

Fostering Sustainable Tourism: Cultivating Responsible Practices in Cultural Festivals

Giulia Alonzo, TrovaFestival, giulia.alonzo@unicatt.it

Alonzo is research fellow at the University of Sacro Cuore of Milan. Her research topics range from Sociology of Culture to Social Sciences and Humanities. Alonzo is president of TrovaFestival Cultural Association, the website that has been mapping Italian cultural festivals since 2017.

Martha Friel (corresponding), IULM University, martha.friel@iulm.it

Martha Friel is Assistant Professor of Economics and Business Management at IULM University, Milan. She is fellow of the Fondazione Santagata for Economics of Culture. Her research areas regard the economy and management of culture and tourism, and the intersectoral relationships between tourism, heritage and the creative industries.

Oliviero Ponte di Pino, Brera Academy, olivieropontedipino@fadbrera.edu.it

Oliviero Ponte di Pino teaches Literature and Philosophy of Theatre at Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera (Milan), is the curator of BookCity Milano literary festival, and is president of Associazione Culturale Ateatro ETS. His interests cover the economy and politics of the arts, audience development and engagement, the evolution of performing arts and their relationship with new technologies. He is the author of several books.

Abstract

Cultural festivals significantly shape contemporary societies by promoting artistic expression, cultural diversity, and community interaction. They play a crucial role in territorial marketing and economic development, especially within cultural tourism, by attracting tourists, extending their stays, and boosting local economies. However, their growing popularity raises sustainability concerns, both in organizational practices and the sustainability of tourist flows.

This study examines sustainable practices among 80 Italian cultural festivals, focusing on environmental and social aspects. Preliminary findings highlight significant gaps in waste management, eco-friendly practices, gender equality, and accessibility. By analyzing data from the Italian cultural events sector, this paper suggests practices for more responsible and inclusive festival management. Integrating sustainability into festival planning can foster resilient communities and inspire positive environmental action.

Keywords: events management, festivals, cultural tourism, environmental sustainability

1. Introduction

Cultural festivals serve as vital components of contemporary societies, acting as catalysts for artistic expression, fostering cultural diversity, and facilitating the creation of local networks and interactions between local communities and global visitors. These events have gained substantial attention in academic discourse, particularly in the realm of territorial marketing and economic development, notably within cultural tourism (Page & Connell, 2012; Richards, 2015 et al.). The allure of cultural festivals for tourism lies in their capacity to attract diverse tourist demographics, prolonging their stays and stimulating expenditure; moreover, festivals have been credited with mitigating seasonal tourism patterns, reshaping urban spaces, and enhancing the spatial distribution of visitors (Smith, 2012 et al.). While celebrated for their cultural and economic contributions, cultural festivals have faced mounting scrutiny over their environmental impact, necessitating a reassessment of their sustainability. Despite their cultural richness and economic stimulus, the sheer scale of organisation often leads to substantial resource consumption and waste generation, exacerbating environmental degradation. Key concerns include the high energy demand for event infrastructure, the disposal of vast quantities of waste

generated by attendees, the emission of greenhouse gases from transportation and venue operations, and the depletion of natural resources used in production (Holmes et al., 2015).

This environmental toll has prompted reevaluating the environmental sustainability practices within the cultural events industry (Jones, 2014).

As environmental awareness grows also in the cultural and tourism sectors (Potts, 2021; Matei et al., 2016; Markham et al., 2023), and the urgency to combat climate change intensifies, stakeholders are therefore under increasing pressure to adopt environmentally responsible approaches to festival management. This imperative extends beyond mere operational efficiency to encompass broader environmental sustainability considerations, including the event's carbon footprint, waste management strategies, and resource usage. Furthermore, the need for climate adaptation measures has become increasingly apparent, as festivals are not only vulnerable to the impacts of climate change but also have the potential to contribute to mitigation efforts through sustainable practices.

Within this context, our study brings a scientifically novel perspective to the fore. By delving into the organisational and promotional practices of Italian festivals, which are pivotal players in the country's cultural and tourism landscape, we aim to delve into the evolving practices of cultural festivals in Italy concerning environmental sustainability and decarbonisation and to assess festivals' active contribution to the discourse on sustainability and climate adaptation. In particular, the research objectives of our study are threefold: (i) to assess the current state of environmental sustainability practices among cultural festivals in Italy and understand which specific environmental sustainability actions are being implemented; (ii) to examine how cultural festivals in Italy engage with their audiences, artists, and sponsors in promoting sustainability; (iii) to contribute to the understanding of the barriers to implementing environmental sustainability practices in cultural festivals and what good practices can be identified.

