Managing abundancy and meanings at cultural festivals: the Ferrara Buskers Festival case

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Abstract: In this paper we investigate how cultural festivals change over time by looking at one key, yet overlooked feature: their being events offering an abundance of cultural initiatives within few days. Based on interviews and longitudinal data on the Ferrara Buskers Festival in the 2000-2019 period, we analyze the effects of the choices taken to unfold the abundancy of the festival offer by comparing two different periods. Our findings underline that changes in the way abundancy unfolds influence the convergence of meanings spurred by participants interactions during the event. Our contribution to previous management studies on festivals is twofold: we develop a framework investigating the nature of abundancy (linear or in parallel) as a key feature of festivals in general; we offer a methodological advancement to longitudinal studies on festival by uncovering two ideal-types of abundance operationalization under the exceptional temporal and spatial boundaries characterizing festivals; we isolate and discuss the effects of changes on abundancy operationalization on the interactions spurred by the format and making up the festival atmosphere.

Keywords: festival, change, abundancy, meanings, longitudinal

1. Introduction

Events organized in the festival form are a widespread phenomenon in the western world. The Woodstock Festival in 1969, the Fringe festival hosted each year in Edinburgh, or the Venice Film Festival founded in 1938, are just few instances of this kind of format. Notably, in the last three decades there was a surge of festivals on various, often disparate themes such as literature (e.g. Festivaletteratura, born in 1997), live music (e.g. Coachella Festival, in 1999), chocolate (e.g. Salon du Chocolat, in 1996), industrial music dancing (e.g. Resistanz Festival, in 2011), economics and comedy (e.g. Kilkenomics Festival, in 2008), and many others. While playing a significant role at the community level, including the facilitation of social cohesion and local identity (purposed to celebrate collectively a given culture: Wilson et al., 2017), festivals have also been called 'the Swiss army knife' of cultural policy (Luonila, 2019) because of the low capital investment required for their production. Currently, they represent a widely used format for cultural production and participation, which enables people to express views on wider cultural, social and political issues (e.g. Crespi-Vallbona & Richards, 2017).

Besides their specific content, festivals constitute an organizational phenomenon that is complex to analyse. Much of this complexity, we argue, relates to the overly comprehensiveness of the word 'festival' itself. The term can be attached to several, different forms of events, such as large-scale popular music happenings, religious commemorations, or street neighborhood celebrations. For Getz et al. (2010), '(t)here are numerous forms and variations possible, and so the term festival is often misapplied and commercialized, leading to confusion' (2010:30). As an example, Webster & McKay (2016) underline that, even restraining the task to British pop music festivals, 'a typology (…) found seventeen different types' (Stone, 2009, quoted in Webster & McKay, 2016).

In contrast with this view, some authors have proposed that a common ground can be found in festivals' temporary character, as these events are produced in an inherent time-bounded fashion (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995), with profound implications in terms of organizational processes. What is mandated is the provision of the specific cultural content of the festival in few days or weeks, whilst keeping asleep personnel, organizational processes and tasks for the rest of the year (Toraldo & Islam, 2019; Toraldo, Islam & Mangia, 2019).

Yet, research on festivals has never dwelled further such overarching traits of festivals, leaving unexplored the implications of their extraordinary timeliness in terms of organizational design and managerial control of the event.

In this paper we look at festivals as events offering a (relative) abundance of initiatives of a given kind, such as music, movies, or cooking, within a single event. Our perspective focuses on the choices taken by organizers in terms of event design and control to accommodate such abundance and on the consequences of these choices on the festival evolution.

The paper focuses on the Ferrara Buskers Festival (FBF herein after). Founded in 1988, FBF is one of the first and most important festivals in the world devoted to street musicians; street performing, or 'busking', is an artistic practice that was hardly perceived as a legitimate one at the festival onset. However, after few editions FBF had to deal with an unexpected success in terms of participation and interest from street musicians scattered over the world. Such surge of interest transformed the event from a one-shot review of street musicians, as initially planned, to a huge, two-weeks event hosting hundreds of musicians. This and other changes underwent by festival reflect, as we will show different ways of organizing abundance.

The work is structured as follows: in the next section we introduce previous studies on cultural festivals; then, we introduce data collected and the methodology of analysis on the FBF. The following section illustrates our findings, followed by a discussion of these findings under the perspective of extant studies.

2. Literature review and problem formulation

Cultural festivals are widely acknowledged as playing a multifaceted role in contemporary society through their cultural, social and economic contributions (Getz, 2012; Richards, 2015; Luonila, 2017). Indeed, a festival 'is a project-based production system that produces art content without permanent structures such as staff or buildings' (Luonila, 2019:84), that have the potential to redefine and regenerate particular locations (Gibson & Connell, 2011) and to unleash artistic and economic opportunities (Frey, 2000; Uysal and Gitleson, 1994). However, it's not easy to grasp the nature of festivals: whereas their format is expected to serve a number of cultural, social and economic objectives at once, in an economically attractive way (Luonila, 2019), it is notable the relative absence of studies adopting a perspective acknowledging the inherent ambiguous, fleeting nature of these events (Wilson et al., 2017).

Research on festivals , had a substantive increase in the thirty years following a first study in 1978 (Heenan, 1978; Friedman, 2014; Sapiro, 2016; Gouthro & Fox, 2019; Mair, 2019). Studies from cultural economy and tourism adopted a perspective focused mainly on festivals' economic impact (Robinson et al., 2004; Getz et al., 2007; Andersson & Getz, 2007; Andersson & Getz, 2008), looking at the potential of festivals in generating value-added activities and their impact on local communities (Quinn, 2005; Getz et al., 2006; Grunwell et al., 2007; Anderson and Getz, 2009; Getz et al., 2010). Such focus on benefits at the local level bounds current knowledge about cultural festival to only the economic dimension. Moreover, measuring the spillover effects of an event on the economy is a complex task, so that the validity of impact assessments has often been questioned (e.g. Maughan, 2015; Bonet & Carreño. 2013).

