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Enhancing Brand Image through Events and Cultural Festivals: the Perspective of the Stresa Festival's Visitors

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ABSTRACT

Cultural events have become a significant component within the strategies of destination branding of a place. Territories are increasingly using events and cultural festivals to enhance their image and boost tourism development. Many destinations worldwide have built events portfolios as a strategic initiative to attract visitors and to develop their own brand. A destination brand represents a dynamic interaction between the destination's core assets and the way in which potential visitors perceive them. Thus, the visitor perspective is considered as fundamental in triggering processes of destination branding. This paper investigates how the visitors assess the impact of cultural events and festivals in enhancing the image of a tourist destination. The Stresa Festival (Stresa, Lake Maggiore, Italy) has been selected as a case study. Stresa Festival is undoubtedly one of the best-known European classical music festivals that every year offers performances by internationally famous artists to its audiences. Structured questionnaires have been used as the methodology to carry out the research. Online questionnaires have been handed out to residents and non-resident visitors to the Stresa Festival to extract the opinions and experience from the public on the image effects of this festival. Findings reveal that there is a positive relationship between this cultural event and the enhancement of the city image and its territory.

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Introduction and methodology

Cultural events and festivals have become an increasingly major component of place branding (Jago, Chalip, Brown, Mules, and Ali, 2002; Marzano and Scott, 2006). Every year a large number of events of different nature motivates tourists to visit the cities that host them. This is due to the fact that, in recent times, events have become a central part in people's lives, as there has been an increment in leisure and disposable incomes, which has led to the rapid growth of public events, celebration and entertainment (Etiosa, 2012). Thus, more and more destinations are trying to figure out the potential of events in the implementation of various economic and tourist objectives (Oklobdžija, 2015), as well as in the enhancement of their image (Getz, 2008). Indeed, many destinations worldwide have built events portfolios as a strategic initiative to attract visitors and to develop their own brand (Blain, Levy, and Ritchie, 2005). Many definition of destination branding are given within the literature. According to the WTO (2009) a destination brand represents a dynamic interaction between the destination's core assets and the way in which potential visitors perceive them. It is therefore clear that the visitor's perspective should be considered as fundamental in triggering processes of destination image and branding (Beerli and Martín, 2004; Park and Petrick, 2006). In the light of these considerations, the purpose of this study is to investigate how the visitors assess the impact of cultural events and festivals in enhancing the image of a tourist destination. The Case Study approach was chosen as a qualitative methodology for an in-depth understanding on this issue. According to Baxter and Jack (2008) the qualitative case study is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within a specific context using a variety of data sources. In most cases, a case study method selects a small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals as the subjects of study. Through case study methods, a researcher is able to go beyond the quantitative statistical results and understand the behavioural conditions through the actor's perspective (Zainal, 2007). This research adopts the explanatory, single case study type, as described by Yin (2003). This type of case study enables to answer the research question that sought to explain the presumed causal links between cultural events and destination image. The analysis was conducted on a cultural event that takes place every summer in Stresa, a small town by Lake Maggiore in Northwest Italy. Stresa Festival is one of the best-known European classical music festivals that every year since 1962 offers performances by internationally famous artists to its audience. Structured online questionnaire has been used as methodology to carry out the research. The advantages of online survey research include access to individuals in distant locations, the ability to reach difficult to contact participants, and the convenience of having automated data collection (Wright, 2005). Online questionnaires have been spread to residents and non-resident visitors of the Stresa Festival to extract the opinions and

experiences from the public on the image effects of this festival. 220 respondents completed the survey. Data was collected between July and September 2015 and processed during the period of January-March 2016.

1. Literature Review

Cultural events and festivals are celebrations that have always occupied a special place in societies. Their celebratory roles, and the many cultural and social implications of ritual and festivity, have long attracted the interest of sociologists and anthropologists (Getz, 2010). Even though event tourism is not a recent phenomenon, the interest for cultural events within the tourism literature have seen a tremendous rise only in the last few decades, as they act as a major element of attraction for tourist destinations. Cities and their hinterlands have become stages for a continual stream of events, which lead eventually to the *festivalisation* of the city and festival marketplaces (Harvey, 1991). With the growth of the symbolic economy (Lash and Urry, 1994; Zukin, 1995; Prentice and Andersen, 2003) and the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Getz, 2008), culture has become increasingly important as a means of consuming the city (Ritzer, 1999). As a consequence, during the 1980s the study of events began to grow dramatically (Manning, 1983; Rolfe, 1992; Prentice and Andersen 2003; Gursoy, Kim, and Uysal, 2004; Quinn, 2005). The growth of the academic interest in events in that decade was closely linked to their increasing role in place marketing in using culture instrumentally to promote cities (Law, 1993; Loftman and Nevil, 1996; Robertson and Guerrier, 1998; Waitt, 1999, 2003; Schuster, 2001).

