

AUDIENCE'S PERCEPTIONS ON ROMANIAN CULTURAL EVENTS AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT - A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: The global Coronavirus pandemic has affected many aspects of social life, with large gatherings being banned or limited, which meant that major cultural events have suffered, some being canceled, others being moved online. The third category of events took place under the conditions of the „new normal” with severe restrictions in order to ensure the safety of participants in terms of health. This study analyzed the way in which major cultural events in Romania were affected by the pandemic, such as the Art Safari Festival, the George Enescu Festival or the Sibiu International Theater Festival, but also how the public's perception of these events may have changed as a result of the decision of the organizers to keep them under the conditions of the new normal. The results of the study in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic show that the participants in the cultural events perceive that the three analyzed festivals contribute to a large extent to the urban development of the host cities, while their notoriety represents the main weakness.

Keywords: cultural events, urban development, COVID-19, festivals.

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of culture in urban development strategies is a relatively common practice not only in Romania, but also in many other countries in the world. An example that reflects the similar way in which culture can be actively used in the strategic development plans of different cities is that of the many Central and Eastern European urban settlements that call for a "glorious past" to promote cultural tourism. For example, Bucharest is one of these cities because it is often called "Little Paris", referring to the interwar period, when the city benefited from an accelerated development (Timothy and Nyaupane, 2009).

Because culture is a set of values shared by a particular community, its content is determined by many variables such as religion, which can be an important feature of the culture of communities in general and those in a region with deep cultural manifestations, such as that of the Romanian space (Tala, 2012). There is a great diversity of forms of culture that can contribute to achieving the objectives of urban development plans and thus several successful models have been identified as using culture as a promoter of urban development (Popescu and Corboș 2017):

- Edinburgh - is known as the "city of literature";
- Bradford - is known as the "movie city";

- Lyon - is known as the "city of media arts";
- Berlin - is known as the "city of design";
- Glasgow - is known as the "city of music".

For each of these cities that are also part of the UNESCO Network, the creative industry has an essential role for increasing urban competitiveness (Popescu and Corboș, 2017), and the models that they represent can be analyzed and adapted to the urban development of Romanian cities. The aim of the paper is to evaluate a series of perceptions of participants in three important cultural events in Romania (Art Safari Festival, George Enescu Festival and Sibiu International Theater Festival) on the level to which the festivals influence urban development and how participants perceive changes in the organization and conduct of these events compared to the pre-pandemic period.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In a broad sense, an event can be defined as an action, a phenomenon or a circumstance of a certain importance, which takes place at a well-defined moment in time (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). Thus, cultural events can be used in a strategy to promote tourist destinations, so that the urban or regional centers that organize them can benefit culturally, socially and economically (Akhoondnejad, 2016; Cheng, 2016; Tanford and Jung, 2017). The value that a festival can have for both the organizers and the public is given by a complex of factors that are presented in Figure 1.

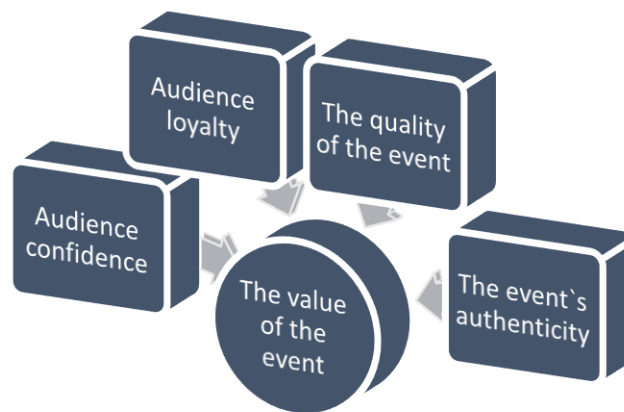


FIGURE 1. FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE VALUE OF A FESTIVAL
Source: Akhoondnejad (2016)

Events and festivals often play a key role in triggering a sense of local patriotism, highlighting the strong force that a festival or cultural event can have to maintain local pride in a city, region or country (Anholt 2016; Olins, 2002). Moreover, studies show that resiliency and sustainability of a city revealed by emphasizing cultural heritage through cultural events and festivals can become the basis of a socially, economically and culturally sustainable city (Moreno, 2020).

Another important feature of today's events and festivals is that they refer to the growing number of events and festivals organized worldwide, as they have been considered a growth driver for both economic and urban development (Liang and Wang, 2020) which ultimately leads to a saturation of the profile market. This trend is most visible in the United States, where over 2,500 festivals are organized annually. Therefore, urban marketers need to be aware of this trend and pay close attention to event and festival planning, so as to ensure the involvement of an active and diverse audience, despite the oversaturation that characterizes the market of events and festivals nowadays.