On the other hand, organization studies have recently highlighted festivals' community-laden and ritualistic aspects, the fact that festivals are gatherings characterized by a social fabric hinging upon the need of people to celebrate, sometimes in a ritualized fashion (Frost, 2016), a given culture. Festivals 'are acknowledged as moments for popular self-organization, where communitarian, affectively laden sentiment congeals in spontaneous self-expression' (Toraldo & Islam, 2019: 310). Indeed, scholars have underlined the inner 'escapism' connected to festival experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), as festivals can offer an 'extraordinary' experience to attendees in respect to 'normal' social life, and its communitarian spirit, meaning the effects produced by a festival on the social context where this originates, as festivals 'celebrate community values, ideologies, identity and continuity' (Getz et al., 2010:30). Perspectives based on escapism consider festivals as exceptional experiences, a 'world in itself' (Falassi, 1987), imposing space and time features which are specific, profoundly different from what happens in the daily routine.

Differently from simple events that can be detached from a social fabric, festivals are enmeshed into the atmosphere produced, the 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim, 1915) that constitutes an important part of the 'unrestrained sensory experience' produced (Sassatelli, 2011).

Research has often looked at intensity of the relationship with the local community as the main, if not exclusive driver of such experience (Quinn's (2005)but, the interactions and collective experience spurred by the events may be incentivized in a more or less massive fashion by the festival organization when its extraordinary timeliness is juxtaposed to the festival contents, that is when the program is designed. The study of Brennan et al. (2007) on the annual Elvis Revival Festival in the small town of Parkes, Australia, is

exemplary in showing that the production of meanings is not necessarily negotiated with the local community, but dictated by the festival, even when these are welcomed: the study analyzes how the 'tradition' imprinted at the festival onset could be, to a certain extent, 're-invented', in the face of a totally non-existent relationship of the place with Elvis.[i] Similarly, Győri (2019) observes not only the Sziget festival basics (the festival's contents, its financial facets, the relationship with the music industry), but also the fact that a festival has its own 'social rhythm', i.e. a set of various meanings created by the different festival actors (organizers, promoters, proprietors, attendants, artists), and resulting into a given 'atmosphere' at the heart of the festival experience.

This perspective resonates with Luonila's view under which'festival management can be perceived as the management of a network of meanings' (2017:89).For each actor, a festival brings a meaning which can represent an opportunity for interaction, and the participatory nature of co-production favored by a format influences the organization of the given festival over time. Among actors, there exists an interaction based on meanings which the festival organization aims to orchestrate.

Drawing on this views, our focus on this paper is based on the idea that festivals have a shared characteristic. First, the way a festival at a certain point in time imposes its specific time and space facets is a crucial distinguishing feature, and an operational matter that deserves analytical attention. Accordingly, variation in pattern of space and time interactions imposed by a specific festival could be a crucial perspective to investigate variations and change across space and time.

Second, they are events offering a (relative) abundance of initiatives of a specific kind (music, movies, cooking etc) within a single event in massive ways, that are not normally present in ongoing activities by other organizations. They are sort of modern 'fairs' on their specific contents.

Third, festivals can differ in the ways in which they manage this abundancy, with two very different models: in series – where all events take place in sequence on the same stage (e.g. Woodstock), or in parallel – with single acts that use at the same time different 'stages' (e.g. Primavera Sound). While the first model manages abundancy by unfolding it linearly, in the second it is managed by 'redundancy', in the sense that at any moment in time there are several acts taking place; these can be followed by the single audience just partially, often leaving a sense of overwhelmingness to the user (e.g. the SXSW festival, see Blanco 2023). Thus, the way these different models are configured has key implications in terms of interactions taking place

among participants, as the ‘social rhythm’ of the event can be configured in ways that are different according to which model is pursued.

In this paper, we argue that festivals are systems of cultural production inherently munificent in the provision of their artistic offer (but indeed this is also true for the festival of economics or the mushroom festival); besides various, theme-level contents of a given festival, these elements constitute the sources upon which a given festival is temporally and spatially organized. Given the relative dearth of longitudinal studies on a phenomenon that is instead highly subject to processes of change and continuity (Wilson et al., 2017), we focus on the FBF and use this perspective to address the following question: ‘how is a festival characterized, and how does it change, in relation to the management of abundancy?’.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research method and data collection

Our study employs a longitudinal research design to understand how the FBF changed over time in relation to the management of abundancy, Longitudinal analyses look for organizational patterns characterized by periods of stability punctuated by moments of extraordinary levels of change (Pettigrew et al., 1989; Van de Ven & Huber, 1990; Saldaña, 2003). We adopt this approach by looking at a festival that was already studied in the past. Previous work tracked the birth and consolidation of the FBF from its origin until the year 2000, and this study updates previous research on the same case in the 2000-2019 period, 20 years after the original case (Masino & Zan, 2002; Zan & Masino, 2022). Thus, this study also provides the opportunity to challenge and update previous results 20 years after (see Ferri et al., 2023 for a similar approach).

The study is based on data from two kinds of sources (see Table 1): a first one consists of documents, such as guides and brochures providing quantitative data and qualitative details about the FBF official program and the shows provided; a second set is made of interviews to key festival actors such as organizers and artists. Once integrated, data from these sources was comprehensive and solid enough to provide a reliable picture of some specific festival editions. Our strategy was based on the collection of data sufficiently comprehensive to cover the festival editions of the 2000-2019 period, that is twenty years of FBF; accordingly, we collected archival sources of various kinds on the given period, such as festival guides, brochures, statutes, reports, income statements, meeting minutes, agreements with the municipality and various publications about the

festival from books and newspapers. Then, we held interviews with seven FBF organizers; out of 12 interviews, seven were done to members of the current FBF organizing team, such as the festival executive director and two project managers; the remaining five interviews were done to FBF co-founders and members of the team running the festival in 2000, including the artistic director. Finally, we interviewed 26 artists participating at various editions at FBF, as credited (16 artists out of 26), invited (two) or both (eight); notably, out of 26 interviewees 21 had participated in more than one edition of the festival, some of them participating to and giving accounts of FBF first editions. However, data were unavailable for the whole study period; for example, given the free access character of FBF, no official record of attendees is available, and their actual size and composition has never been at hand, even for the organizers. At times, surveys purposed to assess participants' satisfaction were organized, but these were done with a low level of consistency over the years. Moreover, the organization running the festival is a small, lean team of friends and relatives formally grouped under an association; documents and archival sources were highly partial, with several years missing from the records or with highly ambiguous information that even the organizers could not make complete sense of. Relatedly, also data from interviews had to be double-checked and triangulated with other data many times, in order to minimize retrospective biases (Danzin, 2007).

