaped their impressions of Thessaloniki—not only as a commercial venue but also as a cultural and experiential destination. German participants frequently emphasized the city's welcoming atmosphere and the interpersonal warmth of local stakeholders. One German exhibitor (EX.11) remarked, "This is not just a fair—it's a whole experience. The people are warm, the city has character, and you feel welcome as a foreign business." The combination of hospitality, mild weather, and the city's cultural landscape was often cited as a reason for potential future visits. Several German participants expressed interest in returning for leisure purposes. As one put it, "I didn't know much about Thessaloniki before. Now I want to bring my wife here next summer" (EX.6).

Chinese exhibitors largely focused on the strategic importance and symbolic value of their participation. Many emphasized the attention and visibility they received as the Honored Country. One interviewee noted, "Being the Honored Country means people come to your stand first. It feels like being a guest of honor for the whole city" (CH.3). Others appreciated the opportunity for strengthening bilateral ties, although some pointed to language barriers and cultural differences in business etiquette as areas for improvement.

UAE exhibitors expressed satisfaction with the fair's business potential and the high level of organization. However, several participants highlighted logistical and cultural challenges that affected their overall experience. A prominent concern was the lack of halal food options—not only at the fairgrounds but throughout Thessaloniki. As one exhibitor stated, "The biggest problem was food. We had problems with halal food. In the city in general, there were no halal food options. We had to order delivery or go to specific places" (UAE.2). This issue was echoed by other participants and underscored a gap in the city's hospitality infrastructure when it comes to accommodating the needs of diverse international visitors. Such observations point to the need for a more inclusive and culturally responsive approach to urban tourism services.

Taken together, these qualitative insights reinforce and contextualize the survey results. They suggest that international trade fairs do more than facilitate economic transactions; they also create emotional, cultural, and reputational connections between participants and host cities. At the same time, they reveal the limits of those connections when logistical, linguistic, or cultural barriers are left unaddressed.

6. Discussion

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study conducts a comparative, cross-cultural examination of satisfaction, perceptions, and destination loyalty at the Thessaloniki International Fair (T.I.F.). While earlier studies offered in-depth national perspectives [4,5,11], the current study provides new insights into how national cultural backgrounds shape exhibitor experiences when evaluated side by side.

The comparative statistical analysis reveals significant differences in evaluations of the trade fair, the host city, and loyalty-related indicators. German exhibitors rated the effectiveness of their participation most favorably, indicating strong alignment between expectations and outcomes, followed by Chinese and UAE participants. Chinese exhibitors consistently showed relatively high satisfaction, particularly in infrastructure and service-related categories. UAE exhibitors tended toward moderate evaluations. These differences align with cultural expectations and behavioral norms identified in the literature [34,37].

Importantly, the Kruskal–Wallis results confirmed statistically significant group differences in perceptions of accommodation, entertainment, and shopping infrastructure. Similarly, differences in price–quality evaluations for services such as taxi use and entrance fees suggest varied economic perceptions. These findings offer support for the study's hypotheses. The presence of statistically significant differences in satisfaction and urban experience across national groups confirms H1 and H2. Although revisit intention and recommendation did not reach statistical significance, the trend toward positive loyalty outcome, particularly among Chinese exhibitor, provides partial support for H3. These results highlight the value of a comparative approach in identifying cultural variation in trade fair engagement. These patterns underscore that even within a single event context, national origin shapes how exhibitors interact with both the trade fair and the host city. While revisit intention and recommendation were not statistically significant, the higher mean ranks from Chinese participants suggest a continued trend toward loyalty, especially when paired with favorable post-event impressions.

Chi-square analyses further supported this interpretation by identifying behavioral differences. German and UAE exhibitors were significantly more likely to engage in shopping and dining compared to Chinese participants, while UAE exhibitors also reported higher engagement with "Other" locations. In contrast, Chinese exhibitors identified a broader set of attractions, particularly local food, shopping, and restaurants, as defining features of Thessaloniki. Notably, local food was reported as attractive by over 80% of

German and UAE exhibitors, but only 19% of Chinese participants. These contrasts reinforce conclusions from the tourism literature linking destination image with emotional and sensory appeal [21,32].

The analysis of first-time visitation also revealed important trends. All German exhibitors were first-time visitors to both Greece and Thessaloniki, while some Chinese and UAE participants had prior exposure to the country and city. This suggests that German evaluations were shaped entirely by first impressions, whereas participants from China and the UAE may have drawn on more informed or nuanced expectations. The finding underscores the importance of segmenting engagement strategies based on prior familiarity and cultural context.

The qualitative interviews provided additional depth to the survey results, revealing how exhibitors' experiences extended beyond business outcomes to include personal impressions of the city's hospitality and infrastructure. German participants emphasized emotional connections and future tourism intentions, while Chinese respondents focused on symbolic visibility. Notably, UAE exhibitors raised concerns about the lack of halal food options across the city, highlighting a disconnect between the fair's international branding and Thessaloniki's readiness to accommodate diverse cultural needs. These insights underscore that for international events to foster sustainable urban reputations and destination loyalty, cities must go beyond event logistics and invest in inclusive, culturally attuned hospitality systems.