One of the tools that can be used for the cultural development of cities is cultural tourism, which can play a key role in supporting the efforts of residents to preserve their cultural identity, goods and exceptional values (Finkel and Platt, 2020). However, for cultural tourism to be a truly effective tool for urban development, there is a need first of all for the active involvement of local authorities who must implement projects aimed at improving infrastructure and urban image (Bogan, 2019; Kalvet et al., 2020; Vergori and Arima, 2020).

In order for cultural events to have the greatest possible impact on the cultural development of cities, they must be adapted to the specifics of the target audience. Often, cultural events are an attraction not only for locals but also for foreign tourists, so it is necessary to analyze their profile when planning a festival or cultural event.

The health crisis that humanity has gone through since 2020 has had a major impact on many aspects of economic, political and social life. One of the most affected aspects was the field of organizing cultural events, given that many exhibitions, concerts, shows or competitions were postponed, canceled or took place in special conditions, without the physical presence of the audience. According to the European Festivals Association, the average loss recorded in the European Union was 40,000 euros per festival, the negative effects being even greater if we consider the indirect impact on the tourism sector on the local economy (European Festivals Association, 2020).

Such festivals could no longer take place after the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, which led to losses for both organizers and local economies. Similar losses were recorded in Romania, given that many of the large events that were to take place during 2020 were canceled, two examples in this regard being the Untold and Electric Castle festivals which normally attracted over 300,000 participants (Digi24, 2020).

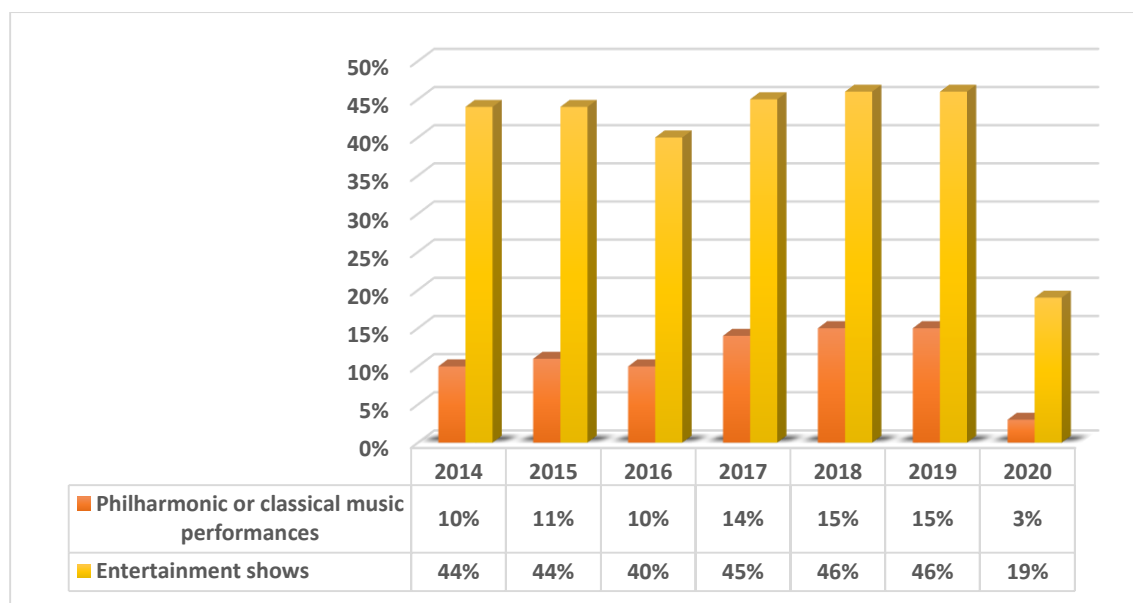


FIGURE 2. FREQUENCY OF ROMANIAN AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION IN CULTURAL PERFORMANCES DURING 2014-2020 (%)

Source: Edited by authors after Croitoru & Marinescu (2019) and Culturada (2021)

The Coronavirus pandemic had a significant negative impact on cultural events in Romania as the market for cultural events was growing in the pre-pandemic period, and in 2020 this growth trend was abruptly stopped. According to the published cultural barometers, constructed by reporting to the 2014-2020 time period, the frequency of participation in performances was increasing both in the segment of philharmonic / classical music and in the segment of entertainment performances, remaining at an approximately constant level in the segment of theater and opera (Croitoru and Marinescu, 2019; Culturada, 2021).