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During data collection, we considered the festival context not just a stimulus environment but 'a nested arrangement of structures and processes where the subjective interpretations of actors help shape the process' (Pettigrew, 1992).

3.2 Analysis

After analyzing each edition of the 2000-2019 period, the evidence collected prompted us to apply our perspective in a more cross-sectional fashion, by selecting some specific years marking moments of change of the festival. Thus, following a longitudinal approach, we analyze change at different moments in time, through three snapshots providing a representation of the festival over time: in 1991, after the FBF early years, in 2000, after FBF first twenty years of life and in 2019, at the end of our study period.

Our use of the analysis is purposed to understand outcomes at two levels that are inter-related within the festival format: first, the operations level, that is how the specific cultural content of the festival is grounded during the event by the organizers; second, the festival 'social rhythm' (Győri, 2019) as perceived by the participating artists; this is a set of the various meanings attributed to the festival material, emotional, and symbolic features by all participants and that are spurred by the interactions encouraged by the festival format.

4. The Ferrara Busker's Festival across time

4.1 Managing abundancy

Though many facets are reconstructed in the analysis, the focus of each snapshot will be on the management of abundancy in line or in parallel (redundancy), according to our previous discussion.

4.1.1 Snapshot #1: 1991 - Street performing from unusual abundancy to extensive redundancy The FBF was run in 1988 for the first time: curiously enough, it was conceived as a one-shot event. The concept was quite unusual: a 'festival' of street artists, which in itself can be seen as a contradiction in terms. Usually, busking is one of the most 'anarchist' forms of art, where the artist chooses his/her stage and tries to reach the audience among people walking in the street for other purposes, out from any institutionalized frame of interaction (such as a 'festival'). FBF provided artists with a protected area where they could collect money 'on the hat' (giving was not permitted by laws at that time). There were 20 invited street artists/groups: a (relative) abundancy of an unusual form of art.

However, things drifted. The success of the first edition ended up with the decision of running a permanent festival. However, a second major change was in a totally unpredicted direction. In fact, after few editions a lot of artists showed up to the festival, wishing to perform. This was posing very serious problems of public order. Avoiding the idea of calling the police to solve it, the organizers' decision was very reactive: to accept as part of the festival self-proposing people, just discipling the process via a sort of selection that was soon structured. This group of artists would be defined as 'credited artists', selected based on a demo to be sent, and were given a place to perform, while raising money 'on the hat'.

This decision was going to change dramatically the nature of the festival in our perspective; from a (relative) abundancy, the result was a situation of extensive redundancy. Many groups/artists were performing in parallel every afternoon and evening, with a number of shows and a total performing time that were forcing the

audience to make constantly a selection of what was offered. More precise details are offered for the next period.

4.1.2 Snapshot #2: 2000 - a picture of extensive redundancy Drawing also on the analysis carried out between 1999 and 2000 by Masino & Zan (2002), this section provides an analysis of the elements characterizing the FBF in 2000 (Table 2).

In terms of general features, the festival is an articulated offer of busking activities, mainly (but not only) music. It lasts one week at the end of August. The historical center of Ferrara provides a unique set of hundreds of stages for individual performances. It is free access: no ticket to get it, while the public is expected to give hats offers to performers. It is a noncompetitive event: no winners, no awards: simply performing, interacting with the audience, and in case collect money. Looking at core artistic activities, there are several aspects defining the specificity of FBF, in addition to a very general characterization of the busking interaction (Bywater, 2007; Simpson, 2011), with is intense sense of authenticity between performers and the audience, its intense catching effort and second-to-second becoming (Hirsch, 2010; Kaul, 2014; Seldin, 2020).

What is specific of the FBF in this period is the redundancy of performances taking place. In 2000, there are 20 invited artists/groups, plus a lot of credited artists/groups (175 in 2000). Travel costs are covered for invited artists, but they do not get a fee, and can collect money from hat; the credited only can get hats, no reimbursement.

A complex set of rules, with possible variations every year, assigns time and space spots for both invited and credit artists, along two time slots (afternoon 6-8 pm, except on Sunday; and 9.30-11.30 pm). Basically, 10 invited artists have to perform every afternoon in the week, and all of them in the night spot (for Sunday there is only one afternoon spot, 5-8 pm). The credited will choose (and being committed accordingly) at the beginning of FBF how many days they wish to perform, and different space spots for both afternoon and night shows are assigned them by the organizer.

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As it was advertised by FBF that means ‘1221 shows, lasting 2.312 hours, the equivalent of 96 days non-stop’ (FBF, 2003). This peculiar way of phrasing things underlines the redundancy of offer characterizing the festival (in any case, a listener could follow a maximum of 4 hours by 7 days = 28 hours, around 1.2% of total performances), with important implications for both sides of the interaction. For the audience that means the possibility of choosing between a huge set of performances, in a way that is highly unanticipated: if the scheduling of invited artists is provided in the guide, very little can be found about who, where and when is performing among the credited artists. That means a sort of collective ‘shuffling’ attitude, walking around and being surprised by unknown genres and repertoires, four hours every day: largely a redundancy of unknown potential interactions. Such shuffling attitude was a fundamental tenet of the audience experience. For artists this means a huge potential audience, with an unusual possibility of performing in the week (up to about 4 hours for 7 days!), with huge potential earning; plus, a potential interaction with other artists when not directly on stage (for normal listening, to possible jam sessions), while enjoying the overall climate of music redundancy. According to specific rules that were in place in 2000, Table 3 provides an estimate of the ‘potential capacity’ of the festival, i.e. the number of hours that were available if all groups were performing in all available time slots, in 2000.

