

Film Festival Ephemera: Promotional Objects as Tools for Brand Identity and Self-Image

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Abstract

While film festivals have been widely studied as transnational cultural infrastructures, there is less theoretical attention to their promotional materials and ephemera. This article fills that gap by analyzing festival merchandise not just as memorabilia but as a material infrastructure that generates economic value, shapes institutional identity, and fosters enduring cinephile communities. Drawing on film festival studies, material culture theory, branding, and consumer culture approaches, the article examines merchandising practices and visual identity systems at major international festivals like Cannes, Venice, Berlinale, Locarno, and Toronto, proposing a three-part analytical model that interprets promotional objects through their economic-financial, identity-strategic, and experiential-communicative functions. Findings indicate that promotional goods operate as hybrid cultural assets. Economically, they support revenue diversification and brand extension within volatile funding environments. Strategically, interpreted through Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2012), chromatic palettes, typographic systems and recurring symbols function as brand-identity stabilisers linking institutional culture and audience self-image. Experientially, drawing on Pine and Gilmore (1999) and Schmitt (1999), festival ephemera activate sensory, affective and relational processes that translate event temporality into lasting practices of recognition and affiliation. Situated within the domain of *cinephemera*, these artefacts emerge as material infrastructures of memory, distinction and cultural retention, demonstrating how film festival ephemera contributes to institutional coherence and the consolidation of transnational cinephile communities.

Keywords: Film festival ephemera; Film festival studies; Brand identity; Experiential marketing; Cinephemera.

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1 Introduction

Film festivals have consolidated as dynamic, transnational cultural infrastructures (Iordanova 2009; Elsaesser 2005). Rather than functioning solely as screening venues, they operate as sites where artistic, industrial and social logics intersect, generating cultural mediation, circulation and identity formation (de Valck 2007; Wong 2011). Since the early 2000s, the field has progressively formalised its theoretical apparatus, moving beyond descriptive approaches and situating festivals within global cultural economies (de Valck & Loist 2009; Iordanova 2013).

Within this framework, the present study examines a dimension that remains structurally significant yet under-analysed: film festival ephemera, with specific attention to promotional objects. These artefacts are not souvenirs, but material devices capable of producing memory, belonging and identity, thereby functioning as durable cultural infrastructures of cinephilia.

Classic scholarship consistently frames the festival as a multilayered device: an alternative distribution circuit (Elsaesser 2005), an infrastructure of global cinephilia (de Valck 2007, 2016), and a transnational mediator shaped by centre–periphery dynamics (Iordanova 2009; Wong 2011). This multilayeredness explains the endurance of festivals despite their ephemeral temporality. As Harbord argues, festivals operate as “time-events” capable of generating collective affect (2009). This stands in contrast to Augé’s theorisation of the *non-lieu* (1992): rather than suspending identity, festivals actively produce and transmit it through ritual repetition and social practice.

Material culture becomes decisive here. Objects such as catalogues, posters and badges act as technologies of memory (Miller 1998; Belk 1988), translating participation into durable identity practices. In this sense, promotional goods contribute to what Zielinski (2016), and de Valck & Zielinski (2022, 2023) conceptualise as the festival’s medial and infrastructural nature: a system composed not only of events and publics but also of artefacts that stabilise experience across time.

Methodologically, this article integrates Film Festival Studies, Material Culture, Branding, and Consumer Culture Theory, drawing on case studies (Cannes, Venice, Berlinale, Locarno, TIFF, Tribeca), semiotic–visual analysis of brand design, and the examination of archival, economic, and primary materials. From this perspective, festival ephemera emerge as material thresholds through which the festival persists and becomes culturally retained.

2 A tripartite architecture

If festival objects endure where events dissolve, their role requires a clearer analytical grammar. This article adopts a tripartite model centred on three core functions – economic, identity-related, and experiential – further articulated through the notion of *cinephemera* (Comand et al. 2024), which captures the dual condition of festival artefacts as both temporary and archivally preserved. This framework combines marketing, brand theory, material culture and film festival studies to explain how objects participate in the construction of institutional identity.

Ephemera, and promotional materials in particular, operate as devices of memory, belonging and cultural transmission. Scholarship on temporary media highlights their capacity to mediate affect, sustain spectatorship practices and generate cultural memory (Prelinger 2009; Grainge 2011; Zielinski 2016; Comand et al. 2024; Piredda 2022). In this sense, film festivals may be situated within a *material and sensory economy*, where consumption, collection and commemoration overlap, consistent with Miller’s theorisation of objects as carriers of social value (1998) and with Belk’s model of possessions as extensions of the self (1988).

Merchandising denotes the strategic process underpinning these practices, whereas *merchandise* refers to its material output: catalogues, tote bags, posters, T-shirts, passes, badges and branded apparel. Their circulation consolidates recognition, visibility and institutional identity, a phenomenon documented in studies of event-based merchandising and in research on consumer–brand interaction (Buttle 1984a, 1984b; Karabiyyik and Elgün 2021).

A third category, *promotional giveaways*, designates free or low-cost branded items designed to stimulate visibility, engagement and loyalty. Marketing literature refers to these objects as promotional items, event premiums or sales-promotion goods (Doyle 2012; Karabiyik and Elgün 2021). Although often treated as disposable, they tend to produce affective attachment and memory retention, particularly in festival environments where audience participation intersects with symbolic consumption.

Taken together, these three components – process (*merchandising*), product (*merchandise*) and symbolic-access function (*promotional giveaways*) – constitute an operational grammar through which festival objects articulate both economic value and community-building capacity. In practice, boundaries remain porous: merchandise becomes collectible, giveaways accrue affective durability and badges, lanyards or branded water bottles persist as tokens of participation. Catalogues and posters often evolve into status-bearing artefacts (Karabiyik and Elgün 2021).

Festival objects circulate across economic, symbolic and affective regimes, assuming *social lives* through exchange and recontextualisation (Kopytoff 1986). Over time, they accumulate cultural substance and identity potential (Miller 1998; Belk 1988), as illustrated in Fig. 1. In this sense, promotional objects function as liminal infrastructures through which festivals generate visibility, identity and long-term cultural endurance.