In 2020, however, there was a significant decrease due to the negative effects of the global health crisis. According to Figure 2, we can say that the Coronavirus pandemic has had adverse effects, given that most of the festivals and events that were scheduled to take place during 2020 have been canceled. Consequently, the plumbing of cultural events changed as it can be concluded that the pandemic has been an important obstacle to the general trend in recent times, that of increasing the consumption of cultural events for the Romanian audience.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main objective of the research is to evaluate a series of perceptions of the participants in three important cultural events in Romania (Art Safari Festival, George Enescu Festival and Sibiu International Theater Festival) regarding the level in which the events influence urban development and how participants perceive changes in the organization and conduct of these events compared to the period before the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the research evaluates aspects starting from the hypotheses below:

- Criteria that the public considers when deciding to participate in one of the three festivals. - *H1. The main criterion that the public considers when making the decision to participate in one of the three festivals is the opinion of acquaintances or friends.*
- The public's perception of some important aspects regarding the organization of the three festivals (ticket price, cleanliness, hygiene conditions, safety of participants, etc.). – *H2. The public considers that the safety of the participants is a strength from the point of view of the organization of the three festivals.*
- Sources of information that the public accesses before participating in one of the three festivals. – *H3. The main source of information that the public accesses before participating in the three festivals is the Internet.*
- The perceived notoriety of the three festivals, compared to similar festivals in the world. – *H4. The public considers that the notoriety of the three festivals is lower than that of similar festivals in the world.*
- The degree to which the public considers that the three festivals have contributed to the urban development of the host cities. – *H5. The public considers that the three festivals have contributed to a very large extent to the urban development of the host localities.*
- The plans that the public has regarding the future editions of the three festivals. – *H6. The public plans to participate in future editions of the three festivals.*

In order to achieve the objective established in terms of the aspects that were evaluated, a set of variables illustrated in Figure 3 was used with the aim of identifying some influences regarding the development of the studied cultural events.



FIGURE 3. RESEARCH VARIABLES

The first research method used, document analysis, consisted in collecting data which allowed the analysis of secondary data related to the studied events., the advantage of this method being that it allowed covering a larger geographical area and collecting data over a period of several years: 2018, 2019 and 2020. The results are presented in section 4.1.

The second method, the opinion poll, was conducted using a questionnaire that contained mostly opinion questions regarding the attitude of the people concerning the three analyzed festivals. The questionnaire retrieved 116 valid answers in the online environment while being completed only by those who participated in at least one of the last three editions of the analyzed festivals: Art Safari, George Enescu Festival and the International Theater Festival in Sibiu. The results are analyzed in section 4.2.

4. RESULTS ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS TESTING

4.1. Comparing three successful cultural events in Romania

Next, three of the most successful cultural events and festivals in Romania are compared (Art Safari, George Enescu Festival, Sibiu International Theater Festival) through the effects obtained such as number of tourists, number of tickets sold and generated income.

4.1.1. Art Safari Festival

The festival reached its 7th edition in 2020, its success placing the city of Bucharest among the great cultural capitals of Europe. The promotion strategy of the festival was an effective one, given that it ensured the presence of over 170,000 visitors at the seven editions that took place until 2020. The number of visitors of the Art Safari festival 2020 edition, decreased due to the conditions in which the number of tourists decreased in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic and traffic restrictions (Art Safari, 2021).

The decrease in the number of tourists who visited Bucharest and especially the decrease in the number of foreign tourists also indirectly influenced the number of potential visitors of the Art Safari festival. As a result, Figure 4 shows the number of tourists who visited Bucharest in the first months of 2020, compared to the similar period of 2018 and 2019.

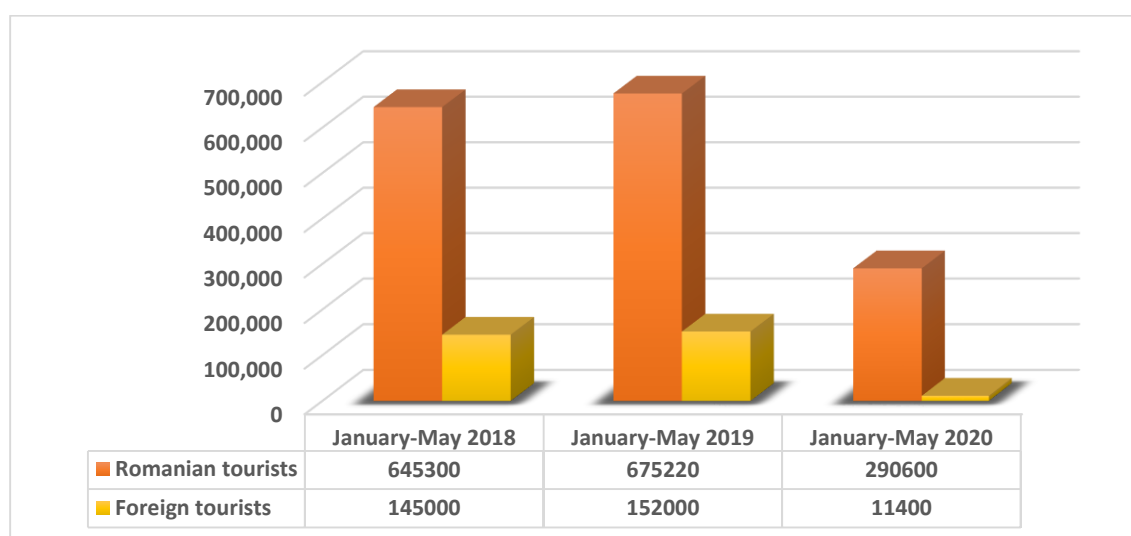


FIGURE 4. NUMBER OF ROMANIAN AND FOREIGN TOURISTS IN BUCHAREST
Source: Agerpres (2020)

Therefore, the much lower number of Romanian and foreign tourists who visited Bucharest was indirectly reflected in the lower number of participants in the 2020 edition of the Art Safari Festival and in the significantly lower revenues obtained at this edition.