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In 2000 the festival evolution shows an interesting dialectic between planned and emerging features. Some basic features were inherited from the original ‘imprinting’ (such as the period of the year, the city as stage context, or the noncompetitive nature of the event), while many others (the change towards a recurrent event, the bottom-up emergence of artists wishing to perform incorporated as artists) were never foresaw nor planned. On top of this, the organizers proposed over time additional activities in a variety of ways. Some of them were particularly crucial, and more associated with the core artistic activities. For instance, the Buskers’ House was introduced in 1998: in order to avoid noise at the end of the night performance, a space was set up where artists could meet after the shows, and go on with music and jams for hours: a solution that in addition to solve a problem was adding value at the musicians’ experience. Similar with the Buskers’ Garden, close to the

City Walls, in 2000: to avoid noise at night, at the end of the night performances the audience could get there having fun, drinking and listen to recorded music up to night: this, again, enriched the experience of audience while solving the problem of night noise. Other initiatives where less strictly linked to the performing part, such as various exhibitions, some charity and fundraising initiatives. Among these initiatives, the Grande Cappello ('Big Hat') stands out as the largest and most controversial one. Inspired to buskers' hat, it was a charity initiative set up at the festival entrances, consisting in the collection of voluntary donations from the festival audience. Albeit voluntary and purposed to fund charity initiatives, interviewed artists reported that its aims were sometimes equivocated: indeed, the audience often thought that the purpose of the big hat was to collect money for artists. After giving money to the big hat, the audience would then reduce the amount of money put into the actual artists' hats, causing frustration among artists.

4.1.3 Snapshot #3: 2019 - a simplified solution? If we look at the festival twenty years later (2019), the main element of continuity relates to the festival concept. The event is still based on performers getting money 'with the hat'. However, if we analyse the event under the light of its abundance, we can notice a few crucial differences (see table 2). To begin with, in 2019 credited artists could perform exclusively during the night. As shown by Table 3, while the maxim hours of show by invited musicians' increase from 420 to 480 between 2000 and 2019, credited artists' hours decrease from 4.725 to 3.556 (see 'max total hours'). If one considers the hours per artist (see 'max hours per artist'), in 2019 credited hours are reduced from 27 to 14 hours. In terms of area for performing the decrease is similar, as this is reduced to 4.113 meters (27% less than 5.883 in 2000)[ii]. Coupling both reductions (time and space), the hours are 3.077 in 2019, with a reduction of 40.2 % compared to the 5.145 in 2000. In other words, the cancellation of the afternoon shows changed substantially the aspects connected to FBF specificity. In particular, the characteristic rate of 'redundancy' is significantly reduced (-40.2%).

On top of that, the additional activities in place in 2000 (particularly 'Buskers' House' and 'Buskers' Garden'), are no more in place. In 2019, all the night events are bundled under 'Nights at the Castle'. Every night, during the festival, some rooms of the prestigious Estense Castle host DJ sets, a bar and dance halls. The format of Nights at the Castle is designed according to lines that usually characterize ordinary shows, markedly different from the one characterizing the activities of the Buskers' Garden and Buskers' House: the entrance is

limited, security people frisk participants to ensure security, and the performances offered are on stage. Additional activities also include ‘Stories of Buskers’, which are presentations introducing invited buskers to the audience; the ‘Buskers Experience’, ‘a touristic package meant to make the FBF a more inclusive and open experience’ (FBF, 2019); the ‘Buskers Lab’ and ‘Buskerini Lab’, that are music laboratories led by artists for adults and kids, respectively; and ‘Buskers in the city’, a space given to citizens of Ferrara willing to play as buskers during the festival days. These initiatives are priced around 10 euro and seemingly marketed to young adults and families.

In our opinion, the overall activities in place in 2019 are profoundly different from those in place in 2000. The Buskers’ House and the Buskers’ Garden were initiatives set up to solve issues strictly related to the core activity of FBF, such as night noise and excitement for music. At the same time, they contributed to ease the interactions of both audience and artists, adding value to each participants' experience. On the other hand, the initiatives in place in 2019 are more generic. The format chosen favors interactions (and performances) that have little to do with street performing, that is the core activity of FBF. Rather, a highly type-tested kind of event, with participants’ (both artists and audience) interactions channeled to an opposite direction, towards the ‘typical’ atmosphere of limited access event: a prestigious location, an overall sense of exclusivity offered to participants and, perhaps more importantly, nothing resembling the immediacy of street shows.

4.2 Searching for perception on the festival atmosphere and its changing format

According to Zan and Masino (2002) the FBF was characterized by multiple meanings attributed (not necessarily in a consistent way) by its various actors and converging at the festival level, fueling the overall ambiguity of the event. Expectations toward the festival deeply differ from different categories (the audience, the performers, the organizers, the volunteers, the City Council), and potentially also within each category (different ‘segments’ of audience, different kind of performers, etc.) in ways that are often tacit and likely not even conceptualized by actors. ‘Indeed, what is fascinating is the overall ambiguity which characterizes the event. Who the actors are, the different groups of 'constituents' and their inner articulation, with specific motivations and meanings: all of this was far from clear at the beginning of the story and was still so at time of our investigation. For instance, the audience composition has never been investigated, in terms of specific preferences, needs or even 'buying behavior' mechanisms.[iii] Even more so for the artists, that we interviewed

extensively. The overall ambiguity, far from being an obstacle, seems to allow variety to emerge while facilitating adaptation. Such an ambiguity would have been frozen if we tried to identify the 'mission' of this event and to 'prove' a superficial understanding at once, forever, for everybody, anthropomorphically attributed to the festival as if it was a person with its willingness and desires. Rather, sense making becomes a central perspective: for all actors, for us as analysts, and for the readers themselves' (Zan & Masino, 2022, p. 125).