Events can be seen as a type of cultural resource able to provide unique experiences (Munsters, 1996). They are spatial-temporal planned phenomena and can be very important in the success of a tourism destination (Getz, 1991, 2008). Tourists are increasingly interested in cultural aspects and they choose a destination also searching for exciting cultural experiences (Richards and Bonink, 1995; Costa, 2004; Smith, 2004; Agarwal and Brunt, 2006).

According to Zetiu and Berteau (2015), cities and tourist destinations are naturally and spontaneously associated with the events they host. A relatively new strategy among cities and destinations is to use events in strategically building the brand (Getz, 2005). In the context of experiential tourism consumption, events and cultural festival play an important role in branding, positioning and promotion of tourist destinations (Zukin 1995; Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Events are part of the attraction of a destination and as such, they should be included into a destination's branding strategy (Jago, Chalip, Brown, Mules, and Shameem, 2003). This implies the need to evaluate the contribution of an event not just in terms of the direct financial contribution that it generates but also in terms of its consistency with the destination brand values (Marzano and Scott, 2006). Events with well-established brands can be used to enhance the brand identity of the destination (Trošt, Klarić, and Ružić, 2012). Other authors have highlighted the direct relationship between events and destination branding. Hankinson (2004) describes events as a component of the core brand experience, while Ritchie (1984) e Hall (1992) underline their role as effective enhancers of destination image.

The decision to host cultural events is generally considered on the impacts to the local economy (Kaplanidou and Vogt, 2007; Kaplanidou et al., 2013; Carlsen and Taylor, 2003; Tarlow, 2001). Brown, Chalip, Jago and Mules (2002) state that a destination may use events in order to: increase tourist flows, improve the destination image and awareness of a place, enhance tourist development, reduce seasonal fluctuations and extend tourism season, foster positive economic impact, increase employment, build community pride.

Destinations are striving to promote a positive image of their tourism destination region (Avraham, 2014). The destination image has been defined as a dynamic construct, resulting from a set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that an individual has of a place (Kotler, Haider, and Rein, 1993). When attending an event, visitors participate as actors in the experience (Boniface and Fowler, 1996; Kotler, Asplund, Rein, and Heider, 1999). Although the experience of participating in an event is a one-time moment, it remains in the memory and can contribute to the enhancement of destination image (Mendes, do Valle, and Guerreiro, 2011). According to Waitt (2001), hosting an event does not necessarily tackle the roots of the image problem, but does help in making some changes, broadening the destination's image and creating local and international identity. The cultural events and festivals in particular have emerged as a means of improving the image of cities, adding life to city streets and giving citizens renewed pride in their home city (Richards and Wilson, 2004). Today, many destinations host or produce cultural events and festivals as platforms for generating positive media coverage (Beriatos and Gospodini, 2004). Indeed, they add value to the brand image of tourism destinations, reinforcing their positioning (Ahmed, 1991; Echtner and Ritchie, 1991). Cultural events are a good way of obtaining publicity, acting, therefore, as an important stimulus in the image formation process (Mendes et al., 2011). They can be also used by consumers to identify cities in a globalized society with an increasing competition between places and their similarites (Richards and Wilson, 2004). In the competition of positioning, city events are more flexible and less costly means than infrastructure-based strategies (Paddison, 1993). In the tourism industry, images represent a fundamental element of the tourist's decision making process (Beerli and Martin, 2004), all because perceptions, rather than reality are what motivate consumers to act or not act (Gallarza, Gil Saura, and Calderón García, 2002). Furthermore, not only does destination image play a vital role in the decision to travel, but it also is a key component in the decision to return or recommend the destination to others (Mohan, 2010). Indeed, according to Hall (1992) cultural events and festivals may also encourage people to visit a place more than once and, by hosting a series of different events, a city may profile itself in a number of different potential markets.