4.1.2. George Enescu Festival

The George Enescu Festival is considered to be the most important cultural event in Romania, an event that has a significant impact on Bucharest's branding strategy both in terms of the visual concept it represents and in terms of the infrastructure involved and how the festival is reflected in traditional media and the new digital media (Alexe, 2013).

Due to the fact that the George Enescu Festival addresses a diverse audience, the promotion strategy of the event is based on the transmission of promotional messages through multiple communication channels: the website www.festivalulenescu.ro, promotional spots broadcast on TV, promotion with the help of international tours organized by the Romanian Cultural Institute, promotion on the YouTube channel, etc.

Figure 5 shows the total number of tickets sold, as we can observe that the number decreased in 2020 compared to the 2019 edition.

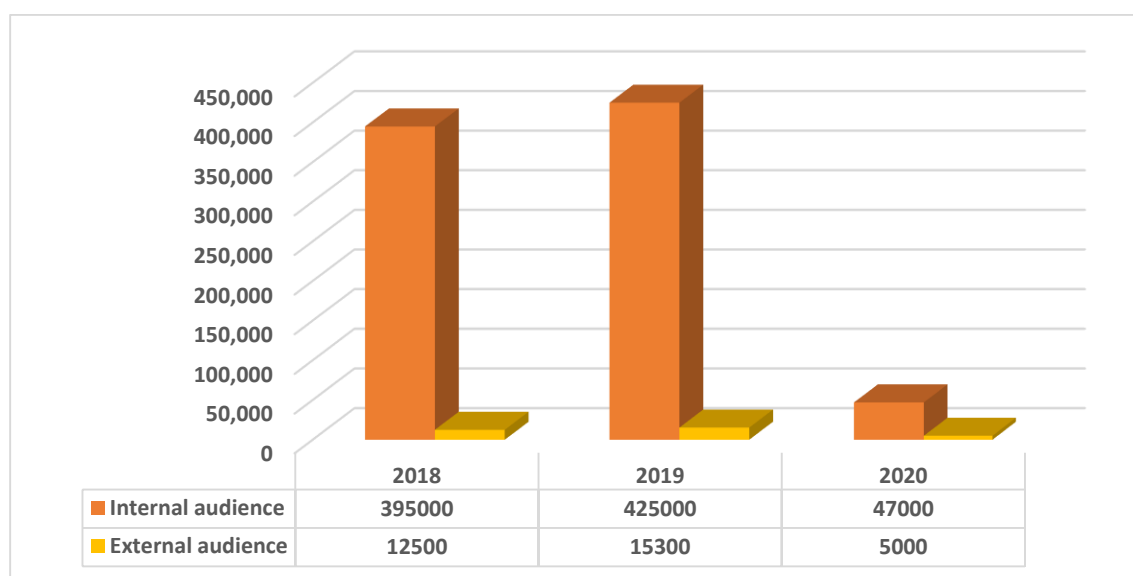


FIGURE 5. EVOLUTION OF THE TOTAL NUMBER OF TICKETS SOLD AT THE GEORGE ENESCU FESTIVAL IN 2019 AND 2020 ON THE SEGMENT OF DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN TOURISTS
Source: Festival Insider (2020)

Therefore, the revenues obtained from ticket sales by the organizers of the George Enescu Festival decreased significantly in 2020 compared to 2019, amid the cancellation of a large part of the events scheduled at the festival and the online relocation of another part of the events.

4.1.3. Sibiu International Theater Festival

The first edition of the festival took place in 1993, when the actors of the "Radu Stanca" Theater from Sibiu decided to offer an important artistic event to the inhabitants of the region. The event grew rapidly in popularity, so that the 2005 edition was attended by artists from almost 70 countries, a threshold that was exceeded in 2007, when Sibiu was the Cultural Capital of Europe (Sibiu International Theater Festival, 2020).

In a similar way to the other two events analyzed in the paper, the Sibiu International Theater Festival is promoted through a wide variety of online and offline communication channels. Specific to this event, however, is the fact that it wants to convey to the public the idea of novelty every year, so that each edition has its own theme and its own presentation poster.

The success of the promotion strategy is reflected in the statistical data showing the public's participation in the festival: usually at the beginning of each edition tickets for all shows are already sold, accommodation in

Sibiu is fully booked and local markets are full on each day of the show (Festival Sibiu International Theater Festival, 2020).