In this section, we investigate to what extent FBF actors perceived any changes in the formula described above. We do so by focusing on artists and organizers. Unfortunately, no data are available for the audience[iv]. Indirect insights could emerge from our interviews to artists and organizers– though many of them where not present in the previous decades, their perceptions could shed light on the degree of awareness of major changes, whether 'deliberated' or emergent they could be.

4.2.1 Perceptions by artists In the analysis of the interviews held with artists a major, though uneasy, task was to disentangle informants' opinions about the overall festival experience from perceptions about changes at FBF. All informants shared details about their experience at the festival in terms of performance, relationship with the organizers and the audience, along with various feelings and perceptions about the festival atmosphere. Isolating perceptions about change was more complicated because some performers were absent around 2000, while others never put an analytical lens on the changes that took place. Thus, interviews have been coded distinguishing between quotes about the FBF experience and quotes expressing perceptions of changes, organized under 4 sections resembling the different facets of interactions making up the overall 'social rhythm' experienced by the festival participant: the social interaction with the audience, the relational exchange within the artistic community, the quality of the performances, the monetary exchange. In each section, perceptions are quoted starting from interviews to artists less experienced in terms of festival editions, followed by those of more experienced ones.

In terms of interaction with the audience, most of artists with a relatively limited experience at FBF remarked the pleasure of performing for the festival audience, emphasizing its size and motivation:

> 'FBF, like the Venice carnival, is one of the biggest, and in Ferrara is even better because they come on purpose.'

One artist equates the current festival atmosphere to mainstream, 'ordinary' music festivals such as Sanremo Music Festival, which is part of Eurovision Song Contest:

> 'People goes to a festival such as FBF knowing what they will find, it's not like usual busking where chance encounters are the rule … It's more like Sanremo, because those who attend Sanremo look for a musical show, not puppeteers.'

Artists experienced in busking shared more blended feelings. Some observed that huge audiences are often at the roots of the 'zapping' issue: 'zapping' refers to a particular mode of attending which consists of jumping quickly from one performance to another. This mode of consumption was highly criticized by artists:

> 'In Ferrara there's so much people that audiences cannot spend too much time with you. It might be that they take a picture, come back but only eventually. Anyway, it was difficult to keep them connected…in other, perhaps smaller contexts, it is easier to have an exchange.'

Some artists experienced in performing at FBF noted that the overall atmosphere has changed towards a less spontaneous one:

> 'It seems to me a bit structured and more commercial, in the sense that is less spontaneous than it used to.'

Also, the interaction is much more 'mediated', in a sense artificial:

> 'We joke that sometimes we feel like monkeys in the zoo because there's always somebody with a camera in your face … It made for a more active audience, but...you sometimes feel like people are looking at you through a screen.'

One performer, who participated to FBF early editions, complains about his current relationship with the audience:

> 'We pull smaller crowds and maybe that has to do with our capacity as performers. Maybe we're not as good, I don't know. I think we're actually technically better. But we're not as young and good looking as we used to be.'

A second level of perceptions concerns the interaction within the artistic community of the festival. It is crucial here to underline that the FBF early years were fueled by the intensity of performances and a general sense of enthusiasm of participants for producing music under chaotic, though joyful circumstances. This had profound implications in terms of community building:

> ‘We have a large circle of friends regularly performing there and we're all very excited to go to Ferrara and spend time together, jamming together sometimes. We've collaborated outside Ferrara on different projects.’

In terms of sociality, what emerges is a nostalgic feeling about past editions, when the personal bonds created were a core part of the enjoyment. Irrespective of ‘tenure’, all interviewees regret the cancellation of the Buskers Garden and Buskers House:

> ‘One change, as a musician that after the show wants to enjoy the event, is the elimination of the area...used as a kind of night party of the festival, because it was much better. As an audience I regret not being able to listen the strange violin player at the other side of the city, so they invented this place outside the performing area where you could listen music until dawn, there was a special atmosphere that unfortunately now has changed.’

Generally, artists regret the lack of opportunities for interactions:

> ‘In the early years at the end of the festival I had the impression that we met most of other performers. Nowadays I don't get the same feeling. Those of us who were there in the 90s had a particular relationship to the way the festival was then, and in those days we'd be staying on the campsite with the others…but then it became less possible.’

Some experienced artists criticize current activities, such as Nights at the Castle:

> ‘It was a place daunting interaction, because you could simply stare to a musician playing on stage. Instead, with just some tables and chairs, if you can bring and play your instruments, meet people, jam

together… that would have turned as a much easier and interesting situation, instead of having someone up there performing.'

A third level of perception concerns the relation between organizers' work in assuring the quality of performances. Interviewees with limited FBF experience expressed general positive attitudes over the way the event was streamlined to avoid an overcrowded event:

'The impression was like jumping into a country fair, with a lot of people, impossible to handle. Then they managed to streamline the whole festival, both performers and audience.'

However, there were also accounts for the disadvantages of the change:

'The flip side is that there is a lot of work and this means a bit less of human touch. So even if they are great, this kind of events brings a lot of hard work and this obviously conveys different emotions.'

The issue of sound pollution is another reason for welcoming a less abundant festival:

'One issue was that those playing amplified...they tended to go over you, given that spots are not very distant, so if there's someone a bit too loud then this kills you, and you give up.'

Another level of perception of artists is related to the monetary rewards potentially at hand. Surprisingly, some informants recognized that performing at FBF, or other busking festivals, does not pay off anymore:

'Last edition maybe I sold 10 CDs, even discounted…I also had Satispay[v], with the QR code, but generally…I stopped doing festivals for money, because it's something that doesn't work anymore…'

Most of perceptions on this matter underscore the need of reducing the number of potential 'competitors' in two ways: besides a more stringent selection of the performances, some compare FBF with other festivals where performances are offered linearly:

‘We were heading to a mountain festival in a place that was hard to reach, so we had very low expectations; instead, we found that shows were given one after the other, and not at the same time, so people would sit there listening and it was very good; in Ferrara the offer of great music is so big that the audience won’t stare much, they understandably are curious and want to enjoy every show’

The other is the cancellation of the Big Hat.

