

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

DIGITAL RECEPTION OF CULTURE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT GENERATION Z WITH FESTIVALS

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ABSTRACT

The role of digital media, especially social networks, in informing citizens about cultural events has become crucial in recent years in shaping public perception, behavior, and consumer habits of visitors to cultural events. This paper examines the digital reception of culture among Generation Z, with a focus on their engagement with festivals in Varaždin, Croatia. The aim is to explore how social networks influence cultural participation and how digitally mediated practices contribute to the transformation of festival experiences.

The study is based on a quantitative survey conducted among young respondents (n = 209), examining their media habits, perceptions of cultural events, and motivations for participation. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze patterns of media use, while interpretative comparison with existing theoretical models provided the framework for contextualization. The results indicate that social networks are the dominant source of information about festivals, surpassing traditional media in both reach and influence. Generation Z shows a strong preference for authentic and experiential forms of participation that can be shared and reinterpreted through digital platforms. The data reveal a generational gap in the reception of traditional cultural events, with younger participants expecting more interactive and personalized content. This study presents the first empirical examination of Generation Z participation in Varaždin festivals, exploring the relationship between digital media use and emotional engagement. It contributes to research on digital culture by providing empirical evidence from a specific local context, linking cultural participation with digital communication practices. It highlights how Generation Z reshapes cultural reception through user-generated content, thereby extending the identity and visibility of festivals in the digital sphere. The findings offer practical implications for festival organizers and policymakers. Specifically, they highlight the need to adapt programming to younger audiences by combining heritage with interactive and digitally mediated forms of engagement.

Keywords: Generation Z, digital reception, social networks, cultural participation, festivals, user-generated content, authenticity

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1. Introduction

In the current digital transformation of society, information about cultural content is undergoing a strong change. Traditional media such as print, radio and television are gradually losing their dominant role in public communication and information, and this role is being taken over by social networks as dynamic, interactive and visually oriented platforms that shape users' everyday media behavior (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2013). The aforementioned change is not only technological in nature, but also social and cultural: the ways in which audiences consume, interpret, and disseminate information about cultural events are being transformed (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 5). It is particularly important to understand how these changes are reflected in the younger generations, especially Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010, who grew up with smartphones, wireless internet and social networks as basic tools for communication and information, representing the first truly digital generation. Numerous scientific studies (Pew Research Center, 2022; Statista, 2023; Kanižaj & Pavliček, 2021) show that Generation Z predominantly uses Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and Snapchat as their main sources of news and information, and the content they consume must be fast, visual and adapted to the format preferred by the online audience. In the context of cultural events, this generation is not only informed about "what is happening", but also actively shapes the experience of events through social networks – sharing content, commenting, expressing emotions and participating in the creation of a digital narrative about festivals, concerts, exhibitions and similar events. This makes social networks not only a source of information, but also a space for cultural reception (Jenkins et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 2014).

Organizers of festivals and similar events and manifestations are today faced with the question of how to reach this digitally literate, but at the same time selective audience, which seeks short and quick information. The aim of this paper is to investigate the role of social networks as a primary source of information about cultural events among members of Generation Z, and to analyze how these platforms shape their perception, engagement, and participation. To address this aim, the study is guided by the following research question: How do social networks influence Generation Z's emotional connection and engagement with festivals in Varaždin?

A quantitative analysis of the data obtained from the survey investigates awareness of festivals

through new media, as well as the authenticity and interactivity of festivals. Three hypotheses will be used to test whether there is a connection between the use of social networks and the level of awareness of festivals, the relationship between information through new media compared to traditional media, and the perception of festivals.

The contribution of this paper is the results that answer the question of whether social networks are the dominant source of information and the key mechanism of emotional connection with festivals. The paper answers the question of whether there is a connection between the frequency of use of social networks and the subjective feeling of awareness, as well as identification with the festival. How does Generation Z experience festivals. And answers the question of whether there is a connection between the dominant source of information and the perception of authenticity, cultural value and tourist potential of festival events.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Context of digital information transformation

In the last two decades, we have witnessed a radical transformation in the way information is produced, distributed and reaches the media audience. Traditional media such as print, radio and television are increasingly losing their primacy in information in relation to digital platforms, i.e. new media, which enable fast, interactive and personalized communication. Mass communication in the traditional media sense has become internet-based communication, both in the production and delivery of content (Castells, 2010).