Fig. 1. – Festival de Cannes promotional objects, private collection of Alain Gomet (geomel_fr 95, France), image from eBay listing no. 126025546244, accessed October 28, 2025.

2.1 Economic and financial function

Within an organisational ecosystem characterised by funding volatility and cyclical revenue structures, merchandising operates as a stabilising economic infrastructure for film festivals. As Vogel (2023) argues, contemporary festivals have become “experience-makers” embedded in the festivalization of capitalism: hybrid cultural organisations structurally dependent on diversified income streams in order to maintain organisational stability. In this framework, merchandising contributes to financial resilience by reducing exposure to box-office fluctuations and short-term sponsorship cycles.

Industry evidence confirms this trend: at the Cannes Film Festival, official product sales have been estimated at around 200 million dollars (Nergy India 2023), indicating that material culture has become a substantial revenue pillar for large-scale cultural events. Far from being ancillary, merchandising has thus evolved into an integrated component of the broader cultural economy of festivals, supported by growing audience volumes, visibility and brand extension potential.¹

This tendency aligns with transformations identified by Anderton (2015) in the music festival sector, where branding and sponsorship practices have undergone marked professionalisation. Branding has expanded from promotional communication to the experiential and material dimensions of events, generating complex forms of brand-leveraging that include the production and circulation of objects. Although film festivals differ from music festivals in aesthetics and historical development, both share a structural duality between cultural vocation and economic imperative. Anderton terms this tension commerce versus carnival: the shift from counter-cultural, participatory gatherings to fully fledged cultural enterprises shaped by market logic, experiential consumption and the pursuit of financial sustainability.

Film festivals embody this dialectic in a more muted but equally structural form. As highly mediated cultural events that compete for visibility, sponsors, talent, and audience engagement, they deploy promotional objects – T-shirts, tote bags, catalogues, bottles, badges, passes, and other branded artefacts – as communicative touchpoints that stabilise brand identity, materialise affiliation, and extend the festival into everyday life. Positioned within Schmitt's experiential marketing framework (1999), merchandise acts simultaneously as a revenue-generating product and as a strategic device articulating recognition, belonging and symbolic investment.

Empirical studies reinforce this reading. Dodds et al. (2020) demonstrate that when merchandise is conceived as an integrated component of an event's business model, it can achieve high profit margins and significantly enhance brand equity. Their research identifies four attributes that determine commercial performance: design quality, perceived usefulness, product exclusivity (such as limited editions or signature items) and brand coherence. These variables are not merely commercial drivers; they operate as mediators between the economic and symbolic spheres, reinforcing audience loyalty and transforming consumption into a form of identity alignment.

In this perspective, promotional objects emerge as hybrid economic–cultural assets: they produce revenue while circulating symbolic meaning, enabling festivals to balance artistic mission, competitive positioning and long-term sustainability. Far from functioning as decorative souvenirs, they constitute a strategic economic infrastructure that supports the endurance and recognisability of festivals within increasingly saturated cultural markets.

Although derived from broader cultural-economy contexts, these findings are directly applicable to film festivals, where revenue diversification has become structurally necessary (Hesmondhalgh 2013). A coherent merchandising strategy extends income beyond box-office and sponsorship cycles, strengthens financial sustainability and reduces dependence on public funding. As Dal Palù et al. (2018) note, products derived from cultural assets generate both economic and symbolic value, reinforcing institutional identity. In this sense, merchandising operates as a “silent salesman” (Pilditch 1961; Buttle 1987), integrating communication, marketing and financing.

Consumer Culture Theory similarly shows that audience loyalty involves both emotional investment and economic participation: acquiring branded objects signifies belonging and reinforces community attachment. Merchandise is therefore not a purely transactional good but a form of cultural and financial engagement

1. European and British audiences spend millions on festival merchandise. The Festival Merch Report highlights Download Festival – a leading UK rock and metal event – as a leader, with over 190,000 monthly Amazon searches and an estimated £56 million yearly from merchandise, surpassing Reading, Leeds, Isle of Wight, and Glastonbury (Event Industry News, 7 September 2023). TSE Entertainment (2023) estimates that, at some festivals, merchandise can make up to 30% of total revenue, making branded items a key economic driver. Drawing on over forty years of live-event experience, they show how merchandising acts as a revenue stream, brand tool, and audience retention method in Danny Rojas' industry report. While these examples are from music festivals, they demonstrate the financial impact of merchandising, model brand-driven revenue, and offer insights that can inform or challenge film festival economics.

that sustains the festival ecosystem, often acquiring a secondary life as ephemera and functioning as a material trace of cinephile memory (Wickham 2010).

The Locarno Film Festival illustrates this dynamic clearly (Fig. 2). One of the few major festivals to disclose detailed financial data, it reported CHF 65,000 in direct merchandise revenue in 2021, alongside a steady expansion of self-generated income: 26 per cent of its total budget in 2022 (CHF 4.4 million of CHF 16.7 million) and 27 per cent in 2024 (on a CHF 18.2 million budget). Catalogues and publications alone exceeded CHF 300,000 in 2022, tripling the previous year, while the official shop grew by approximately CHF 70,000 in 2023. These figures confirm that merchandising is not peripheral but a structural economic asset within festival finance.²



Fig. 2. – Post published on this 7 August on the official Locarno Film Festival Instagram and Facebook pages, promoting the purchase of promotional items among festival attendees.

From an analytical standpoint, the Locarno case illustrates how merchandising, publishing and brand-licensing have shifted from peripheral activities to strategic pillars of financial sustainability and brand valorisation. Festival-branded products and publications emerge not as ancillary outputs but as integral components of a mixed economic model that combines public funding, private sponsorship and self-generated revenue. Locarno's unusually transparent reporting provides rare empirical insight into the economic relevance that merchandising can assume within a festival's budgetary ecosystem, a dimension often obscured elsewhere by the lack of publicly available data. This evidence aligns with the broader arguments of Hesmondhalgh (2013) and Dal Palù et al. (2018): cultural organisations increasingly rely on hybrid economic logics in which symbolic capital and brand equity are converted into financial resources through carefully designed tangible outputs. The promotional object thus functions not only as Pilditch's silent salesman but as a cultural asset that links creative mission to economic performance, contributing to what Pine and Gilmore (1999) and Schmitt (1999) conceptualise as the experience economy of festivals.