In 2020, due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the event could not be organized in its traditional version, but with a series of 138 online shows broadcasted to the public through media such as the festival's official website, YouTube channel and Facebook page. In total, the 138 shows included over 14,000 minutes of theater that the general public could watch for free in digital format (Cultural Observatory, 2020). Also, in 2020, no tickets were sold for any event organized within the Sibiu International Theater Festival, the revenues being obtained exclusively through online social platforms advertising.

The significant restriction of income sources in 2020 was also reflected in the volume of revenues obtained by the organizers of the International Theater Festival in Sibiu, which decreased more than ten times in 2020, compared to the previous year, as we can see through Figure 6.

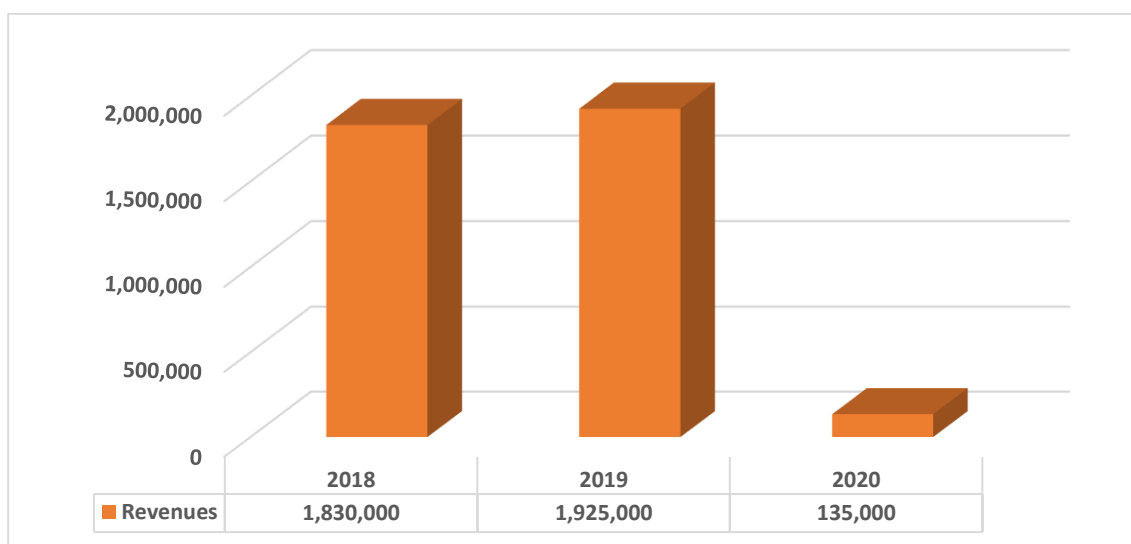


FIGURE 6. EVOLUTION OF REVENUES FOR THE SIBIU INTERNATIONAL THEATER FESTIVAL IN 2019 AND 2020

Source: *Observator Cultural* (2020)

4.2. Opinion poll results

An important variable that was assessed with the help of the research was that of the participation criteria that the respondents considered when making the decision to participate in one of the three festivals. The importance of the different potential criteria was evaluated by the respondents with a score from 1 to 5, the average scores on each criterion and on each festival being presented through Figure 7.

One of the reasons why the Romanian public or potential foreign tourists did not participate in a very large number in the festivals organized in Romania could be that of the low notoriety of these events, compared to other similar events worldwide. This was indicated by the respondents by the way they offered answers when asked to compare the festival they participated in from the point of view of notoriety with other festivals in the world, the results showing, especially in the case of the Art Safari festival, the fact that the public perceives its notoriety as much lower than other similar events organized in other countries. As a result, festivals in Romania must apply an effective promotion strategy that aims to increase notoriety among audiences in Romania and abroad.