Changes are not only occurring in the technical part, but also in communication patterns. Users are no longer passive consumers of content, but are becoming active participants in the media space: they comment, share and reinterpret content. According to Jenkins (2006, p. 3), "media convergence represents a cultural shift, since users are encouraged to search for new information and connect dispersed media content". In this context, social networks go beyond the function of information transmitters and become a space of cultural reception, participation and affective engagement. According to Papacharissi (2015), "technologies network us but it is narratives that connect us to each other, making us feel close to some and distancing us from others" (p. 5) and this is precisely how digital communication takes on both a narrative and identity dimension. Highfield

(2020) describes social media as a place where events are not only observed and followed, but also felt, and interpreted through personal attitudes and social affiliation. Dunne et al. (2023) indicate that the presence of Generation Z at a festival directly depends on their expectations of the festival content and experience, and the state of “flow” during the event. This confirms Jenkins’ thesis on media convergence, according to which traditional boundaries in the media are disappearing, and new digital practices enable multidimensional interaction between users, content and new technologies.

2.2. Cultural festivals as objects of public communication

Cultural festivals go beyond the role of artistic events in urban environments – they become spaces for public communication, cultural exchange and social interaction, and as objects of public discourse, they not only reflect the values of the local community, but also actively shape them through symbolic and identity narratives (Finkel, 2009; Quinn, 2005). In this way, they contribute not only to the cultural life of the community, but also to the formation of collective identity, especially in cities with a strong festival tradition. Festivals also function as platforms for communication branding – creating an image of a destination in the public eye through cultural content, media presence and audience participation (Getz, 2010; Richards & Palmer, 2010). In this context, festivals in Varaždin – such as Špancirfest, Varaždin Baroque Evenings and VAFI Festival – are not just occasional cultural events, but permanent media symbols of the city’s identity. They serve as spaces for the production of meaning and public reflection, and their effect increasingly relies on a presence in digital media, especially social networks that enable two-way communication between organizers and audiences (Lange & Bürkner, 2013). New media expand the communication space of the festival beyond the space-time limitations of the event. Festival reception becomes available in real time, and cultural experiences are multiplied through user-generated content, visual representations and interactive participation (Larsen & Ooi, 2018). Yin et al. (2023) in their study of the Guangzhou International Light Festival indicate that participants actively share their experiences through TikTok. The analysis of these announcements indicates a multidimensional experience of the festival through cognitive, affective and social dimensions. In order to realize their full cultural and communication potential, festivals must be recognizable, accessible and active within the digital media space, which

today shapes the dominant forms of public visibility and discourse.

2.3. The importance of social networks in cultural reception

Social media today are key players in the processes of cultural diffusion and public reception of content. They enable users not only to quickly access information about upcoming cultural events, but also to evaluate, comment on and share them within their own social circles. Through activities such as commenting, “liking”, forwarding, posting in the form of stories and direct interaction, the audience actively co-creates the cultural narrative of the event, together with the organizers and traditional media (Hudson et al., 2015).

The personal emotional component strongly shapes the aforementioned behavior. Members of Generation Z are visually oriented, react intuitively and emotionally to the content of the festival, and use social media as the main channel for transmitting affective reactions. While platforms such as Instagram and TikTok enable the visual presentation of the festival, primarily through photos, videos and “live” broadcasts, the collective perception is constructed through the emotional tone and sense of authenticity (Papacharissi, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2013).

Interaction via hashtags, comments and live streaming has become a key metric for assessing the success of festivals today. Digital activity directly increases the visibility of events in this specific case of festivals, especially among young audiences, while also encouraging emotional connection and mobilization of the local community. This also provides festival and event organizers with direct feedback, which is inevitable and necessary in the preparation and design of future events (Hudson et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 2014).

In this digitally “hypervisible” culture, active participation in festivals is often confirmed by posting on social networks, which deepens symbolic capital, but also confirms individual identity and cultural inclusion in accordance with Rainie and Wellman’s concept of social capital in the digital environment (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Generation Z has also been described as the “generation of metamodernism” – a cultural phenomenon marked by rapid social change. They temporarily rely on previous civilizational values,

but reinterpret them through digital habits and digital platforms that change institutions, including the cultural sector (Tirocchi, 2024).