With these objectives, our study addresses a significant research lacuna. The investigative methodology is presented in section 3: it includes the collection of 80 questionnaires from Italian cultural festivals and applies a mixed method, combining participant observation with a survey to understand which environmental sustainability actions are being implemented by festivals and their approach towards reducing their carbon footprint. This section is introduced by a review of the literature on the role of cultural festivals in contemporary society and the raising awareness about environmental sustainability concerns (section 2). The preliminary results are set out and discussed in section 4; we conclude by offering practical recommendations to foster cultural festivals' action in section 5, where limitations and future developments of our research are also discussed.

2. Literature review

Scholarly literature widely recognises the pivotal role of cultural festivals as significant contributors to the cultural fabric of contemporary societies. Many authors have investigated how cultural festivals catalyse artistic expression, promote cultural diversity, and foster interaction among local communities. Festivals serve as platforms for inclusion, participation, and social innovation, breaking down barriers and enhancing people's well-being (Wallstam et al. 2020; Alonzo & Rossetti, 2023), and supporting the creation of local networks (Ponte di Pino, 202), and studies by Wilks (2011) and Arcodia and Whitford (2007) demonstrate how festivals build social capital by fostering community resources and social cohesion among attendees.

A vast body of literature underscores the significance of festivals also as drivers of economic growth also addressing the increasing convergence of tourism, economic, and placemaking strategies to leverage festivals to improve urban quality of life and foster urban regeneration (Getz & Page, 2016; Richards, 2016; Quinn, 2009). Cultural festivals thus play a crucial role in territorial marketing and economic development, particularly within the realm of cultural tourism. With specific regard to tourism, festivals have demonstrated the ability to attract additional flows, draw new visitor segments to destinations (Friel & Segre, 2021), extend tourists' average length of stay and expenditure (Connell et al., 2015; Gibson et al., 2003; Tang & Turco, 2001), and mitigate seasonal tourism fluctuations (d'Angella et al., 2021). This can influence the spatial distribution of tourists and, therefore, potentially reshape urban spaces (Mommaas, 2004; del Barrio et al., 2012; Richards, 2021).

However, the relationship between festivals and tourism is multifaceted: the festivals' growing popularity as tourist attractions for both national and international audiences and their growing

commercialism have created a series of dilemmas for places and communities (Bailey et al. 2004; Quinn, 2006) highlighting the need for festivals to carefully manage their engagement with tourism to maintain their socially sustaining function and encourage sustainable approaches to tourism development.

Moreover, authors have emphasised that, despite the significant economic and social importance of the relationship between cultural festivals and tourism, it is crucial to recognise that festivals' social significance extends beyond tourism. While festivals often evolve into tourist attractions, they also contribute to sustainable development and cultural enrichment (Quinn, 2006).

More recently, the growing environmental impact of such events has also raised important questions about their true sustainability concerning organisational aspects and the sustainability of the tourist flows they generate paving the way to a growing literature on sustainable event policies and management (Jones, 2014; Holmes et al., 2015).

While festivals offer opportunities to showcase best practices in carbon mitigation and adaptation to climate change (Mair, 2022), there is a need for further investigation into the impact of these initiatives and the barriers to their implementation.

On the other hand, the literature also highlights the evolving role of festivals as platforms for promoting environmental awareness and sustainable practices, particularly among young people (Cummings, 2016; Cummings, Woodward, & Bennett, 2011). These studies underscore the potential of festivals to serve as sites for raising public consciousness of eco-political issues and fostering a global awareness of environmental challenges.

However, research gaps persist regarding the efficacy of festivals in instigating tangible social and environmental change, as well as the extent to which festival organisers prioritise sustainability initiatives (O'Rourke, Irwin, & Straker, 2011). In addition, cultural festivals, with their power to raise awareness and instigate action on environmental concerns, can go beyond mere promotion to actively engage attendees in sustainable behaviours and initiatives.

Building on this understanding, in a context of increasing environmental awareness and the urgent need to address challenges related to climate change and 'decarbonising culture' (Kaján & Saarinen, 2013; Potts, 2021), it becomes essential to examine more in depth the role of cultural festivals not only in promoting sustainable practices but also in addressing sustainability issues comprehensively.