Alongside this economic dimension, an economy of signs also becomes apparent, recalling Baudrillard's theorisation of how symbolic systems convert reputation, prestige and authorship into value.³ In festival merchandising, design credibility, visual coherence and the cultural standing of the institution feed directly into the

2. All data referred to here is available on the official website of the Locarno Film Festival, section *Annual Reports*. Link in the references.

3. The expression "economy of the sign" refers to Jean Baudrillard's seminal work *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (1972), which argues that late-capitalist societies are governed less by material production than by the circulation and consumption

profitability of objects, while financial performance in turn reinforces the brand's symbolic legitimacy. The resulting ambivalence is structural: commercial pressures may produce mission drift; inconsistencies in design or messaging may weaken symbolic capital; and excessive standardisation risks banalising the festival's identity. Yet these tensions illuminate, rather than undermine, the role of promotional objects as mediators between cultural value and market logic.

Two analytical axes emerge.

1. Functional-analytical axis. Merchandising operates as an economic-financial lever: a structural component of festival design that supports diversification of revenue, co-branding opportunities and long-term audience engagement.
2. Interpretative-critical axis. The economic function occupies a hybrid space between culture and market. Its legitimacy depends on maintaining equilibrium between symbolic value, visual coherence and commercial sustainability.

The case of Locarno exemplifies this dialectic: sustainable sourcing, transparent communication and a recognisable design language demonstrate that the economic and cultural dimensions of merchandising can be aligned without compromising institutional identity. Objects such as the recycled SIGG bottles or limited-edition apparel show how a festival can integrate market logic into its brand architecture while preserving – and even amplifying – its symbolic capital.

2.2 Identity-strategic function

Merchandising functions as economic and cultural infrastructure that helps define, stabilise, and legitimise a festival's identity. When embedded within the event's broader communication strategy, it aligns financial aims with cultural mission, confirming that promotional objects operate not at the margins but at the core of contemporary festival branding. Beyond their economic relevance, these artefacts serve as a semiotic interface: they materialise values, aesthetics, and institutional commitments, extending audience engagement beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of the event (Doyle 2012).

It is in this sense that merchandise operates as a *silent ambassador*, embodying and disseminating the symbolic capital upon which festival reputation is built. This evolution reflects the convergence described by Anderton (2015) in the tension between commerce and carnival, where economic imperatives and cultural identity mutually reinforce one another. In this regard, Kapferer's *Brand Identity Prism* (2008, 2012) – illustrated in Fig. 3 below – offers a valuable framework for understanding how official products operate across all six identity dimensions: their visual and tangible components (*physique*), communicative tone (*personality*), articulation of institutional values (*culture*), relationship with audiences (*relationship*), representation of the target public (*reflection*), and processes of audience self-identification (*self-image*).

Read through this framework, official items – from Cannes' *Palme d'Or* tote bags to Locarno's eco-certified accessories and the Berlinale's bear-branded caps – do more than express visual coherence. They participate in the construction of the festival's communicative persona, enabling audiences to recognise and position themselves within a shared symbolic universe. In this respect, merchandising emerges as a cultural interface where economic, symbolic, and experiential dimensions converge, turning material design into both an extension and a crystallisation of collective identity.

Recent research affirms this interpretation. Specifically, Um (2023), in *A Study on Brand Identification through Poster of International Film Festival*, analyses the official posters of international festivals and emphasises that chromatic and typographical consistency enhances recognisability and loyalty. Colour and shape evolve into genuine *visual codes* that encapsulate cultural identity and project it over time. This demonstrates that design is not merely a tool for communication but also a device for establishing identity, capable of influencing *sensory* and *emotional* responses. In the same way, Karaalioglu (2024), in *Creating Visual Identity in Film Festival*

of signs. In such an economy, objects and experiences derive value primarily from the prestige and social distinction they confer rather than from their practical or exchange utility, producing hierarchies of meaning and desire. Within the film-festival sphere, this logic translates into the symbolic valorisation of branded artefacts – passes, catalogues, and merchandise – that accrue significance not for their material use but for their role as markers of belonging and cultural capital.

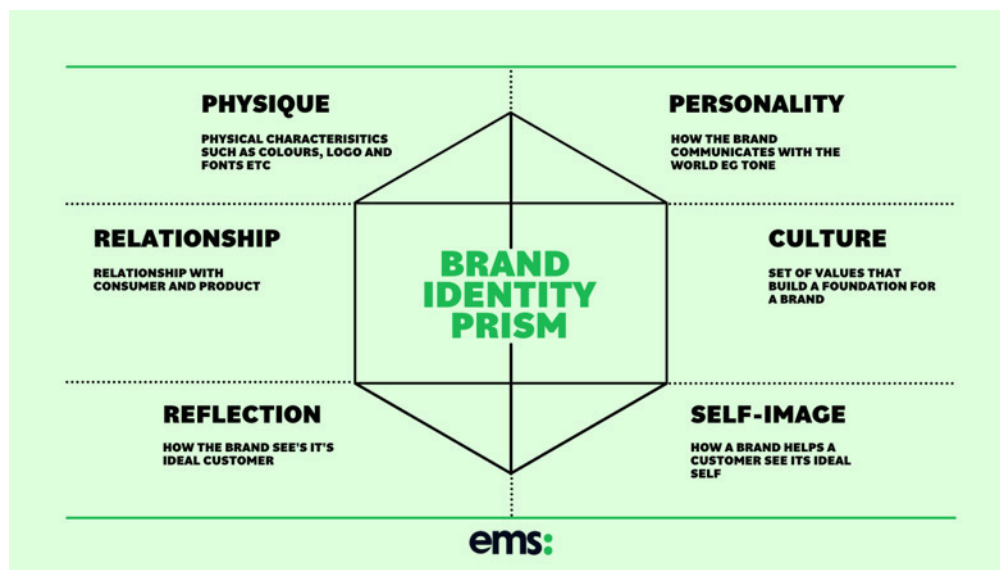


Fig. 3. – Illustration of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism – schematic representation of the six facets of brand identity: physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection and self-image.