2.4. Digital participation and cultural identification

Digital participation refers to all forms of audience participation in the online sphere around an event – from sharing official announcements, to posting one's own photos from the festival, to creating a complete user-generated story about the event. In the context of cultural festivals, this kind of participation expands the space of reception: the festival is no longer limited to a physical time and place, but lives online through posts and interactions that can continue and enhance the experience of the event. According to Jenkins's concept of "spreadable media" content that is easily shared by the audience becomes culturally relevant in the digital environment (Jenkins H. et al., 2013). In this way, visual and narrative elements of the festival generated by the participants themselves (e.g. Instagram Stories from the concert, TikTok videos with a summary of the festival atmosphere) contribute to building a collective image of the festival on the Internet. This collective image is important for cultural identification: young people can identify with the festival and local culture through a digital experience, even if they are not physically present. By expanding the audience on different platforms, a new experience of local identity is also created. Gen Z prioritizes authentic cultural engagement—including local gastronomy, urban culture, and traditions—which strongly aligns with the "Immersive Explorers" tourist segment (European Travel Commission, 2020, p. 14). The need for authenticity and personal participation in such processes is particularly emphasized. Generation Z appears on the social scene at a time when the media landscape is marked by the social media revolution, the historical phase in which we moved from a static web to a participatory web (web 2.0). This shift increasingly focused on the ability of consumers to generate their own content (the so-called "prosumer", and then "producer"). (Tirocchi, 2024). Young people around the world, for example and through platforms such as BeReal, increasingly strive for transparency, credibility and the expression of their own personality in public space. Generation Z tourists seek active, authentic and personally meaningful cultural experiences, including participation in workshops and practices of intangible cultural heritage (Lyu, et al., 2024). Interactive public art allows individuals, especially young people, to become not only observers, but also co-authors of cultural narratives (Guljaževa &

Sola, 2024.) The application of modern technologies such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR) and tools based on artificial intelligence (AI) allows the creation of personalized and emotional narratives aligned with the digital habits and expectations of younger audiences (Chang & Hsieh, 2017; Wang & Iahad, 2025). Approaches such as the above contribute to redefining festivals as multidimensional communication platforms, and strengthen cultural participation and connection with values that Generation Z perceives as key elements, namely authenticity, engagement and current technological relevance.

Accordingly, festivals should adapt narratives and values to the demands of the digital generation, i.e., include young audiences in the creation of content or the use of modern technologies (AR/VR experiences, etc.). When young audiences, especially Generation Z, actively participate digitally, their cultural identification with the festival and the community is consequently strengthened. Thus, young people who create content related to the festival simultaneously confirm their identity as active members of a particular cultural community. This phenomenon can also be observed through the concept of user-generated content (UGC), according to which the audience moves from a passive recipient to a co-creator of the identity of a festival. In this way, the festival becomes "ours", that is, it is part of the identity of the participants. Research confirms that user-generated content (UGC) on social networks contributes to strengthening the group identification of festival participants or destination, especially among Generation Z. Yamagishi et al. (2024) systematically analyze the influence of UGC on the intention to visit a destination among members of Generation Z through the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model. They find that user-generated content, such as photos, videos and reviews, has a strong impact on emotional connection and perceptions of destination authenticity. They conclude: "... user-generated content has a strong impact on emotional connection and perceived authenticity" (Yamagishi, et al., 2024).

The thematic analysis of the bibliometric review, which included 407 publications published in the period from 2011 to 2025, identified six thematic clusters, among which the "festival experiences" cluster stands out (Wang & Iahad, 2025). The authors emphasize that members of Generation Z do not use social networks exclusively for content consumption, but actively participate in creation through user-generated content (UGC), which shapes the festival experience as an element of the collective identity of that generation.

UGC contributes to authenticity, emotional reasoning and interactivity, and research confirms that young people expect festival and cultural experiences to be creative, participatory and identity-based. Thus, digital participation almost redefines the boundaries of traditional cultural reception (Wang & Iahad, 2025).

The digital participation of Generation Z pushes the boundaries of the traditional reception of culture – it becomes participative and identity-based.