‘Something that now the festival has thankfully undone, was that the festival decided that they would raise money by giving people a sticker on the way in if they paid some money. Now, I understand why the festival might have wanted to do that, but it's something that didn't work positively for the performers. And yeah, it's quite a common thing that people say to you ‘aren't you paid by the municipality or by the festival?’ and they're surprised, they think that you must be.’

4.2.2 Perception by organizers The organization historically running FBF since its creation in 1988 is an association of friends and relatives, headed by the festival artistic director; while some of the co-founders recently left the organization, the festival has now a general director and various co-organizers in charge for special projects. This section accounts for the perceptions of organizers, in order to understand whether festival changes entailed also changes in the interactions between FBF key actors.

Under the backdrop of festival changes, the interaction with the audience changed, from one relying on information collected through questionnaires to an interaction taking place mainly through social media:

‘We used to do questionnaires…Now data comes from people asking for information on the Internet: who, age, preferences towards a music festival or whether they intend it as an event of jugglers, or others.’

The motivations for reducing the hours of show were expressed as the need to inject change to each edition, describe in very generic terms, regardless the success of prior ones and with no reference to performances themselves:

‘Keeping the same elements and structures for 15, 20 years, what you see is the same thing...for instance, you need to make the city more beautiful. Like that idea of putting umbrellas on the street,

many photos were taken, right? This created traffic, and advertising...now everything is digital, you can't be static.'

Specific motivations for the cancellation of afternoon shows were expressed as follows:

'Each year I had to double-check everything two times, because sometimes artists were too early, cheating to perform …there are changes that can't be handled, like the permissions to move…even a bicycle rack. So, I said 'let's start at 8:30 with only one show, when the area is free from traffic, and commerce is closed.'

Given that these perceptions were highly self-referential and not backed by systematic analyses, we asked why the audience of a buskers' festival should be more interested in such novelties rather than, for example, the joyful atmosphere of music co-production of the early years:

'Audience needs to know precise times and places, not a sense of freedom.'

'A street packed…over the years we realized that it is sensible for the artist to have an easy edge, but this was bad in case of accidents.'

'People between 15 and 30... listen to music in a completely different way …they are not anymore like 'I'm going and then I see what happens', but "I want to know the program and then I'll decide".'

In fact, when asked about the elimination of the afternoon shows, organizers considered it a step forward for streamlining the event, while making it more 'credible' in front of participants:

Before [2019] nobody was even aware at what time of the day the festival was supposed to start. There was no possibility of having a business in such way.'

What is clear, more than a demand-side issue, is a motivation to simplify the complexity of the supply side. In fact, organizing a festival is a complex endeavor:

‘Each year we set up around 90 spots for credited and 10 spots for the invited. Organizing these shifts is the hardest part.’

In this context, precise information is much needed by the organizers as well:

‘…until the very last day we don’t know about streets works …shops don’t want the afternoon, because buskers impede the access, while one year later they are happy, and ask for performances, but suddenly there are 30 tables more on the street, and I don’t have spots for performers…so each year these changes.’

Indeed, the agreement with artists lacks clarity on a number of issues that may potentially arise; technical issues are just one instance of how this makes organizers’ work more stressful:

‘During the festival I’m stressed a lot, receiving calls at night such as ‘Look, they are leaving without performing, the inverter is not working’, but it’s 10:30 pm, and 200 people waiting for them to perform …and this goes on all day.’

This affects also the assignment of spots:

‘We start broadly, to face emergencies … for the invited a software would be enough, you can schedule according to the band: large street for a band attracting a lot of people; smaller for an acoustic …but the credited come for about one day, can have a number of problems, the traffic, a tire flat…their positioning becomes very complex.’

Also, the deal is endowed with ambiguity as well, and this keeps the interaction with the artists on a latent, though constant risk of infringement:

‘The lack of a contract, as we can only invite artists, is a variable. It may happen, and in fact happened, that someone pops up like ‘Look, I found a bar in a city nearby and they give me € 300, so tomorrow I’m not playing’.’

Thus, the reduction of the redundancy characterizing the event was deliberate, taken in a top-down fashion:

> ‘I’d rather get back to a Monday-Sunday festival, like the first 20 years: the same number of musicians, more or less, with a consistent pattern, so that everybody can see the artists.’

With much ex-post, but ultimately self-referential assessment of others’ satisfaction:

> ‘For sure this new…format has allowed for a larger appreciation to bands, before you had to arrive into a rather large area, could just listen to 3-4 bands, with no previous selection, now you know the bands, where are playing …this creates a stronger bond with the festival, with music.’

When asked about the risks of ‘normalizing’ a busking event, with its mixture of sounds and improvised sessions:

> ‘Busking is not piano-bar, I like that the audience is focused on the performance, I don’t care about audience coming to have a beer on the ground …Instead of 800,000 visitors with a cursory mindset like in the past, I’d rather go for 6,000 very focused … As an organizer I don’t care having eight or whatever thousand people.’

The interaction with artists takes place at various levels, and changed accordingly. At a broad level, the interaction is still dictated by the formula; but the effect on the redundancy of the event, due to the elimination of hours of show, seems underestimated.

> ‘Over the years a lot changed, not the core. Briefly, the formula is the same, we have always 20 invited and credited artists that vary each year according to their availability and the spots allowed.’

In 2019 artists are still selected as invited or credited, although with a more welcoming stance towards musicians:

> ‘The festival started to be invaded by any kind of busker, so we focused on musicians.’

In terms of redundancy reduction and how this change has been retrospectively rationalized, it emerges that the decision was underscored by a strong focus on novelty, but ultimately detached from artistic considerations:

> ‘If you don’t have a new instrument to show, something new, visitors have no interest to come here, except music listening.’

And the nature of the event, by itself characterized by chaos and redundancy, seems far from organizers’ ideas about the festival:

> But how many bands are you really able to listen to? …100? Perhaps 3 or 4. So if you can give me something that you cannot see elsewhere...like that band from Mongolia, with traditional clothes, instruments...then at the festival I'll see something new and I'll come over.’