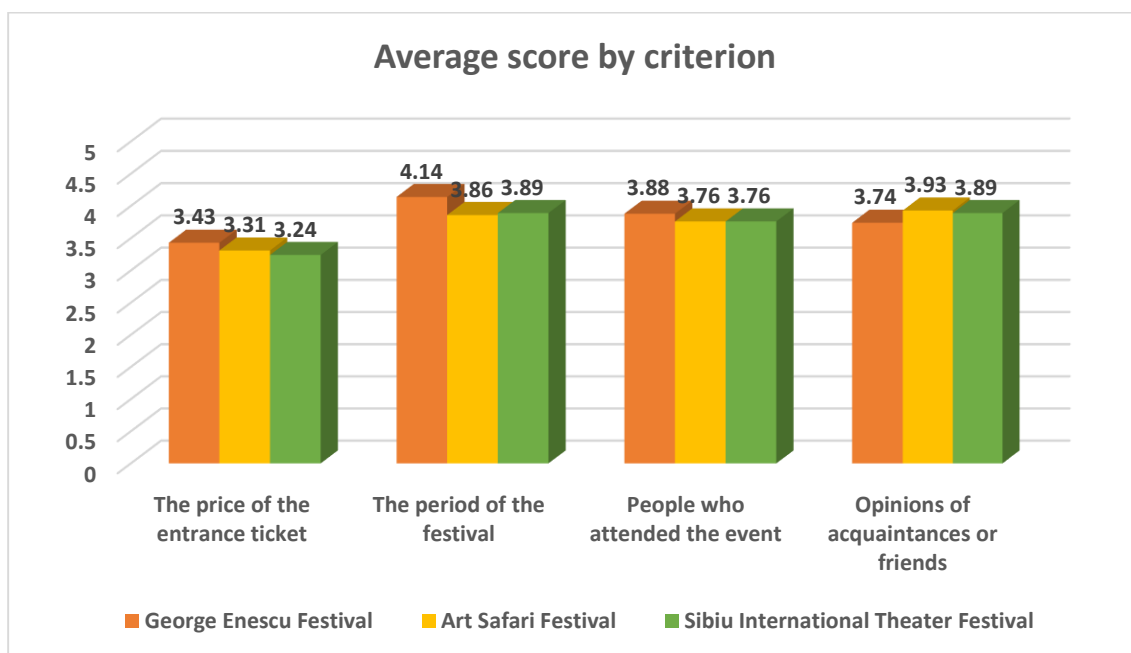


FIGURE 7. CRITERIA UNDERLYING THE DECISION TO PARTICIPATE

Although many of the respondents consider that the festivals in Romania do not rise to the level of those known internationally from the point of view of notoriety, they indicated in the way they answered the questionnaire that the cultural event they participated in had an important contribution to the urban development of the city in which it was organized, regardless of whether it was Art Safari, the George Enescu Festival or the Sibiu International Theater Festival, as we can see in Figure 8.

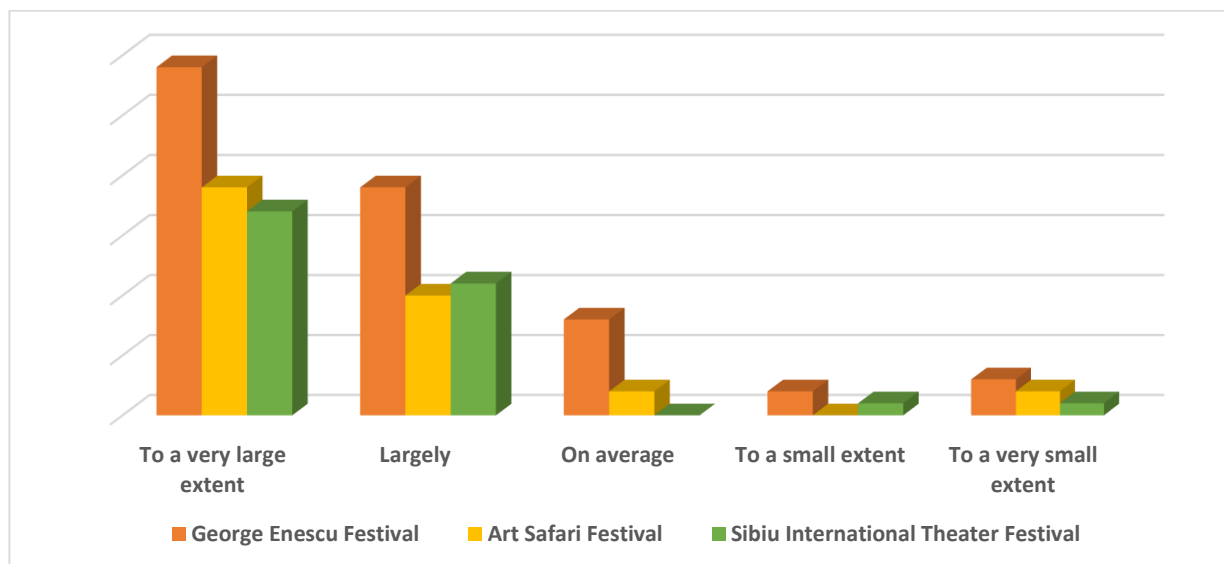


FIGURE 8. PERCEPTION ON THE LEVEL OF CONTRIBUTION OF THE FESTIVAL TO URBAN DEVELOPMENT

The relatively high degree of satisfaction of the majority of respondents regarding the way the three festivals were organized, including in this pandemic period we are going through, is also reflected in the willingness of people to participate in future editions of the three cultural events considered by this study. Respondents not only plan to participate in the future, but also expressed interest in participating in other cultural events in Bucharest or Sibiu. This can be explained both by the fact that they were satisfied with the way the festival they

attended was organized, and by the fact that the long period of quarantine, isolation or social distancing makes people eager to a greater measure to participate in cultural events (Figure 9).