Despite the significant number of studies on the relationship between events and destination image (Hall, 1989; Getz, 1997; do Valle, Mendes, and Guerreiro, 2012), the visitors' perspective and the effects of their participation in cultural events are still unexplored questions. Thus, further empirical investigation on the visitor's perception on cultural events and festivals is necessary in order to frame their role in enhancing the image of a destination.

2. Visitors' perception and destination image: the case of Stresa Festival

Stresa Festival is an annual cultural festival that every summer from mid-July to mid-September is held in Stresa, a small town in Piedmont Region situated on the shore of the Lake Maggiore, Northwest Italy. It was at the beginning of the 20th Century that Stresa took off as a tourist destination, after the opening of the Simplon rail tunnel. Thanks to its acquired accessibility, it later became a stop on the Venice-Simplon Orient-Express service. However, since the 17th century, noble families of Lombardy (e.g. the Borromeos and the Viscontis) were attracted by this place and they started to build sumptuous villas along the lake coast. Over the years, Stresa was visited by several well-known guests, including George Bernard Shaw, Rockefeller, Clark Gable and Charlie Chaplin, who were fascinated by its beautiful landscape and, in particular, by the marvellous Borromeo Islands. Loved also by Ernest Hemingway and, in more recent times, by the English Royals, this Archipelago is made up of the monumental Isola Bella, with its 17th Century Borromeo Palace and its scenographic gardens, the picturesque Isola dei Pescatori (Fishermen's Island) and the Isola Madre (Mother Island) famous for its botanical garden.

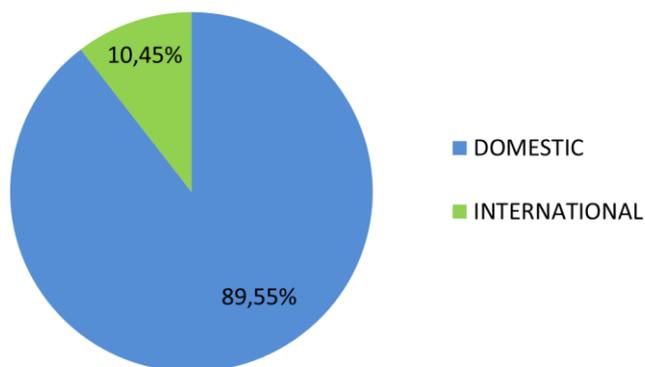
In this enchanting scenario, Stresa Festival brings together several concerts of high artistic value performed by internationally renowned musician with different styles ranging from baroque to contemporary music. The event is also open to new talents the event who finds in this festival the opportunity to become more popular. The main program is preceded by the Musical Meditations, an appointment with sacred music that starts with two evenings dedicated to Bach's Cello Suites, performed each year by a different soloist. Since 2004 the Meditations have grown in number: a half-dozen concerts of Renaissance and Baroque music are performed in the most gorgeous churches of Lake Maggiore and Lake Orta. The Festival adopts a theme every year upon which are chosen symphonic, chamber, instrumental and vocal works. From 2006 to 2008 the Festival organised the Easter Concerts, two events of sacred music bound; From 2008 few Spring Concerts were in the calendar, to enrich the wonderful flowering season on Lake Maggiore. Since 2010 the Spring Concerts were dedicated to improvisation in music, and then become exclusively jazz concerts. Since 2012 they turned into the Midsummer Jazz Concerts, realized in the third weekend of July. From its beginnings in 1962 until the managerial changes of 1998, the responsible for the organization of the festival was the Associazione Settimane Musicali di Stresa. Founded as a non-profit cultural association, the scope of the association is the promotion of musical events and any activity of artistic value. In 1999, the Festival adopted the new identity Settimane Musicali di Stresa e del Lago Maggiore and in 2001 it obtained status as a legal entity. Over the years, the association has increased its programming both in terms of concerts (from 16 in 1998 to 30 in 1999) and in terms of venues. New ancillary activities were introduced: promotional partnerships with other institutions and the extension of knowledge of classical music through the involvement in other forms of artistic expression.

3. Results

The online structured questionnaire enabled to investigate two types of data. It was essential to collect information on the visitors profile in order to identify the main target of Stresa Festival. Secondly, their perception on the role of this cultural event in enhancing the image of Stresa was assessed.