By integrating sustainability principles into various aspects of festival planning, programming, and execution, festivals can influence attitudes and behaviours towards more environmentally friendly practices. Moreover, festivals can catalyse innovation, showcasing sustainable technologies and solutions contributing to the transition towards a greener and more sustainable society (Julie's Bicycle, 2021; Mair & Smith, 2021). Therefore, this transformative potential of cultural festivals is not limited to promoting sustainable practices but extends to driving broader societal shifts towards sustainability, fostering resilient communities, and inspiring positive environmental action locally and globally.

To contribute to the literature on tourism and leisure studies related to environmentally sustainable festival management and cultural climate action, our paper focuses on assessing the adoption of sustainable organisational practices and the festivals' contributions to sustainability discourse and climate adaptation.

In particular, we have formulated three key research questions aligned with the overarching aims: (i) What is the current state of environmental sustainability practices among cultural festivals in Italy and what specific ecological sustainability actions are being implemented? (ii) How do cultural festivals in Italy engage with their audiences, artists, and sponsors to promote sustainability? (iii) What barriers exist to implementing environmental sustainability practices in cultural festivals, and what good practices can be identified?

3. Methodology

To reach the research goal, we opted for a mixed methods approach to explore the nuances and depths of complex phenomena. Mixed methods require proper integration of methods in data collection and analysis and, ultimately, in interpreting evidence (Shorten & Smith, 2017). This targeted combination allows a view of the research context from different perspectives, giving the researcher a broader overview of the case study (Shorten, Smith, 2017).

An "explanatory sequential" research design was used, i.e. the qualitative data were used as a starting point for the analysis of the case study, while the quantitative data were used to empirically test the results, using an inductive logic (QUAL → QUAN).

In spring 2023, the TrovaFestival Cultural Association launched the "Guidelines for Sustainable Festivals," a manual designed to aid festivals in achieving environmental sustainability and reducing their carbon footprint. This tool, which was developed in collaboration with several sectors' partners¹, offers practical guidance through 250 actionable steps organised into six design phases and assists organisations in transitioning towards ecological and social responsibility throughout the festival production process, from planning to post-event activities. Starting from this handbook, in the summer of 2023, the TrovaFestival Association decided to tour some of the 1,574 Italian festivals surveyed by DBFest, the website's database, to observe good environmental sustainability practices. To do this, the Association hired 10 researchers who, after training to align themselves with the project's objectives, visited 80 events between 1 June 2023 and 30 September 2023, together with the TrovaFestival team². The reference sample cannot be considered representative of the entire Italian festival panorama; it is simple, random, and not systematic, as it was not decided to administer the questionnaire according to a reasoned distribution logic. The stay at each festival ranged from a minimum of 2 days to a maximum of 5 days.

The first phase of the observation was the immersion of the researchers in the case festival and the reporting of the experience. Before leaving for the festival, each researcher has done a desk analysis both about the territory of the festival where they would have gone, and about its history and program. Each researcher had to observe the approaches to sustainability and how the festival approached the issues of environmental and social sustainability without asking for preferential treatment from the festival or interfacing directly with the staff. The objective was precisely to be treated as a "normal audience" to be able to grasp the characteristics that an average spectator attentive to sustainability could observe.

After the observation, the researcher was asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding social and environmental sustainability based on what they observed during their stay at the festival.

The construction of the questionnaire was determined in three phases:

- 1) development of a structured, understandable and relatively short questionnaire;
- 2) pilot administration (and adaptation);
- 3) definitive administration of the survey.

The research instrument was written in Italian and structured into 34 items.

Before filling out the full survey, a pilot administration (pre-test) was carried out to identify possible setting or production anomalies. The pre-test sample comprised individuals across gender and age groups, mainly workers in the cultural sector. From the pre-test, it emerged that three questions were ambiguous. Following the notes, one ambiguous question was removed, and the other two were merged and explained, ending in a final questionnaire with 32 questions.

The objectives of the survey were to ascertain: 1) the socio-demographic profiling of the festivals (questions 1-4); 2) the communication of environmental sustainability guidelines for the audience, measures to promote sustainability, and involvement of the various stakeholders in the promotion of sustainability (sponsors, artists, audience) (questions 5-10); 3) understanding the ecological sustainability actions implemented by the festival, from waste collection to water distribution, the administration of food, hospitality, mobility, the use of paper and digital, the relationship with the territory, gadgets and reuse of materials (questions 11-26); 4) the last section is dedicated to social sustainability, to evaluate how festivals approach the theme of accessibility, for example by observing the architectural barriers in the locations used by the festivals, the attention to gender equality, in the

¹ Created in collaboration with BBS-Lombard, a studio specialised in cultural economics, particularly attentive to the issues of environmental and social sustainability, and in partnership with the MEC - Master Events and Communication for Culture and with the Associazione Culturale Teatro.