Conducted international research confirms that social networks have a significant impact on the audience's emotional connection to festivals. Thus, Hudson et al. (2015) analyzed music festival visitors and found that the use of social networks positively affects their satisfaction, loyalty and recommendations, which also strengthens the emotional connection of participants with the festival brand. Digital interaction thus goes beyond the informational aspect and activates the interest and participation of visitors in giving recommendations. Jenkins et al. (2013) emphasize the role of spreadable content/media – easily shareable content that becomes culturally relevant in a network context. They distinguish the concept of spreadability (spreading through user interaction) from stickiness (focus on centralized platforms), thereby contributing to the understanding of how festivals reach audiences through shared visual and emotional content. Traditionally, festivals are both the result and symbol of the cultural identity of a space. However, today they are often used as a marketing tool for developing destinations and reminding of local specificities, while at the same time actively reinterpreting them (Elias-Varotsis, 2006). Social networks further accelerate this process, as they allow users to create, share and reinterpret festival content from personal and collective perspectives. The role of visual content (e.g. Instagram and TikTok) is particularly pronounced, which “stages” local specificities for a wider digital audience, thereby confirming the transmedia dynamics of cultural identification. Numerous studies show that young people of Generation Z do not want to be passive audiences but active co-creators of cultural content. Martusciello et al., (2025) also emphasize how generative artificial intelligence, gamification and AR technologies enable personalization, interaction and engagement on a personal level, which significantly enhances the feeling of participation and identification with cultural narratives. Through a bibliometric analysis of 217 WoS publications on Generation Z in tourism, Ivasciuc et al. (2024)

identify thematic clusters covering attitudes/perceptions and behaviour, social media and digital interactions, experiential tourism, communication and information dynamics (authenticity), and generational comparisons. They further note that social media, eWOM and UGC significantly shape Gen Z's destination attitudes and travel decisions.

Generation Z seeks authenticity, interaction and personalized forms of participation, which challenges festivals to reinterpret their values and narratives in line with the digital expectations of their audiences.

Singh et al. (2023) through a systematic literature review using the PRISMA technique confirm that in the digital context, festival and event promotion is a multi-channel activity, in which social networks, mobile applications and user-generated content platforms play a fundamental role. According to their findings, platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp represent key touch points for informing the audience about the program, artists and logistics of the festival, while at the same time enabling audience participation through comments, posts and reviews (UGC), which moves the audience from a passive recipient to a co-creator of the festival identity. However, the paper also warns of the challenges of digital promotion: excessive advertising, information noise and failure to distinguish between official and unwanted promotional content.

In the Croatian context, there is still a lack of sufficient empirical work linking social networks, cultural festivals and audience perception, so this paper contributes to this area by analyzing the festival audience in Varaždin and their reception of cultural events through social networks.

3. Hypotheses and research methodology

This paper aims to explore the impact of social networks on the approach and perception of cultural festivals among Generation Z in Varaždin, Croatia. The research problem holds an interest in the extent to which social networks, particularly Instagram and TikTok, are the major sources of information about festivals as compared with more traditional forms of media (i.e. press, television, radio) and how these channels influence emotional engagement, perceptions regarding cultural authenticity and actual participation of Generation Z in the events. It seeks to fill this gap existing in the context of Croatia by interpreting results on how digital media consumption shapes awareness about such festivals as Špancirfest or Varaždin

baroque evenings and also their perceived cultural or touristic value among young people.

The research design employs a quantitative approach through an online survey conducted among 209 first-year undergraduate students at the University of the North, Varaždin, from May 12 to 18, 2025. The survey, distributed via Google Forms, consisted of 40 closed-ended questions divided into three parts: demographic data, perception and affective connection (e.g., importance of festival atmosphere), and behavior and sources of information (e.g., primary information channels). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in Excel and SPSS to assess the dominance of social networks, preferences for modern technological attractions, and the role of festival atmosphere in engagement. This design enables a detailed exploration of digital media's impact on festival reception among Generation Z.

In the research, we start from three hypotheses:

H1: Social networks are a more dominant source of information about Varaždin festivals than traditional media.

Theoretical connection: In accordance with the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Media Practice Model, social networks are becoming a dominant channel of information because they satisfy the needs for speed, interaction and personalization (Jenkins et al., 2013). Cohen et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of communication channels in tourist perception and loyalty – social networks thus play a key role in emotional connection.

H2: Members of the Z generation strive for new attractiveness in accordance with modern technologies.