Designs, conducts a semiotic analysis of the 74th Berlin International Film Festival, demonstrating how the systematic recurrence of the red–black–white chromatic triad and the stylised bear motif have contributed to consolidating the Berlinale's visual identity. Through a consistent interplay between colour symbolism and *iconographic minimalism*, the festival has established a coherent *brand grammar* that communicates institutional authority and cultural distinction. The study highlights how this integrated visual language functions as a *semiotic anchor*, reinforcing the festival's recognisability across media platforms and enhancing its position within the global festival circuit.

This dynamic becomes visible in material practices. As illustrated in Fig. 6, the Berlinale's official shop sells bags, posters, apparel, and accessories that deploy its chromatic palette and bear iconography. Such objects do not operate as neutral souvenirs: they function as tools of self-expression and belonging, enabling audiences to inhabit the festival's symbolic universe materially. Merchandise becomes a tangible extension of experience, strengthening emotional attachment and reinforcing cultural memory. The analyses of Um and Karaalioglu converge on a crucial point: visual consistency and symbolic recurrence crystallise cultural identity. For this reason, merchandising should be interpreted not as a peripheral activity but as a strategic component of festival branding. In line with Setiawan et al. (2022), branding through material objects constitutes an engagement-oriented form of communication, embedding experience into memory and generating long-term attachment.

Further examples across the global festival landscape corroborate this pattern: Venice deploys the Golden Lion and a red–gold palette as markers of continuity and prestige; Cannes has developed a boutique centred on design-led products that extend the festival's aesthetics into everyday life; Sundance maintains an online store featuring clothing, posters, and limited-edition artefacts that articulate the festival's identity as a creative, community-oriented platform. In each case, merchandise serves both economic and symbolic functions: it generates revenue while circulating status markers for cinephiles and serving as tools of international promotion. The Locarno Film Festival provides an especially instructive example. As illustrated in Fig. 2, the long-standing use of yellow and the leopard motif has produced an instantly recognisable identity that permeates communication, programming, and official products. The 77th edition,⁴ demonstrates a structured merchandising architecture comprising:

4. The complete range of products from the 77th edition is no longer available online, as it has been replaced by that of the following edition. However, the official website still allows the reconstruction of the main product types and categories representative of the merchandising strategy adopted by the festival.

1. *Clothing*: Locarno77 T-shirts (adult, child and baby) act as *signs of belonging*, not mere promotional items;
2. *Accessories*: GOTS and Oeko-Tex certified DillySocks, tote bags in organic cotton, recycled aluminium bottles and upcycled cases (Fondazione Diamante) integrate *aesthetics, sustainability, and social inclusion*;
3. *Books and catalogues*: institutional publications strengthen curatorial and archival identity;
4. *Collectables*: posters, limited photographs and the *Postcard Box – 70th Anniversary* transform merchandise into *material archives*;
5. *Playful elements*: *Monopoly – Locarno Edition* exemplifies *brand extension*, translating Piazza Grande into a ludic experience.

Through these practices, Locarno translates its institutional values – aesthetic innovation, sustainability, inclusivity – into everyday consumer practices. Merchandise thus consolidates brand positioning and strengthens community cohesion. From a place-branding perspective⁵ symbolic portability becomes strategic: the Leopard of Locarno, the Bear of Berlin, the Lion of Venice circulate beyond the festival, functioning as mobile fragments of urban and cultural identity (Richards 2017).

In this context, merchandising performs a dual and interdependent role: it differentiates the festival within the global market; it reinforces audience belonging and cultural adherence.

Under Kapferer's (2012) brand-identity framework and Holt (2004) and Sălcudean (2017)'s cultural branding concept, festivals function as cultural brands that organise values, visual codes, and identity narratives across time. Chromatic palettes, typography, and recurring symbols constitute a persistent semiotic constellation (Karaalioglu 2024; Um 2023), materialised through strategically.

2.3 Experiential-communicative function

While the identity-strategic function of merchandise focuses on establishing a recognisable and coherent festival image, the experiential-communicative function transforms the audience from passive spectators into active cultural participants, generating sensory, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Two theoretical frameworks are foundational here: Pine and Gilmore's Experience Economy (1999) and Schmitt's experiential marketing model (1999). The first suggest that contemporary cultural value might reside in the ability to design memorable experiences structured around four experiential realms – entertainment, aesthetics, education, and escapism (Fig. 4). This taxonomy could align well with film festivals, whose experiential ecology might extend from screenings to spatial design, from encounters with filmmakers to the circulation of promotional objects (Park & Park 2010). Promotional items might fit within this logic: they could amplify each experiential domain and transform the festival into an environment where spectatorship becomes participation.

Entertainment, the most widespread realm, would encompass all forms of passive yet emotionally engaged participation. In film festivals, this could include screenings, Q&A sessions, opening ceremonies, prize announcements, and special events such as live orchestral performances accompanying restored classics. Merchandise might contribute to this realm by acting as a memory stabilizer: objects materialise moments that would otherwise dissolve into the flow of time. A paradigmatic example could be the sale of bound screenplays by A24 at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF). These volumes allow audiences to access the filmic text beyond the viewing event, extending interpretation, deepening cinephile engagement, and reinforcing the affective bond with the festival.

5. Place branding refers to the strategic process through which territories construct and communicate coherent identity frameworks to attract audiences, resources and investment (Karavatzis 2004; Richards 2016) described as a network of associations through which places acquire symbolic meaning for their publics. Within the festival context, this framework clarifies how events operate as cultural place brands: festivals condense local identity, aesthetic codes and institutional values into recognisable symbolic forms that reinforce territorial visibility and audience attachment (Ooi and Pedersen 2010). In this sense, place branding and festival merchandising converge, as both translate cultural identity into material and experiential interfaces.