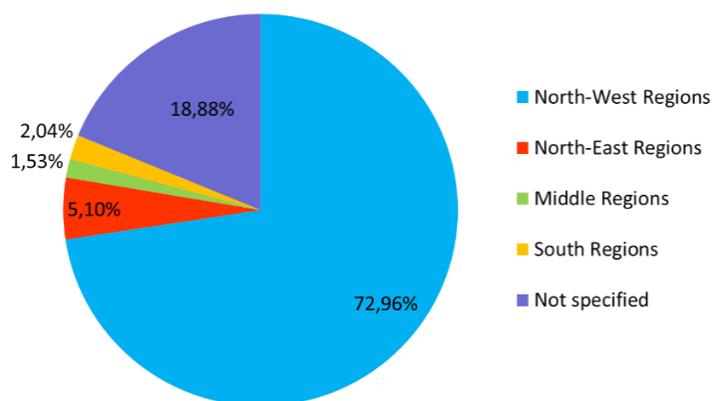
The first information that emerges from the questionnaire regards the origin of the visitors (figure 1)¹. Data reveals that their origin is mostly domestic (90%), while foreign visitors are only 10%.

Figure 1: Origin of the visitors



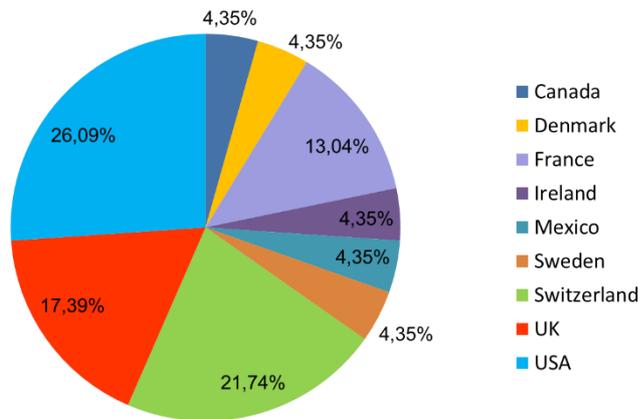
Among domestic visitors (figure 2), 73% come from the surrounding Regions (North-West Area) and 25% of the respondents live in the provinces where the festival is held - Province of Novara and Verbania. A smaller 5% come from North-East Regions, while only 2% live in the South of Italy and 1% come from central regions. 19% of the respondents did not specify their provenance.

Figure 2: Origin of domestic visitors



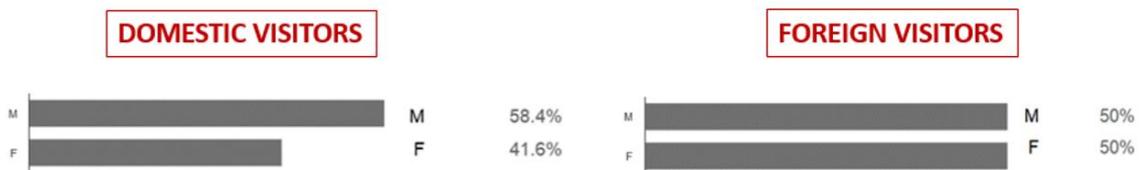
With regard to the foreign visitors (figure 3), the largest international audience come from USA, UK, Switzerland and France, while a smaller portion of respondents live in the Ireland, Sweden, Mexico and Canada.

Figure 3: Origin of international visitors



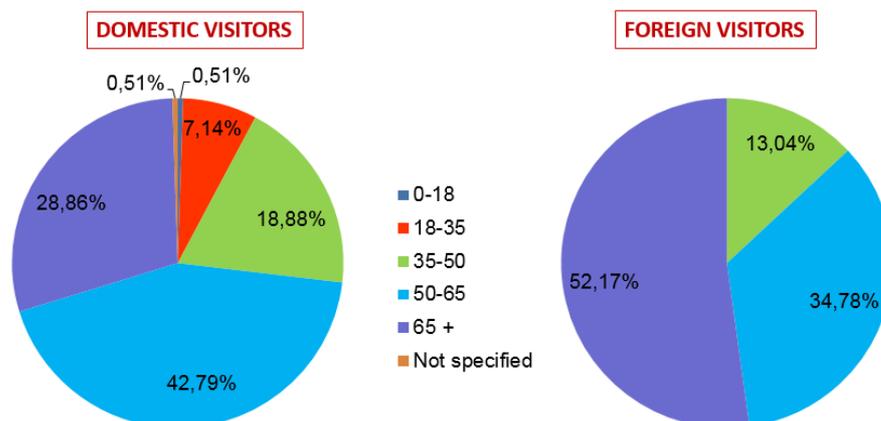
The research question shows the share of adults who attended Stresa Festival, split by gender and age group. The majority of the domestic respondents are male (58%) while within foreign visitors there is an equal distribution among male and female respondents (figure 4).