Substantive changes took place in the additional activities:

> ‘We exaggerated, so we made a smaller festival; too many people, too many days and booths, the Buskers’ Garden was very long and it was not worthy. So, we went back to the traditional spirit, I feel people is happy and there are always many youngsters coming.’

Initiatives initiated in 2019 were instead motivated as follows:

> ‘Current initiatives are created mainly to involve the audience, because you have a very long day ahead and a cultural city such as Ferrara can be a destination with touristic tours that go in parallel with the festival while taking advantage of the presence of musicians. This is where we head to…’

When asked which new activities are priced, and how these help the festival sustainability:

> ‘Laboratories are done for the artists, so they can promote themselves. Yes, you are not paid, but all my efforts are for your visibility, so we started by giving them locations for masterclasses, priced say 10, 20€. So yes, they are priced, but it is for the money that goes to the artist.’

The interaction between the organizers and the municipality changed only partially: in respect to 2000, the bureaucracy for permissions for the streets did not change; instead, the interaction related to the municipal funding supporting the festival changed when the mainstream of earned income of the festival, the Grande Cappello, was cancelled:

> 'The motivation for starting was to collect money for the festival from the audience, but this was damaging artists' hat. These complained over the years, given that the audience was not willing to give additional money to artists.'

Due to the cancellation, the festival found itself with serious financial issues and the remedy was found in a larger support from the municipality:

> 'When the Grande Cappello was cut off we asked the municipality for support, because after all we had money from it.'

> 'We used to have around 50.000 from the mayor, and we realized it was not enough…but the new mayor said 'Ok, let's make 90'. I read this like a sound belief, because you can't make a festival with such impact without a support from someone.'

According to organizers a more supportive relationship with the municipality came with duties, changing the overall sense of the interaction:

> 'This obliged us to demonstrate the festival can produce money from tourists. We need to give people reasons to spend the night here, and even if out of the core business this is necessary to have a virtuous relationship with the institutions.'

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

Our work highlights that a core aspect of cultural festivals is the provision of an abundant offer of events and activities. While characterizing any festival besides the specific theme, such abundancy unfolds depending on the design of the program, that is, depending on the operationalization of the artistic offer within given time and space boundaries (Frisby and Getz, 1989; Frost and Lang, 2015). Thus, a first contribution to research on

festival management relates to the key concept of abundancy, framed under the backdrop of the vibrant and extensive, though fragmented, research landscape on festivals (Mair, 2019; Getz, 2012; Richards, 2015; Luonila, 2017; Gibson & Connell, 2011; Frey, 2000; Uysal and Gitleson, 1994).

Rather than proposing a fully-fledged framework, our remark is that abundancy can unfold within a range constituted by two very different 'models' for organizing a festival. The first abundant model is characterized by the fact that core events and initiatives take place at different moments, and participants can (in theory) attend and enjoy each of these. In such a linear display of abundancy, the festival performances can be anticipated to participants and set up with a relative distress by organizers. The interactions between participants can be spurred very lightly, given the clarity of what is offered. On the other hand, the second model relates to a non-linear and redundant offer that unfolds though events taking place in parallel. This configuration forces attendees to make a selection of what is offered, while probably experiencing a sense of overwhelmingness. This model is characterized by a higher unanticipated nature of the interactions between performers and participants, as well as higher levels of stress and organizational complexity for organizers. Such festival is marked by excess which largely increase levels of ambiguity concerning the 'what' and 'why' move different actors (both performers and the audience); the interactions are spurred massively, also through side activities, and the meanings attributed to the event could develop in many additional different directions, although not necessarily in a consistent way.

Our work is the first longitudinal study to tackle this key aspect of festival organizing and couple it with the extraordinary timeliness of these events (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995; Frost, 2016; Falassi, 1987; Toraldo & Islam, 2019; Toraldo, Mangia & Islam, 2019; Wilson et al., 2017). We do so by looking at the festival through three different images in time. In the FBF case the abundancy at the core of festival organizing became massive and organized in a redundant fashion after few editions, when the festival started to be invaded by buskers wishing to perform and the organizers reacted creating a new category of credited artists. Credited artists then became the main bulk of a massive offer, characterized by a high rate of redundancy. Similarly, the creation of the Buskers' House and the Buskers' Garden was instrumental to channel the redundancy according to the space and time boundaries of the festival, to make the city environment apt to host such high rate of redundancy, while at the same time boosting in a massive fashion the interactions of participants, who could access freely these

side initiatives. It was this excess that worked out in creating an atmosphere of ‘organized chaos’ and fueling the attendees’ sense of getting overwhelmed by the festival itself.

Another contribution relates to the conceptualization of abundancy in festival organizing as a construct which is not self-evident but hidden. Our comparative analysis contributes to research on festival organizing by offering a methodological advancement: it unmasks how abundance unfolds under the exceptional temporal and spatial boundaries characterizing festivals (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995), by looking at changes in their operating mode: in the FBF case the most influential change was the elimination of the afternoon shows of credited artists; as shown in Table 3, this cancellation was particularly crucial to decrease the redundancy rate of the event in terms of hours of show. It was influential also in setting the path for a more normalized, anticipated and streamlined kind of festival, closer to the linear model that characterizes mainstream (e.g. Rock in Rio), bouquet (e.g. The Green Man festival) or TV-produced festivals (e.g. Sanremo).

The analysis on interviewees’ perceptions of changes at FBF allowed us to understand key implications of the change at the level of festival experience and meanings (Luonila, 2017; Larson 2002; Getz et al. 2007): from a festival characterized by abundance and field-level excess to an event characterized by the willing to avoid stress for participants. This suffocates the convergence of meanings fueling the ambiguity of the event, which now provides a more anticipated experience, as participants are not forced to make a leap; rather than let it go, participants are invited to focus. However, such invitation is done while keeping an ‘invented’ tradition (Hobsbawn & Ranger, 2012) of unofficial meanings stratified over time through images of organized chaos, freedom and collective effervescence.