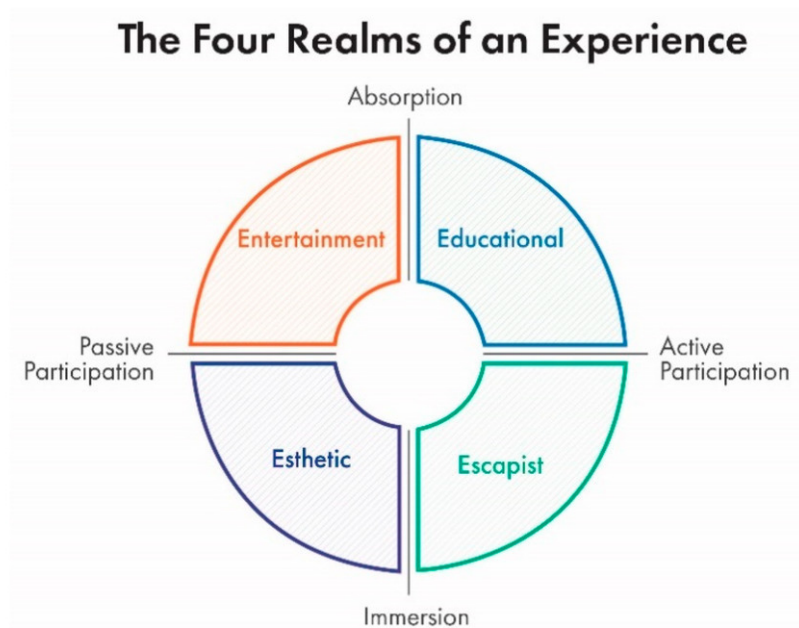


Fig. 4. – The Experience Realms, Pine and Gilmore (1999).

More broadly, TIFF's shop has developed an ecosystem of playful and creative products – trivia games, tarot-inspired card decks (Movie Tarot), and colouring books based on film iconography. These items transform cinephilia into an everyday interactive practice: they would not only recall the festival experience but might also enable the audience to perform it, thereby strengthening identification and fostering a long-term sense of belonging to the festival community.

Aesthetics could be described as the immersive perceptual dimension, where spectators are transported into atmospheres shaped by scenography, design, sound, and spatial organisation. In this context, participation is primarily receptive but no less transformative. Festivals operate as temporary aesthetic worlds, and their merchandise could function as portable fragments of these worlds. Posters, catalogues, bags, and photographic prints serve as material extensions of the festival's visual identity, stabilising and circulating its aesthetic codes.

The Cannes Film Festival exemplifies this principle. Its boutique features meticulously designed items that reproduce the Palme d'Or emblem, the festival's typographic style, and its signature chromatic palette. These objects could be status markers, signalling cultural distinction and social alignment with one of the most prestigious brands in global cinema. Their consistency over time demonstrates an advanced level of brand governance, with aesthetics and institutional mission perfectly aligned.

Similarly, the Locarno Film Festival has consolidated a distinctive visual identity focused on its iconic yellow chromatic field and leopard motif. Its merchandising line includes both functional gadgets – such as yellow umbrellas with black spots – and artistic prints created by internationally recognised illustrators. The circulation and preservation of posters across editions effectively constitute a visual archive that documents the festival's aesthetic trajectory. As material traces, these objects embody cultural memory, stabilising identity through repetition and variation.

Across both Cannes and Locarno, merchandising might perform a dual aesthetic function: on one hand, reiterating brand identity by reinforcing stable visual codes; on the other, fostering audience loyalty by transforming objects into semiotic anchors that link individual experiences to collective symbolic heritage.

The third dimension – the *educational* one – demonstrates how film festivals serve as venues for learning and knowledge creation. Masterclasses, workshops, and dialogue sessions with industry professionals allow audiences to engage in a formative process that goes beyond simply watching films, encouraging critical thinking

and interdisciplinary exchanges. Events like the Bambù Talks at the Far East Film Festival, along with editorial publications from the Locarno and Toronto International Film Festivals (TIFF), show how education manifests through tangible tools for intellectual involvement. In this context, editorial materials such as critical catalogues, monographs, and retrospectives might serve not only as records of events but also as pedagogical and archival resources that support cultural and historical preservation. Additionally, playful-educational tools reimagine learning through participatory activities, extending the festival experience into everyday life.

The *escapist* dimension, by contrast, constitutes the most immersive layer of festival experience, in which audiences transcend passive spectatorship to become active agents within the performative sphere. This logic finds its most eloquent expression in immersive technologies and interactive practices, which have profoundly reconfigured participation and reception. A paradigmatic instance is *Venice Immersive*⁶ at the *Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica di Venezia*, hosted on *Lazzaretto Vecchio*. Dedicated to virtual and augmented reality, the festival transforms into an experiential laboratory in which spectators explore narrative worlds beyond traditional cinematic boundaries.

A further articulation of the escapist logic is embodied by experience passes, such as the *Industry Pass* or *VIP Pass* of the *Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF)*, which grant privileged access to invitation-only events, encounters with professionals, and private receptions. Here, experience is defined not only by cinematic content but by networking and social exchange, transforming participation into a distinctive form of *cultural capital*. Innovations at the *Tribeca Film Festival* have pushed this further: by incorporating *Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs)* into its digital strategy, the festival enables participants to acquire collectable digital artefacts – from limited-edition posters to virtual passes – that provide exclusive benefits, including private screenings, virtual meetings, or VIP event access. Thus, the festival redefines collectability, extending interaction beyond the material and temporal confines of the event and consolidating identity through technological and experiential innovation.

In all these cases, escapism becomes not only perceptual or narrative but *performative*: audiences enact their membership, navigate spaces of privilege, and participate in identity-building processes. These practices enable festivals to function as hybrid infrastructures that generate memory, relationships and cultural belonging – a marked departure from the anonymity of Augé's *non-lieux* (1992). Festivals are temporary yet non-anonymous spaces: ephemeral events that nevertheless produce durable symbolic communities.

This interpretation is reinforced by Park and Park (2010), who demonstrate that the four experiential realms converge in generating an escapist effect at the Busan International Film Festival. This effect mediates satisfaction and predicts future behavioural intentions such as return attendance, recommendation or continued engagement through merchandise. Escapism thus operates as a *behavioural catalyst*, binding together sensory, educational and social stimuli into a unified experiential system.

If the festival experience can be understood as an escapist, *othered* space–time, what remains to clarify is how this dimension is rendered *tangible* and *enduring*. Pine and Gilmore's taxonomy clarifies what participants experience – entertainment, aesthetics, education, escapism – but does not explain how these experiences are designed and translated into everyday practices. At this point, Schmitt's (1999) experiential modules (*SEMs*) – illustrated in Fig. 5⁷ – become essential, as they help us elucidate how merchandising materialises the festival escapism described above. These are not abstract analytical labels but dimensions that acquire concrete relevance in the objects and devices circulated by festivals.