Theoretical connection: Generation Z, according to research by Martusciello et al. (2025), prefers personalized and interactive formats that include gamification, AR/VR and digital technologies. This hypothesis also fits into the model of digital participation and transmedia cultural reception (Jenkins et al., 2013).

H3: The interestingness of the festival and the festival atmosphere are crucial for Generation Z.

Theoretical connection: Emotional Branding

theories and hedonic models of festival consumption (Hudson et al., 2015) highlight precisely the atmosphere and engagement as key in shaping emotional attachment to the destination and festival brand.

3.1. Methodology

The study, based on quantitative analysis of an online survey, involved 209 first-year undergraduate students (N=209) at the University of the North, of whom 34.4% (N=72) were men; 64.6% were women (N=135); and 1% (N=2) were of another gender. Age: $\bar{x} = 20.54$ (SD = 2.01), range 19–30 years. For the purposes of H1, the respondents were divided into two groups: 18–24 (n ≈ 185) and 25–30 years (n ≈ 24). The sample was collected via Google Forms distributed through student groups in the period from May 12 to 18, 2025. Before participating in the survey, all participants provided informed consent via the introductory part of the Google Forms questionnaire, which contained information about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of data. Participants confirmed their consent by clicking the “I agree” button before starting to fill out the questionnaire. No personal data that would allow the identification of the participants was collected. Only the researcher had access to the data. Since the participants were students, special attention was paid to ensuring that participation did not affect their academic status or relationships with teachers.

For the purposes of the study, a survey questionnaire was compiled that contained 40 closed-ended questions, structured in three parts: demographic data (6 questions); perception and affective connection (*Importance of the festival for Varaždin, Importance of the atmosphere in deciding to participate*); behavior and source of information (*Intention to participate again, Primary source of information*). The questionnaire was pretested on a sample of 15 students to check the clarity of the formulations. The patterns of use of social networks, the frequency of festival-related posts, emotional attachment to festivals and the perception of cultural value were analyzed. The data were processed in Excel and SPSS. This study employs a quantitative approach based on a survey, utilizing descriptive statistics to summarize data and inferential statistics to test hypotheses regarding the influence of social media on Generation Z's emotional connection to festivals in Varaždin.

Although the questions were initially tested for internal consistency, the results

indicated that they functioned more effectively as indicators of different dimensions of festival perception. Therefore, in this paper, they are presented and interpreted individually, by the theoretical frameworks of cultural reception and digital participation.

This research aimed to analyze the role of social networks in informing and receiving festivals in the city of Varaždin, with an emphasis on the connection between the use of digital media:

- level of information about festival events,
- perception of cultural authenticity and identity of the festival.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive results

In the survey conducted among first-year undergraduate students at the University of North, at the Varaždin University Center, 209 students participated, of whom 135 were female, 72 were male, and two were identified as gender-other, aged 19 to 30, thus confirming their belonging to Generation Z. Territorially, the respondents were from different counties in the Republic of Croatia, which actually covered the entire country.

Table 1.
Demographic distribution of respondents by gender and age

		N	%
What is your gender?	Male	72	34,4%
	Female	135	64,6%
	other	2	1,0%

When asked how often they get information about festivals in Varaždin via social media, the largest percentage of respondents, 49.3%, said occasionally.

Table 2.
Obtaining information about festivals

		N	%
How often do you get information about festivals in Varaždin via social media?	Rarely	85	40,7%
	Occasionally	103	49,3%
	Frequently	21	10,0%
	Total	209	100,0%

When asked how informed they were about festivals in Varaždin, the majority of respondents (75.1%) answered that they were partially informed. Only 8.6% declared themselves very informed, which indicates room for improvement in the festival's communication strategies.

Table 3.
General information about festivals in Varaždin

	N
How informed are you about festivals in Varaždin?	
Very informed	18
Partially informed	157
Not at all informed	23
Not interested	11
Total	209

4.2. Results of hypothesis testing

The results show that according to the respondents, members of Generation Z, social networks are the best way to promote the festival in Varaždin. As many as 93.8% of respondents stated that they get information through social networks, while posters and flyers (39.2%), press and television (34.9%), and recommendations (33.0%) have a much smaller reach (Table 4). These data confirm the change of communication channel in favor of digital and interactive space.