Our work contributes to the literature on festivals also by including time dynamics while analyzing the various, often contrasting meanings attributed to the festival event (Brennan et al., 2007; Győri, 2019). Organizers remark the change as deliberated; they mainly focused on the reduction of the redundancy by acting upon credited, which were also the factor triggering the redundancy characterizing the FBF. Our analysis highlights a curious loop: credited artists came ‘grassroots’, bottom up, and were institutionalized at FBF in an unplanned and emergent fashion; in 2019 they are de-institutionalized deliberately and in a planned way, top-down, similar to a buffer that is blown or deflated depending on the rate of redundancy envisaged for the festival. Also, organizers claim that the change is consistent with the meanings attributed to the festival by the

audience, although there is no recorded evidence of the opinion of the audience. In fact, such claim was backed in our interviews with organizers by exclusively voicing the audience, rather than let them speak.

A further, more general issue relates to the lack of clarity on who exactly the organizers refer to when they talk about the festival audience. Research on cultural festivals, especially urban festivals, has underlined the importance of the interaction between a festival and the community 'owning' the festival (Quinn, 2003; 2005). While updating the FBF case, we noticed that the group of participants mostly resembling the idea of a 'community' is the one of artists. Artists' talent, enthusiasm and word of mouth have been key factors for organizing the FBF. Artists' perceptions on changes at FBF vary, depending on busking and busking festivals experience: artists that were present around 2000 underline the normalization of the festival in its core and community-laden aspects, those absent equate the FBF experience as a mainstream festival. In our interviews the feeling of being part of something unique and exceptional is weak, and the meanings attributed to FBF are somewhat aligned with the general sense of ordinariness endorsed by organizers. Rather than disregarding this weakness as non-significant, our interpretation is that this weakness confirms the normalization of FBF.

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[i] The town of Parkes has, and never had, no actual link with the ‘real’ Elvis: he never visited the town, played there, or even just talked about it.

[ii] This space reduction is computed in linear meters, comparing the streets reserved for credited artists’ shows in 2000 and 2019.

[iii] On the audience side what seems to matter for someone was largely a new set of interaction with artists, a less standardized form of sociology of music consumption, largely unpredicted and unknown (not differently from what today the shuffle function of any mp3 player does). Other would simply enjoy the atmosphere of entertainment or crowdy party.

[iv] The festival has a massive reception in terms of audience. Brochures and press releases from both 2000 and 2019 highlight a figure around 800.000 for each edition.

[v] A payment system that allows to send money to others or pay in stores from the smartphone.

APPENDIX

Table 1 – Data collected

Archival sources	**Documents**	**Years**	**Length (pages)**
FBF guides	19	2000-2004; 2007-2019	750
FBF brochures	4	2012; 2013; 2016; 2018	244
FBF Association statutes	2	1989; 2011	26
City council deliberations	4	2017-2019	24
Reports and other sources	16	various	50
Total	45		1094
Interviews (FBF organizers)	**Interviews**	**At FBF since:**	**Length (minutes)**
Executive director	3	2005-2019	230
Artistic director, co-founder	3	1988-2019	211
Organizer, cofounder	2	1988-2019	122
Organizer, cofounder	1	1988-2019	70
Organizer, cofounder	1	1988-2019	80
Project manager	1	2012-2019	70
Project manager	1	2008-2019	55
Total	12		838
Interviews (FBF artists)	**Interviews**	**Participations (first)**	**Length (minutes)**
Invited Artists	2	2 (2012)	86
Credited musicians	16	47 (1990s)	675
Both	8	51 (1990s)	379
Total	26	98	1140

Table 2 – The FBF business model/formula, around 2000 and 2019

	2000	**2019**
Name & Focus	Ferrara Buskers Festival	same
General features	• Busking: music (mainly) & street performing • One week (last full week of August) • Ferrara historical center as stages • Free access (hat's offer encouraged) • Not competitive	same
Core business	• Performers: invited musician (20) plus Credited artists (175) • Rules for artists: - All: time/space spot assigned, unamplified sound, self-managed[1] - For invited: travel reimbursement, hat offerings - For credited: application & selection process; hat offering - Performing area: 5.883 m	• Same (varying number of credited artists every year: 254 in 2019) • Rules for artists: - same but one main difference for credited: elimination of afternoon shows - Performing area: 4.297 m (-27%)
Additional activities	• Related to performing aspects (Buskers' House; Buskers' Garden; Busker Card) • Additional activities (exhibitions; social initiatives; free camping)	• Related to performing aspects (Notti Buskers; Storie di Buskers) • Additional activities (Pesca & Vinci; Buskers Experience; Buskers Lab, Buskers in the City)

[1] Once selected, artists are free to manage their performances as they want and take full responsibility, also in negative terms. This implies that important parts of the performance, such as grabbing the audience attention, or recognizing the right moment for collecting money, are up to buskers' skills and experience.

Table 3 – The FBF potential capacity, 2000 and 2019

		2000		2019	
		Max total hours[1]	Max hours per artist[2]	Max total hours[1]	(Incorporating the performing area reduction)[3]
Invited artists	Afternoon	180	15	200	200
	Night	240	12	280	280
	total	420	27	480	480
Credited artist	Afternoon	2.625	15	-	-
	Night	2.100	12	3.556	2.597
	total	4.725	27	3.556	2.597
Total	Afternoon	2.805		200	200
	Night	2.340		3.836	2.877
	total	5.145		4.036	3.077

[1] Maximum number of hours of performance at FBF, computed as follows:
number of artists * number of days of performance * number of hours per performance

[2] Maximum number of hours of performance accorded to each artist/band at FBF, computed as follows:
number of days of performance*number of hours per performance

[3] Maximum number of hours per performance at FBF in 2019, considering in the computation also the reduction of the performance area for credited artists (a 27% reduction: from 5.883 squared meters in 2000 to 4.297 in 2019) as follows:
number of artists * (1-0,27) * number of days of performance * number of hours per performance