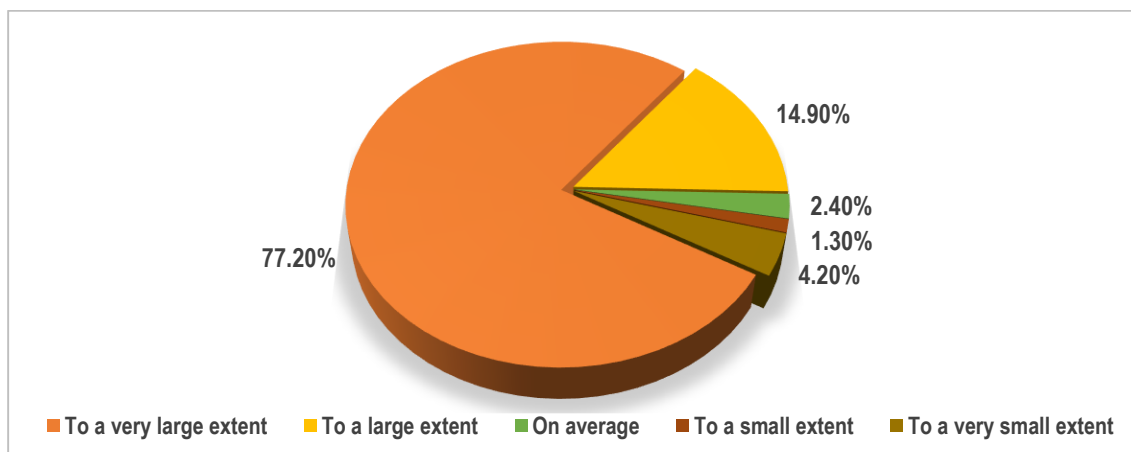


FIGURE 9. INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING IN OTHER CULTURAL EVENTS

A third important intention that the respondents expressed by the way they answered the questions from the questionnaire, is to participate in at least one of the other two festivals analyzed in this study. In other words, most of those who have participated in the Art Safari festival in the past have expressed their intention to participate in the future in one of the editions of the International Theater Festival in Sibiu or the George Enescu Festival. The very high desire expressed by the public to participate in cultural events in the post-pandemic period can be capitalized by the festival organizers, if they manage to develop an effective promotion strategy that can attract as many participants as possible from this potential audience.

The questionnaire also included questions strictly related to the way in which the participants in the three festivals perceived the level of quality of the organization of the events under the specific conditions of restrictions imposed by the authorities. A first aspect in this regard was to identify the degree to which participants are satisfied with the way in which the organizers of the cultural events complied with the restrictions imposed by the government to limit the spread of COVID-19.

The results show that most respondents believe that the organizers of the three events succeeded in deciding to comply with the restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the new Coronavirus. A large number of respondents participated not only in the 2020 edition of the festivals, but also in past editions of these cultural events (Figure 10), so they had the opportunity to compare how the events were organized under special conditions, imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic and how these events were organized in previous years. We thus deduce that the way of organizing events under pandemic conditions was at least as good as the organization of events under normal conditions.

These results show that people have understood and accepted the special situation that the organizers of the three events had to consider in 2020, but they would very much like to return to the classic way of organizing in the following years, to the detriment of the solutions found by the organizers to run part of the festival with the help of online tools. Also, the results of the study led to a conclusion for each of the six proposed hypotheses.

The first hypothesis which states that the main criterion that the public considers when making the decision to participate in one of the three festivals is the opinion of acquaintances or friends, has been partially confirmed, this being valid only in the case of Art Safari Festival. In the case of the George Enescu Festival and the Sibiu International Theater Festival, the main participation criterion is the period of the festival.

The second hypothesis, according to which the public considers that the safety of the participants is a strength from the point of view of the organization of the three festivals, was confirmed by the answers of the respondents, which indicated that the decisions of the organizers were appreciated.