² The team was made up of Martina Balsamo, Francesca Bongiovanni, Valeria Bruzzi, Valentina Dagrada, Gian Luigi Demenego, Francesca Iacono, Giulia Imbriani, Mariella Pace, Guglielmo Poto, Valeria Tacchi, Johanna Tedde.

artistic proposal and in the direction, if there are spaces for children - even in festivals not dedicated to them - and if there are sensory decompression areas (questions 27-32).

The observers filled in the questionnaire directly to avoid partial and biased compilation by the organisers or staff of the observed festivals. Although it was a closed-ended survey, each question could be further investigated with a notes field. It is important to underline that the intent of the observation was not to judge the actions of the festivals but to propose an as-yet-unfinished as yet unfinished photograph of a crucial cultural sector for culture in Italy.

The analysis of the material collected was carried out between October and November 2023. For the analysis of the questionnaires, the pro version of SurveyMonkey was initially used, the same system with which the data were collected.

Once the data had been "cleaned", a program for analysing data and carrying out statistical tests called Jamovi was used for the numerical part. Instead, the textual part has been auto-coded using NVivo to facilitate analysis by grouping responses according to the survey question. Data have been interpreted by the authors using thematic coding, as commonly used for this type of research, following the scheme: 1) Data familiarisation; 2) Generation of initial codes; 3) Identification of themes; 4) Construction of thematic networks; 5) Integration and interpretation (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Moreover, the monitoring aimed to highlight some difficulties of the transition towards sustainability, increase awareness among the festival organisers, and enhance some good practices that can inspire other events.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive analysis

The average age of the 80 festivals observed is 16 years. Five festivals were born in 2023, while six festivals have more than 40 years of history. As regards the geographical distribution, 58 (72.5%) festivals are in the regions of Northern Italy, 13 (16.25%) in Central Italy, and 9 (11.25%) in the South. Although apparently disproportionate, in the festival selection phase, we tried to respect the distribution proportion shown by DBFest, i.e. 51.9% of festivals in the north, 27.63% in the centre, and 14.16% in the south.

The data shows that 76.25% of the surveyed festivals do not disseminate information about their sustainability actions, neither through their website nor through written or oral information during the festival. Among the remaining festivals that instead dedicate space to narrating their sustainability practices, great attention is noted, making this aspect one of the central issues in the festival's communication.

Regarding involvement practices, 66.25% of festivals, or 53 festivals out of 80, do not involve the audience through awareness initiatives on the topic of sustainability before and/or during the event. 81.25%, or 65 festivals out of 80, did not involve the artists in disseminating the sustainability lines adopted by the festival. Moreover, from data analysis and textual analysis, there seems to be a correlation between those who promote their sustainability actions and those who activate engagement practices with artists and the audience, making sustainability a value to be shared and attracting new audiences who recognise themselves in that value.

The last data in this second section concerns sponsors, a very delicate topic for the economic sustainability of festivals. 67.5% of festivals, or 54 festivals out of 80, have sponsors who do not apply declared sustainability policies. Among these 54 festivals, some events promote sustainability among the festival's assets.

The survey's third section (questions 11-26) is devoted to the ecological sustainability actions implemented by the festivals.

57.5% of the examined festivals, or 46 festivals out of 80, still need to implement waste sorting, a crucial element in responsible environmental management strategies. Furthermore, separate waste collection concerns all indirect waste that moves around the festival, such as catering and the hotel industry. In 60 festivals out of 80 of those observed, food organised directly by the event is served, with stands or temporary catering on the occasion of the festival. In these 60 festivals, only 28 involved restaurateurs in separate waste collection. 83.75% of festivals, or 67 of 80, do not provide sustainability-conscious

refreshments and hospitality solutions, a critical consideration in responsible consumption practices that affect the entire festival lifecycle (Andersson et al., 2013). 73.75% of festivals, or 59 out of 80, do not have free water dispensers. This forces the audience to purchase bottles in the shops at the festival without checking the containers' materials.