6. *Venice Immersive* is the Extended Reality (XR) section of the *Venice International Film Festival*, curated by Liz Rosenthal and Michel Reilhac for *La Biennale di Venezia*. Hosted on the island of Lazzaretto Vecchio, opposite the Lido, the section is entirely devoted to immersive and interactive media – virtual, augmented, and mixed reality, as well as virtual worlds and installations. The 2025 edition (27 August – 6 September) includes sixty-nine projects from twenty-seven countries, divided into *Competition*, *Best of Immersive*, and *Biennale College Cinema – Immersive*.

7. Diagram adapted from Viegas, *Sensory Marketing: The Role of Sensory Stimuli in Consumer Behaviour in Retail Environment* (2022: 5): it summarises the structure of the Strategic Experiential Modules (SEMs), as originally presented in Schmitt (1999), and is reproduced here to clarify the articulation between sensory, affective, cognitive, behavioural and relational components within experiential marketing. Its inclusion serves to support the analytical framework adopted in this article, providing a visual reference for understanding how SEMs inform the reading of film festival merchandising as an experiential device.

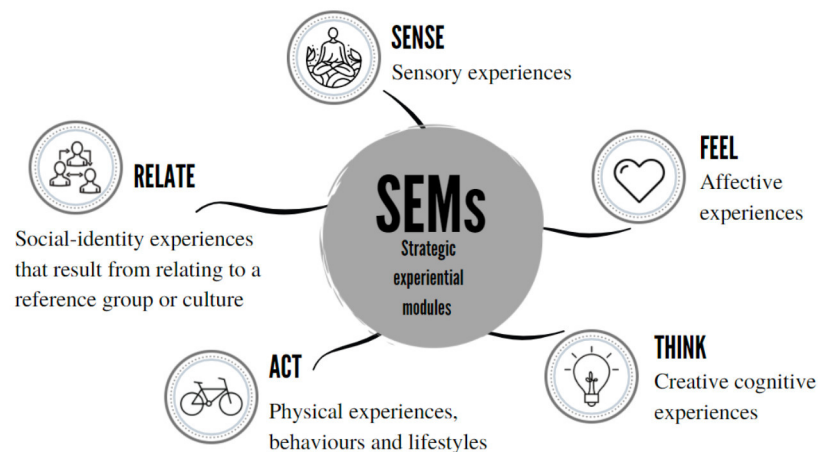


Fig. 5. – Strategic experiential modules (SEMs), adapted from Schmitt (1999). Source: Viegas (2022: 5).

To synthesise the argument developed so far, the conceptual articulation outlined above can be clarified by following the illustration presented in the previous figure. The sensory dimension (*Sense*) emerges, for instance, in limited-edition screen-printed posters or in the *Monopoly – Locarno Edition*, which translates the festival's visual identity into memorable perceptual experiences. Similarly, tote bags and exclusive packaging activate the senses and consolidate the event's recognisability within the collective imagination. The emotional dimension (*Feel*) concerns the ability of objects to condense atmospheres and affective states. Examples include TIFF's colouring books, the T-shirts of the Berlinale or Venice, Locarno's DillySocks, the shirts inspired by Far East Film Festival retrospectives, and the *Premio Amidei* bags produced from discarded materials and therefore unique pieces. In all these instances, merchandising becomes an emotional souvenir that immediately recalls the festival's atmosphere and extends its affective impact.

On the cognitive level (*Think*), merchandising materialises in critical publications and in the book sections of official stores, which stimulate reflection and debate. Choosing an eco-sustainable gadget over a traditional one may also trigger processes of critical thinking and awareness, transforming the purchase into a curatorial and intellectual practice. The performative dimension (*Act*) translates consumption into behaviour. The NFTs of the Tribeca Film Festival, for example, invite audiences to experiment with new forms of digital collecting and engagement; likewise, eco-responsible gadgets such as reusable water bottles, organic-cotton totes, and accessories derived from upcycling practices encourage everyday habits that extend the festival's values into the urban space. Finally, the relational dimension (*Relate*) highlights how these objects become shared codes: wearing a T-shirt, collecting a catalogue, or displaying an official poster is not an individual gesture, but an act of belonging and mutual recognition that sustains local and transnational cinephile communities.

Placed in dialogue with Kapferer's (2012) *Brand Identity Prism*, these experiential modules reveal the intertwined nature of merchandising and its role. The comparative diagram (Fig. 6) shows that the two models describe two sides of the same coin: on the one hand, the modes through which audiences live and interpret the experience; on the other, the elements that define and stabilise the identity of the festival brand.

The sensory dimension (*Sense*), as defined by Schmitt, encompasses all perceptual stimuli activated through experience: sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste. Within film festivals, this dimension materialises in tangible forms, particularly through official merchandising. The texture of a tote bag, for example, its weight, print quality, or chromatic impact establish an initial sensory connection between the attendee and the festival brand – a connection that may persist over time as the object continues to circulate once owned. This perceptual experience is directly linked to the *physique* component of Kapferer's *Brand Identity Prism*, that is, the immediately recognisable and material layer of the brand (logo, colour palette, typography, materials, visual design). In festival merchandising – for instance, a shopper marked "Venezia 81" – physical attributes consti-

tute the primary identity threshold: what is *seen, touched, worn*. Through this material foundation, the brand activates further layers of Kapferer's model, namely *Personality* (communicative tone, expressive stance) and *Culture* (values, symbolic orientation). Logo, colour, and design are therefore not neutral elements; they act as perceptual predispositions that enable Schmitt's *Feel* dimension, the emotional response arising from sensory experience. The affective value associated with the object depends on the alignment (or misalignment) between the festival's identity structure and the attendee's own values.