By synthesizing data across three case studies, this paper offers a rare comparative view of how international exhibitors perceive a single host city under identical organizational conditions. It demonstrates how Social Exchange Theory applies not only within cultural groups, as earlier articles have shown, but also across them—revealing that perceptions of fairness, value, and trust are strongly mediated by national and cultural background [9,10,20]. Although not directly measured as standalone variables, trust and fairness were inferred from responses related to satisfaction with organizational processes and reinforced by qualitative interview themes.

The observed cultural difference, such as the German exhibitors' emphasis on emotional warmth, the Chinese participants' focus on symbolic visibility, and the UAE participants' concern with halal food access, can be better understood through an anthropological perspective. For instance, the German group, composed entirely of first-time visitors, may reflect a cultural preference for structured and hospitable environments, consistent with high uncertainty avoidance and expectations of reliability in unfamiliar settings [34]. The Chinese emphasis on visibility and symbolic status reflects the importance of collective identity in Chinese cultural settings, as noted by Ting-Toomey [41]. Meanwhile, the attention given by UAE participants to religious dietary requirements highlights the importance of faith-based practices and the expectation of cultural accommodation abroad [42]. These patterns suggest that what is valued by each group may reflect either core priorities at home or heightened awareness of what is lacking when abroad. Understanding these deeper cultural logics adds interpretive depth to the findings and enhances the value of comparative analysis in international event research.

6.2. Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, these findings highlight the need for differentiated event design and city branding strategies. Thessaloniki's capacity to appeal to diverse national audiences can be strengthened by tailoring promotional messages and hospitality features to specific cultural expectations. For example, food-centered marketing may appeal strongly to East Asian exhibitors, while emphasis on infrastructure efficiency may better resonate with Western European audiences. Event organizers can benefit from

integrating culturally adaptive design, targeted signage, and language-specific support into fair planning. Moreover, first-time visitors, particularly from emerging markets, should be prioritized through orientation services and post-event engagement to maximize long-term destination loyalty. While TIF-HELEXPO and local authorities have made efforts in recent years to internationalize the fair, such as multilingual signage, targeted media campaigns, and bilateral forum, feedback from exhibitors suggests that these interventions remain uneven in their cultural specificity. For example, concerns raised by UAE participants about the lack of halal food options point to unmet expectations in urban hospitality. Therefore, the proposals advanced here are partly corrective, aiming to align Thessaloniki's international positioning with more inclusive and culturally responsive strategies.

The fair's evolution has contributed to Thessaloniki's contemporary urban and cultural positioning, reinforcing its visibility as a hub for international engagement. Initiatives like the Honored Country program have expanded the fair's role beyond commerce, incorporating elements of cultural exchange, public diplomacy, and international cooperation. For instance, during the 82nd T.I.F. in 2017, when China was the Honored Country, the event featured significant international participation and high-level delegations, reflecting its strategic value as a platform for bilateral visibility. Such developments illustrate how the T.I.F. serves not only as a longstanding trade exhibition but also as a dynamic setting for shaping Thessaloniki's external image and partnerships.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. While the dataset is consistent and robust across countries, the UAE sample was smaller, limiting some comparative depth. Additionally, all data reflect a specific exhibition context in Thessaloniki, which may constrain generalizability to other fairs or cities. Finally, while this paper delivers a valuable statistical comparison, future research could incorporate qualitative feedback to deepen understanding of how cultural values shape experience interpretation. Future research could also benefit from incorporating ethnographic or anthropological methods to more deeply explore the cultural logic behind exhibitor preferences and behaviors, including how values such as hospitality, religious accommodation, or symbolic presence are shaped by broader sociocultural frameworks.

Despite these limitations, this study offers a substantial contribution by integrating previously segmented findings into a coherent cross-cultural analysis. It affirms the dual role of trade fairs as both economic engines and instruments of cultural diplomacy and offers strategic guidance for cities seeking to enhance their international visibility and stakeholder engagement through events.

7. Conclusions

This study provides a comparative analysis of how cultural background shapes the experiences, evaluations, and loyalty behaviors of international exhibitors at the Thessaloniki International Fair. Drawing on national-level data from China, the UAE, and Germany, the analysis reveals meaningful differences in satisfaction with infrastructure and services, engagement with local attractions, and perceptions of value. While each group demonstrated distinct priorities and expectations, commonalities also emerged around the importance of hospitality, professionalism, and urban accessibility.

By synthesizing these insights through a cross-cultural lens, this study advances our understanding of how trade fairs function not only as economic events but also as cultural encounters and urban branding platforms. The findings support the relevance of Social Exchange Theory in interpreting exhibitor behavior and suggest that differentiated,

culturally informed strategies are essential for maximizing tourism and reputational impact of international events.

Future research may build on these results by incorporating longitudinal follow-ups or qualitative data to further explore how cultural perceptions evolve over time and across destinations. In the meantime, cities like Thessaloniki can leverage these insights to refine their approach to M.I.C.E. tourism and international engagement.

From the Thessaloniki case, it becomes clear that trade fairs can serve as soft power tools and tourism amplifiers, but their long-term contribution to sustainable urban development depends on how well benefits are distributed locally. This includes returns to local businesses, employment generation, urban mobility enhancements, and the integration of sustainability principles in event management. While our study focused on international exhibitor perceptions, future research should explore the extent to which local stakeholders experience these benefits—and under what conditions. This highlights the need for cities to embed fairs within holistic urban strategies rather than viewing them solely as episodic promotional events.

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