Table 4:
What is the best way to promote the festival in Varaždin?

		N	%
Social Media	Yes	196	93,8%
	No	13	6,2%
	Total	209	100,0%
Posters and Flyers	Yes	82	39,2%
	No	127	60,8%
	Total	209	100,0%
Press and Television	Yes	73	34,9%
	No	136	65,1%
	Total	209	100,0%
Word-of-mouth (Recommendations)	Yes	69	33,0%
	No	140	67,0%
	Total	209	100,0%

Given that the majority of respondents believe that social networks are the best way to promote festivals compared to traditional media, H 1: Social networks are a more dominant source of information about Varaždin festivals compared to traditional media is confirmed. Members of

Generation Z strive for attractive content, in line with modern technologies, and according to the survey data, the majority of respondents, 49.8%, believe that Varaždin lacks tourist attractions in line with modern technologies. This confirms H2: Members of Generation Z strive for new attractions in line with modern technologies, and this is also required by Martusciello et al., 2025, who point out that AR technologies enable personalization, interaction and engagement on a personal level, which significantly enhances the feeling of participation and identification with cultural narratives.

Table 5:
Lack of tourist attractions in line with modern technologies

		N	%
In your opinion, does Varaždin lack tourist attractions in line with modern technologies?	Yes	104	49,8%
	No	16	7,7%
	Maybe	89	42,6%
	Total	209	100,0%

For most respondents, the interestingness of the festival is a motive for visiting festival events in Varaždin, which can be linked to the festival atmosphere, which is important for most respondents (71.3%) when deciding to participate in one of the events. This confirms H3 - The interestingness of the festival and the festival atmosphere are crucial for Generation Z, which can be linked to Lyu et al., 2024. that Generation Z tourists are looking for active and authentic experiences.

Table 6:
Main reasons for visiting festivals in Varaždin

		N	%
What is your main motive for visiting festivals in Varaždin?	Cultural offer	46	22,0%
	Interestingness of the festival	124	59,3%
	Personal recommendation	21	10,0%
	Tourist interest	18	8,6%

Table 7:
The importance of the festival atmosphere

		N	%
How important is the festival atmosphere to you when deciding to participate in the event?	Not important	10	4,8%
	Somewhat important	50	23,9%
	Important	149	71,3%
	Total	209	100,0%

5. Discussion

All three hypotheses were confirmed by data analysis and are theoretically grounded in contemporary approaches to digital media reception, participation and cultural communication. The results further confirm that social networks do not serve exclusively as a promotion tool, but also as a space for identity construction, cultural engagement and the spread of digital narratives among members of Generation Z. The results of this research confirm the fundamental assumptions about the change in the communication landscape in the field of cultural events. Social networks have not only established themselves as a primary source of information, but also act as a space for cultural reception, emotional engagement and informal evaluation of the festival. This is in agreement with researches such as Pew Research Center, 2022; Statista, 2023, as well as scientific works showing that Generation Z predominantly uses Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and Snapchat as their main sources of news and information

The confirmed dominance of social networks (93.8%) as the main source of information about festivals is in line with the literature that emphasizes that communication about culture is increasingly visual, personalized and decentralized (Jenkins et al., 2013; Hudson et al., 2015). The results show that social networks enable fast and emotionally rich exchange of information, thus contributing to the expansion of cultural visibility. These results match the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which shows media choice as a reply to personal needs like speed, personal touch, and interaction (Cohen et al., 2014). These findings are consistent with recent bibliometric insights by Ivasciuc et al. (2024), who highlight social networks, experiential preferences and user satisfaction as central thematic clusters in Gen Z tourism research. Similarly, Tirocchi (2024) emphasizes that authenticity and visibility are intertwined in the way Generation Z engages with cultural events through platforms such as TikTok, which corresponds directly to the patterns identified in this study.

Generation Z's need for social networks proves that these sites are not just places of information but also tools for active take part and identity building. At the same time; the focus on realness and feeling ties shows Jenkins' idea of taking part culture where users are not just passive buyers but co-makers of meaning (Jenkins et al., 2013). In this way festivals act as hybrid cultural space: both a real-life and online place where cultural taking part is talked about and grew through user-made content.