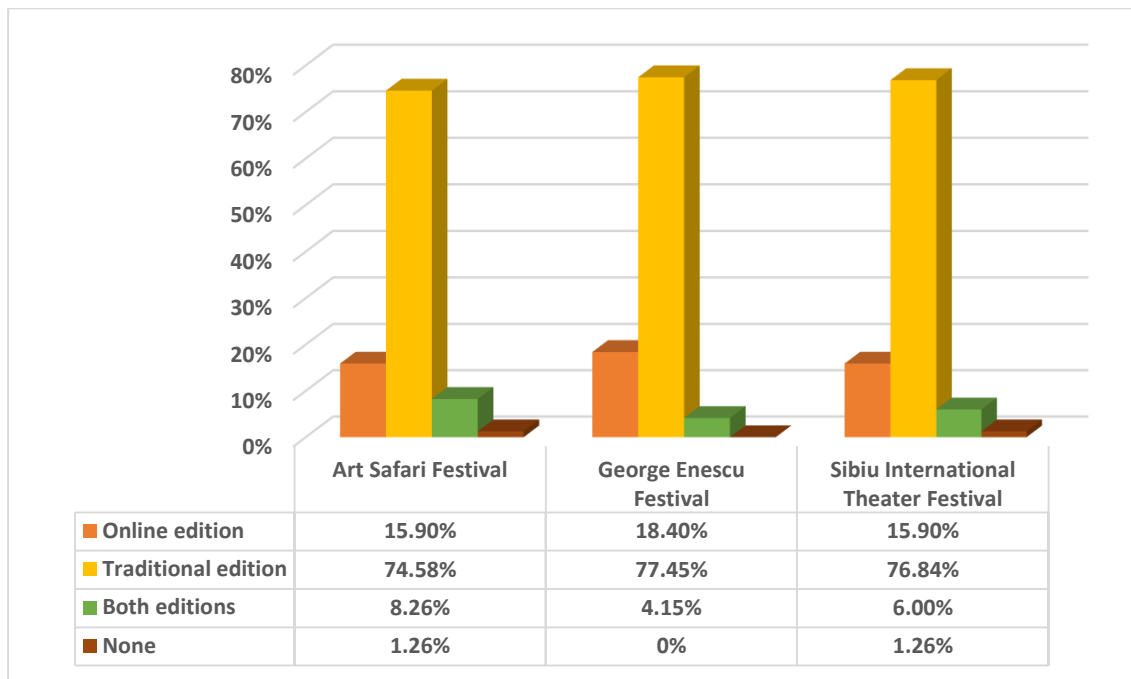


FIGURE 10. ONLINE VS. TRADITIONAL PREFERENCES

The third hypothesis which states that the main source of information that the public accesses before participating in the three festivals is the Internet has been confirmed, resulting in the Internet being an increasingly effective means of promoting cultural events.

The fourth hypothesis regarding the low notoriety of festivals has been confirmed, showing that it is necessary to further intensify the promotion activity, so that the notoriety of the festivals to be closer to that of major international festivals.

The fifth hypothesis which states that the public considers that the three festivals have contributed to a very large extent to the urban development of the host localities has been confirmed, thus indicating the importance of festivals for local communities.

The sixth hypothesis regarding the decision of the public to participate in the future editions of the three festivals was confirmed, as the respondents expressed their desire that festivals to return to the pre-pandemic situation and to be able to participate under normal conditions at these events.

5. RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

5.1. Level of achievement of the research objective

The results of the study made it possible to draw conclusions regarding the degree of fulfillment of the proposed objective in terms of all the evaluated aspects.

Thus, the main criterion that the public considers when making the decision to participate in one of the three festivals is the opinion of acquaintances or friends, but this is valid only in the case of the Art Safari Festival. In the case of the George Enescu Festival and the Sibiu International Theater Festival, the main participation criterion is the period of the festival. Furthermore, the audience considers that the safety of the participants is

a positive aspect from the point of view of organizing the three festivals, which indicates that the decisions of the organizers during the pandemic have a strong chance to be appreciated by potential tourists. The results confirm that the main source of information that the public accesses before participating in the three festivals is the Internet, resulting in the Internet being an increasingly effective means of promoting cultural events. However, the low notoriety of the festivals was also highlighted, the answers of the respondents showing that it is necessary to further intensify the promotion activity, so that the notoriety of festivals in Romania is close to that of major international festivals.

The public considers that the three festivals have contributed to a very large extent to the urban development of the host cities, a fact confirmed by the results, thus indicating the importance of the festivals for the local communities. The decision of the respondents to participate in future editions of the three festivals was also analyzed, and the respondents expressed the wish that the organization of the festivals return to the situation before the pandemic so that they can participate under normal conditions.

5.2. Improvement proposals

The research highlighted the low notoriety of festivals such as Art Safari, George Enescu and the Sibiu International Theater Festival. A recommendation in this regard is to develop promotion strategies with well-developed objectives. Examples of major festivals such as the Paseo Arts Festival, which focuses on the experience of participants, or Beethovenfest, which emphasizes the success of previous editions of the event when promoting the next edition of the festival, can be followed. A clear solution is for the Art Safari Festival, the George Enescu Festival and the Sibiu International Theater Festival to conclude partnerships with important travel agencies, which can further attract foreign tourists to Romania.

Partnerships should also be concluded between festival organizers and municipal town halls (with Bucharest City Hall for Art Safari and George Enescu festivals and with Sibiu City Hall for Sibiu International Theater Festival) to increase visibility of the events among citizens. In addition, the massive promotion of online festivals both nationally and internationally can attract new consumers of culture to participate in the three festivals.

5.3. Research limits and future research directions

The main limitation of the research was determined by the special conditions in which the questionnaire was distributed to the respondents and by the way in which they provided answers to the questions. The whole process took place online, there was no direct contact with the respondents, which made it difficult to interact with them. Another important limit of the research was the small number of respondents, the selected sample not being representative for the population of the entire country. Future studies may also consider other cultural events that may have an impact on urban development.

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