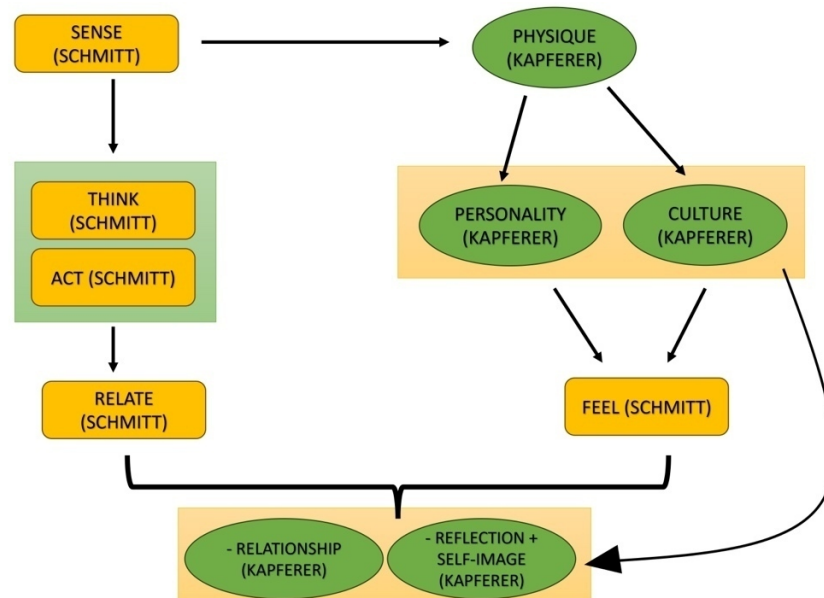


Fig. 6. – Connections between SEMs (Schmitt 1999) and the Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer 2012). A comparative table designed by the author to visually clarify the correlation between the two models.

Accordingly, when a festival-goer chooses to retain or purchase, for example, a tote bag, its value does not lie only in its utility, but in what it symbolically carries: memory, identity recognition, and adhesion – explicit or implicit – to a cultural value system. Affective attachment therefore emerges from the interaction between the sensory stimulus (*Sense*), the material brand identity (*Physique*), and the perceived values (*Personality* + *Culture*), crystallising into an emotional response (*Feel*). The process is not automatic, yet possible: a promotional object functions as a *sensory–affective–identity node* that sustains the relationship between spectator, festival, and community.

This sensorial–affective base extends into Schmitt's further experiential dimensions: *Think*, *Act* and *Relate*. The first concerns subsequent cognitive processing: the object functions as an interpretative and mnemonic trigger, reactivating recollection of screenings, conversations in queue, or the atmosphere of the auditorium. A tote bag thus also operates as a recall device, capable of retrieving contexts and experiences. Then follows *Act*, where experience translates into observable behaviour. Wearing the tote bag, reusing it daily, displaying it or sharing images online converts memory into cultural action. The object becomes not merely a souvenir but a practice of self-presentation and cultural participation. Reiterated behaviour elicits *Relate*, the relational dimension. The tote bag operates as an identity marker, recognisable by other festival-goers; recognition fosters kinship, tacit affiliation, micro-communities of cinephilia.

At this stage, Kapferer's final components – *Relationship* and *Reflection/Self-Image* – become active, correlating with Schmitt's *Act* and *Relate*. *Relationship* involves ongoing interaction between the individual and the festival's brand: a tote bag can be a daily touchpoint, extending the festival experience beyond its duration (which explains why promotional objects from film festivals can function as ephemera) and serving as a constant advertisement (*the silent salesman*). *Reflection/Self-Image* appears when the object no longer simply represents the festival but also the person carrying it, communicating belonging, taste, cultural capital, and identity.

The *Meridian SIGG x Locarno Film Festival* (77th edition), in Fig. 7, exemplifies how a single merchandising object can function as an interface between visual identity, values, and belonging. Material quality and the *pardo* chromatic signature activate the brand's sensory and physical dimensions (*Sense/Physique*), while sustainability, design aesthetics, and co-branding articulate its *Culture* and *Personality*, eliciting emotional response (*Feel*). Everyday use then prompts reflection and behaviour (*Think/Act*), transforming the bottle into a relational marker of affiliation (*Relate/Relationship/Self-Image*). Not merely an object, but a *vector of identity* and experiential continuity.

Taken together, these connections show how film festivals' promotional materials occupy the precise intersection between *experience* and *identity*. On one side, they translate individual and collective festival experiences into tangible objects; on the other, they strengthen the brand identity of festivals as recognisable and enduring *cultural brands*. In this perspective, merchandising should not be regarded merely as an accessory or marginal element, but as a *symbolic interface* linking experience and identity: it converts festival escapism into concrete memory, stabilises brand morphology, and reinforces transnational cinephile communities.



Fig. 7. – Collage of film festival promotional merch. Compiled by the author using publicly sourced images, illustrating the range of contemporary festival ephemera (bags, apparel, mugs, accessories).

3 Promotional objects in film festivals as self-assertion, self-representation, and social distinction

Promotional objects used in film festivals may be understood as material interfaces through which identity is produced, recognised and negotiated. Drawing on the Reflection and Self-Image dimensions of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2012), these artefacts act both as mirrors of the publics the festival addresses and as

projective devices that allow attendees to translate institutional values into personal narratives. Merchandise therefore exceeds the role of a mere accessory: it becomes a cultural mediator that anchors the festival within everyday practices.

This interpretative approach gains depth when situated within the aesthetic and affective ecology of film festivals. As Virginas (2023) observes, festivals operate as atmospheric milieus in which spectators temporarily share perceptual and affective rhythms. Within this environment, objects circulate as condensations of that collective intensity: they stabilise otherwise fleeting sensations, extend the synchrony of the event and materialise forms of participation that would otherwise dissipate with the end of the programme.

The theoretical foundations of this argument emerge clearly in material-culture and consumer-identity studies. Belk's notion of possessions as extensions of the self (1988) and Escalas's work on their narrative functions (2013) demonstrate how consumer goods participate in the construction of personal and relational identity. Empirically, research confirms that purchase intentions increase when brand meaning resonates with a consumer's self-image (Escalas & Bettman 2005; Wheeler & Bechler 2020). In the festival context, a Berlinale hoodie or a Locarno recycled-aluminium bottle thus becomes more than a souvenir: it is a symbolic act of alignment with the festival's ethos.

This symbolic dimension is particularly visible in sustainable merchandise lines. Studies on green consumption show that individuals with strong environmental identities are especially inclined to choose products that externalise their commitments (Haws, Winterich & Naylor 2013; Lou & Li 2021). The decision to purchase sustainable festival items therefore combines aesthetic appreciation, functional utility and value signalling, reinforcing the sense of moral consonance between audiences and institutions.