Compared to traditional media, social networks enable multidirectional communication, audience participation and virality of content, which makes them particularly suitable for the promotion of cultural and festival events. This change is not only technological, but also structural in the way the audience receives and shapes cultural messages.

People who are informed through social networks participate in festivals more often and recommend festivals to friends more often, especially those that are most present in the media and visually (e.g. *Špancirfest*, *Advent*). This confirms the importance of building the festival's digital image and the existence of continuous communication, not just a promotional campaign before the event itself.

The research results provide an argument for redefining roles within cultural management. The previous models of festival promotion, understood as advertising, should be changed in designing as an interactive, two-way process of communication. It is therefore necessary to professionalize digital communication strategies, use data from social networks to monitor influence and more actively involve users, especially Generation Z, in the co-creation of cultural content.

The use of user-generated content, micro-influencers and visual storytelling formats are nowadays key tools in festival communication. If festival organizers do not recognize this dynamic, they risk losing visibility and cultural relevance. For festival organizers in Varaždin, this implies the need to design digital strategies that go beyond traditional promotion, including continuous engagement through user-generated content, collaboration with micro-influencers, and the creation of authentic narratives that resonate with young audiences.

According to research, members of Generation Z show a strong preference for authentic and experientially rich festival experiences that they can reinterpret and share via social networks. Such digitally mediated participation enables not only personal engagement in a cultural event, but also contribution to its promotion through user-generated content (UGC), thus expanding the reach and strengthening the festival's identity in the digital space (Wang & Lahad, 2025). This corresponds to Jenkins' concept of participatory culture, where cultural consumers increasingly act as producers of meaning through digital practices (Jenkins et al., 2013). By engaging in co-creation via UGC, Generation Z not only reinforces their personal

connection with festivals but also contributes to shaping collective cultural narratives in the digital sphere.

The main limitation of the research relates to the sample of respondents and the research conducted digitally; future research could include qualitative methods (e.g. interviews or focus groups) to gain a deeper understanding of motivations and perceptions.

6. Conclusion

In today's digital age, the ways in which audiences perceive, experience and participate in cultural events and festivals have changed in many ways compared to the period of, for example, ten years ago. The research conducted in this paper confirmed that social networks are no longer just an information channel, but a key platform for cultural reception, emotional engagement and the formation of collective identity, especially among members of Generation Z.

The analysis of the collected data enabled several current features related to Generation Z and the digital reception of culture:

- Social networks are the dominant source of information about festivals for the vast majority of respondents.
- More frequent use of digital channels positively correlates with a higher level of information and greater willingness to participate in cultural events.
- The perception of festival authenticity is more strongly expressed among those respondents who regularly and actively follow festival content on social networks.
- Traditional media (press, television) play a secondary role in informing members of Generation Z.

The findings indicate the necessity of strategically incorporating social networks and new media, as well as modern technological advances, into festival communication. Organizers of cultural events should use digital tools not only for promotion, but also for building an interactive relationship with the audience, using content on specific platforms, measuring digital engagement and encouraging the publication of user-generated content (UGC) as much as possible. For cities like

Varaždin, which want to preserve and develop their cultural identity through festivals, investing in digital presence and visual branding are becoming key elements and prerequisites for modern promotion and digital perception of culture. Direct and interactive communication via social networks allows the festival to live outside the physical space, that is, the space where the event is held and lasts, because it also expands its meaning through the digital community of users.

This study presents the first empirical examination of Generation Z participation in Varaždin festivals, exploring the relationship between digital media use and emotional engagement. Although the research was conducted on a limited sample, namely among first-year students at the University of North, it opens up space for broader and deeper research that would include more diverse populations and methods. Future studies, which would combine quantitative and qualitative approaches, could shed more light on the role of algorithms, motivation for participation and mechanisms of reception of cultural content in the digital environment. In conclusion, social networks are not just a medium or a distribution tool – they have become a cultural space in which meanings, identities and emotional connections with cultural events are shaped. Digital reception of culture among members of Generation Z is not a passive process, but a form of participatory communication in which users actively reinterpret and share content. Festivals that include the audience in this process and encourage digital participation achieve a deeper and long-term connection with the audience and ensure their cultural relevance in the modern media landscape, which is crucial for long-term cultural relevance and engagement. In this context, digital media do not represent the end of festival communication, but its continuation – through a community of users who actively shape the narrative of the festival.

7. Literature

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