Mobility is also a delicate issue for festivals. It would require a serious and profound reflection for a sustainable approach both on an ecological and accessibility level. 87.5% of festivals, or 70 out of 80 festivals, do not monitor how participants arrive at the festival. 86.25% of festivals, or 69 festivals out of 80, do not promote the use of human-powered vehicles both to reach the festival and to move around the festival.

82.5% of festivals, i.e. 66 out of 80 festivals, print their programs on paper. In addition, adopting practices such as printing on recycled paper is limited to only 10 events, highlighting a need for more awareness and integration of eco-friendly strategies. However, the ecological alternative to paper is not automatically digital. Indeed, it is now well established that "digital is material" (McGovern, 2021); digital also produces real pollution and solid waste, but only 7 out of 80 festivals use sustainable servers. One question also investigated the relationship with the territory from the perspective of festivals as elements of local promotion. But only 38.75% of the festivals, i.e. 31 festivals out of 80, promote eco-sustainable valorisation actions to highlight the peculiarities of the territory/or neighbourhood where the festival takes place, making the visitor's experience unique, both in terms of the use of spaces, with regards to the material and immaterial heritage of the territory.

The last two questions of this third section concerned the recycling and reuse of materials in gadgets and festival displays. Only 15% of festivals, or 12 festivals out of 80, use recycled or recyclable gadgets for subsequent editions, using simple precautions such as not putting the edition number or dates. The use of installations that can be reused, with generic elements without specific references to the edition to be able to reuse them, is a practice used by 27 festivals out of 80, or 33.75%.

The fourth and last section (questions 27-32) is dedicated to social sustainability to evaluate how festivals approach the themes of motor and sensory accessibility and the gender gap.

Regarding the physical accessibility of event venues, almost a third of the analysed festivals present architectural barriers that limit access for individuals with physical disabilities. In detail, 35%, or 28 festivals - or part of the festival - out of 80 occur in locations with architectural barriers.

Regarding gender equality, 21.25%, or 17 festivals out of 80, have artistic or organisational direction led by women; this percentage rises to 43% only when considering companies and collectives where at least one female figure is present in their management. 37.5%, or 30 festivals out of 80, do not have a gender-balanced programme. 26.25%, or 21 festivals out of 80, organise inclusive events that promote gender equality and full participation in independent use, safety, comfort and well-being.

4.2 Textual analysis³

In addition to the quantitative analysis, a text analysis was carried out via Nvivo. The central themes identified on which the analysis was based were: 1) causes of non-implementation of sustainability; 2) explanation of the implementation methods; 3) good practices found.

Regarding the causes of non-implementation of sustainability, the first consideration that emerges is the lack of awareness and in-depth knowledge of the topic on the part of the organisers of the festivals observed. Only two festivals out of 80 had a person responsible for the sustainability of their event, aware of the possibility of integrating the concept of sustainability into the entire planning of the event. In most cases, it was clear that sustainability was only marginally addressed at the end of the organisational process. Two actions described by several observers have been to avoid using plastic for water bottles and packaging and to avoid printing the festival programs, therefore plastic and paper-free festivals. This element is closely related to the theme of festival communication, which we will address shortly.

Another element reported is how the organisers point to the lack of economic funds as the impossibility of adopting sustainable solutions. This factor also highlights how many consider the concept of sustainability as a downstream action carried out in the organisation phase without a supporting business plan showing the possible long-term benefits.

³ Preliminary results.

The second theme that emerged was the methods of implementing sustainability practices.

The first explanation given by the festivals was marketing and sponsors. In fact, several festivals report on their websites and programs the involvement of sponsors attentive to sustainability without describing the concrete actions of attention. In the era of appearance, communication plays a key role in the diffusion of sustainability practices. However, the line that separates careful action from greenwashing is very thin.

The last thematic node was that of good practices, i.e. those actions carried out by festivals and which, due to their positivity, could be exported and adopted in other events. For example, one of the most appreciated was the free distribution of water via dispenser; a "counting butts" for the collection of cigarette butts, the cleaning of the beaches which also involves the guests and the public of the festival. In conclusion, the observation action therefore highlighted how each event is a case, linked to its own territory, local policies, and the experiences and skills of those who organise the festivals. The organisational variables underlying the organisation of a festival are too many to think of being able to adopt a common "sustainability formula" for all the festivals in Italy. The intent of this preliminary observation, however, was to increase the knowledge and awareness of those who organise, highlighting the possible margins for improvement.