Because film festivals are socially dense environments, the visibility of objects amplifies their communicative power. As Hall (1996) argues, identities are formed and negotiated within systems of representation: wearing a festival T-shirt or displaying an accreditation badge becomes a daily practice of positioning within a cultural field. Findings from other event-based contexts confirm that merchandise strengthens interpersonal bonds and prolongs the affective cohesion of temporary communities (Barrière & Finkel 2020).

A final interpretative layer emerges when read through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of distinction (1984; 1986). Limited editions, curated collaborations or restricted-access items function as markers of symbolic capital, signalling not merely attendance but cultural competence and familiarity with the tacit hierarchies of cinephilia. Objects such as the *Monopoly Locarno Edition* or Tribeca's NFTs exemplify how festival merchandise can demarcate exclusive taste communities. These artefacts do not only commemorate presence: they embody proximity to the festival's aesthetic and affective core, reinforcing internal stratifications of cultural and symbolic capital.

Seen through this perspective, festival ephemera occupy the intersection between identity-making, affective participation and cultural distinction. Their acquisition and display articulate belonging while simultaneously expressing a form of positionality within the cinephile field. Rather than homogenising audiences, these objects contribute to the differentiation of roles, competences and affiliations, converting ephemeral materials into durable markers of memory, visibility and cultural positioning.

4 Cinephilia, cinephemera and material culture

Situating festival merchandising within the broader field of *cinephemera* enables a more precise understanding of how ephemeral media objects participate in the production of cinephilic cultures. Following Grainge (2011), ephemeral media should not be read through their material fragility alone, but rather through their capacity to generate and stabilise shared cinematic imaginaries. Comand et al. (2024) further demonstrate that film ephemera operate simultaneously as historiographic evidence and as material culture, challenging the assumption that their low durability equates to low significance. In the ecology of film festivals, this distinction becomes especially pertinent: soft media such as catalogues, brochures and programmes, and hard media such as posters, branded merchandise and limited-edition prints, work together to sediment memory, affiliation and cultural participation.

The temporal and spatial instability of festivals intensifies this dynamic. Foucault's theorisation of heterotopia (2010) and Harbord's notion of the time-event (2009) emphasise the liminality and ephemerality that structure festival experience. Festivals emerge as temporary assemblages whose existence is circumscribed by short-lived temporalities, spatial reconfigurations and ritual cycles. Yet merchandising complicates this temporality: whereas the event dissolves, the object persists. Badges, catalogues, tote bags or screen-printed posters materially prolong the festival's presence in everyday life, creating what might be seen as a portable archive. In doing so, these objects counter the logic of what Augé (1992) defines as the non-place: the festival's fleeting, itinerant identity becomes anchored through artefacts that are durable, iterable and recognisable across contexts. Ephemeral in production, perhaps, but enduring in effect.

This ongoing tension between the transient nature of festival materials and their enduring significance has been a longstanding focus in festival studies. Zielinski (2016), in his analysis of queer film festivals, situates ephemera within the broader concept of the "archives of feeling" theorized by Cvetkovich (2003), emphasizing how programs, badges, and flyers serve as records of affective and political histories that official archives often overlook. Warner's (2002) exploration of publics and counterpublics further clarifies how festivals function as discursive spaces where objects act as mediators in the process of world-making. Building on this genealogy, Dayan's contribution "Looking for Sundance" (2020) remains foundational: his description of Sundance generating «a Niagara of printed paper... huge amounts of text were pouring out every day» (Dayan 2000: 52) vividly illustrates the scale and density of the paratextual environment through which festivals define and present themselves. Stringer (2013) interprets Dayan's metaphor to suggest that festivals create publics through the prolific production of textual and visual materials, transforming ephemera into key agents shaping cinephile identities. Across these studies, ephemera are revealed not as mere marginal leftovers but as integral infrastructural elements of festival culture, vital to processes of mediation, circulation, and identification.

Material culture theory provides the final analytical layer. Miller (1998) underscores the extent to which objects mediate social relations and everyday practices, while Belk (1988) positions possessions as extensions of the self and as vehicles of identity-performance. Applied to festival contexts, such frameworks clarify why tote bags, posters or accreditation badges become routine interfaces between personal narrative and collective belonging. Their circulation is often shaped by cultural distinction: limited-release posters, seasonal collaborations or exclusive items – such as Locarno's artist-designed prints or Cannes' restricted collectors' editions – operate as markers of taste, competence and symbolic capital.

Preservation practices reveal further asymmetries. As Peirano (2020) notes, smaller festivals often lack structured archival infrastructures, resulting in the dispersion or disappearance of their material traces. By contrast, institutions such as Sundance or Locarno have, since the 1980s, formalised systems of patrimonialisation, converting ephemeral materials into curated archives that feed academic research, brand narrative and institutional memory. This duality – dispersal versus preservation – demonstrates the analytical value of cinephemera as an object of study: they anchor the festival simultaneously to cultural memory, economic logics and experiential identity.

Across these interpretative registers, festival ephemera reveal a triple function. Economically, they participate in circuits of branding, sustainability and cultural monetisation. Symbolically, they materialise festival identity through recurring visual codes and object ecologies. Experientially, they extend the event beyond its temporal boundaries, embedding it within participants' routines, affects and long-term self-narration. The study of cinephemera thus illuminates how film festivals construct their cultural presence not only through films and programming, but equally through the objects that survive them.

5 Conclusion

To sum up, the research shows that festival merchandise is not an accessory but a structural cultural device. Promotional objects act as carriers of memory, identity and belonging, extending the festival beyond its temporal limits and functioning as material infrastructures of cinephilia.

The analysis also exposes key limitations: scarce comparative data, limited financial transparency, a Western-centred corpus, and the absence of shared metrics for evaluating environmental impact. These gaps indicate

the need for further research, including non-European mapping, the development of common sustainability protocols, and the creation of digital or physical repositories for festival artefacts.

In essence, merchandise operates as a quiet infrastructure: it preserves, circulates and prolongs the festival. Far from being disposable, these objects materialise identity and memory, ensuring that festivals do not simply occur, but endure.

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