5. Concluding remarks

Our study's preliminary results provide updated data on the current situation in Italian cultural festivals and reveal significant disparities and areas for improvement across multiple dimensions. Firstly, the geographical distribution of festivals demonstrates a Northern Italy dominance, which reflects broader national trends and indicates potential regional biases that could impact sustainability practices. This uneven distribution suggests that targeted regional strategies might be necessary to address specific sustainability challenges.

A critical finding is the pervasive need for more communication regarding sustainability efforts. With 76.25% of festivals not disseminating information about their sustainability actions, there is a missed opportunity to educate and engage audiences. Effective communication can transform sustainability from a backstage concern into a shared value, attracting audiences to prioritising eco-friendly practices. The engagement of artists and audiences in sustainability initiatives is another area of concern. The data indicates that most festivals fail to involve these key stakeholders, which limits the potential for broader cultural shifts towards sustainability. The correlation between festivals that promote their sustainability actions and those that engage stakeholders highlights the importance of integrated communication strategies.

The analysis also exposes significant gaps in practical sustainability measures. Waste management, for instance, needs to be better implemented, with 57.5% of festivals not engaging in waste sorting. The lack of sustainable food and beverage practices, with 83.75% of the analysed festivals not providing sustainability-conscious refreshments, further underscores the need for comprehensive sustainability frameworks. Additionally, mobility practices are largely ignored, with 87.5% of festivals not monitoring participant transportation methods and 86.25% not promoting human-powered vehicle use.

Social sustainability also presents challenges, particularly regarding accessibility and gender equality. Architectural barriers at festival venues and gender imbalances in organisational and artistic roles indicate that many festivals do not fully embrace inclusivity. These aspects are crucial for ensuring festivals serve as equitable and inclusive spaces.

The textual analysis adds depth to these findings, identifying lack of awareness and funding as major barriers to implementing sustainable practices. This points to a need for educational initiatives and financial incentives to support sustainability. Additionally, good practices, such as free water dispensers and beach clean-ups, suggest that successful models exist and could be replicated more widely.

These findings have several implications for festival organisers, policymakers, and stakeholders in the cultural sector. Firstly, there is a clear need for improved communication strategies highlighting environmental sustainability efforts. Organisations can engage and educate audiences by making sustainability a central theme in festival communication, fostering a culture of environmental responsibility.

Moreover, the study suggests that integrating sustainability into the core planning process rather than as an afterthought is crucial. This integration requires dedicated personnel and financial planning to ensure that sustainability measures are feasible and impactful. Policymakers could support this by providing grants or incentives for festivals that adopt comprehensive sustainability plans.

Moreover, the significant gaps in practical sustainability measures highlight the need for standardised guidelines and best practices that festivals can adopt; these guidelines could cover waste management, sustainable catering, mobility, and resource use, providing a roadmap for festivals to follow.

Regarding social sustainability, the findings suggest a need for policies that enforce accessibility standards and promote gender equality within festival organisations. This could involve funding for infrastructure improvements and initiatives that support female leadership in the cultural sector.

Finally, identifying successful sustainability practices points to the value of knowledge-sharing and collaboration among festivals. Creating platforms for sharing best practices and lessons learned can help festivals learn from each other and implement proven sustainability strategies.

In conclusion, while the current state of sustainability practices in cultural festivals reveals many areas for improvement, it also highlights opportunities for significant progress. By addressing communication gaps, integrating sustainability into planning, adopting standardised practices, and promoting social sustainability, festivals can become powerful advocates for environmental and social responsibility.

Finally, while the results of our study provide valuable insights into the sustainability practices of cultural festivals in Italy, it is crucial also to acknowledge certain limitations in our research.

First, it is important to note that the sample may not numerically represent the entire Italian festival landscape, while variability in resources, size, and geographic location may affect the generalizability of our findings. Moreover, the data reflects practices at a single point in time, not capturing changes over time, and longitudinal studies would be beneficial in tracking the evolution of sustainability practices. Additionally, our research provided a snapshot of current practices without delving deep into the causal roots, drivers, or contextual factors behind these practices.

Future research could incorporate in-depth interviews and case studies to better understand the motivations and barriers festival organisers face. Finally, a last point is that this study's scope of sustainability metrics was limited, focusing primarily on environmental and social aspects. A more comprehensive approach, including long-term impacts on local communities, would provide a fuller understanding of festivals' overall sustainability.

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