Figure 4: Visitors gender



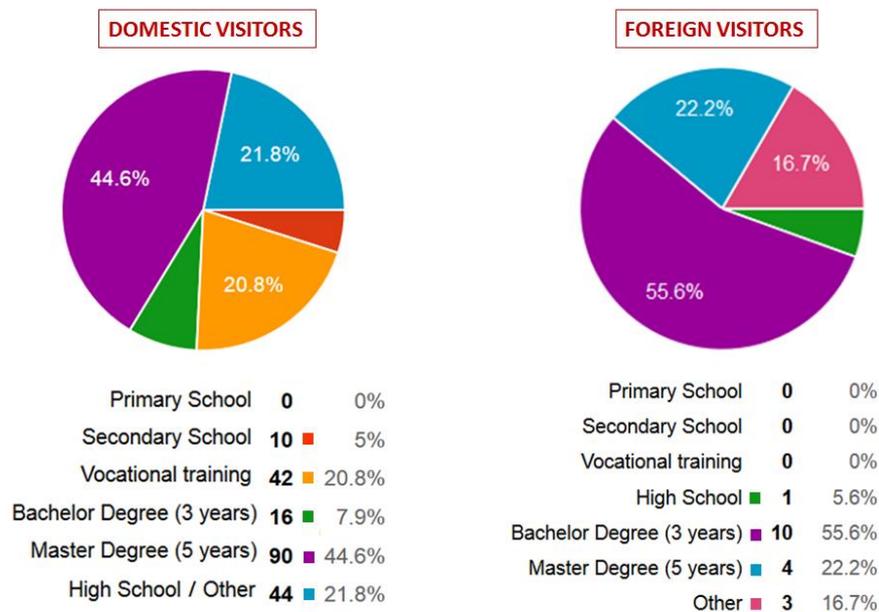
According to the survey, the most frequent visitors are in the 50 to 65 and 65 and over age brackets (figure 5). In particular, 43% of domestic respondents are aged 50 to 65, 29% aged 65 or over, while 19% aged 35 to 50. Only 8% of visitors are aged under 35. Foreign visitors are on average older than the Italians and no one falls in the age bracket of under 35. 52% are aged 65 or over, 35% aged 50 to 65, and 13% 35 to 50.

Figure 5: Visitors age



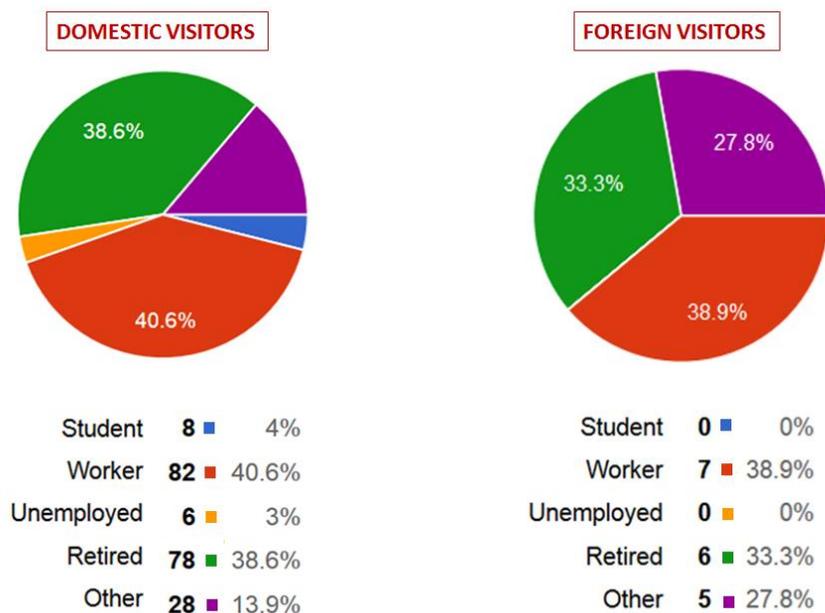
On average, both national and international Stresa Festival attendees have a high level of education (figure 6). 53% of Italian respondents and 78% of international respondents have at least a degree level.

Figure 6: Educational classification of visitors



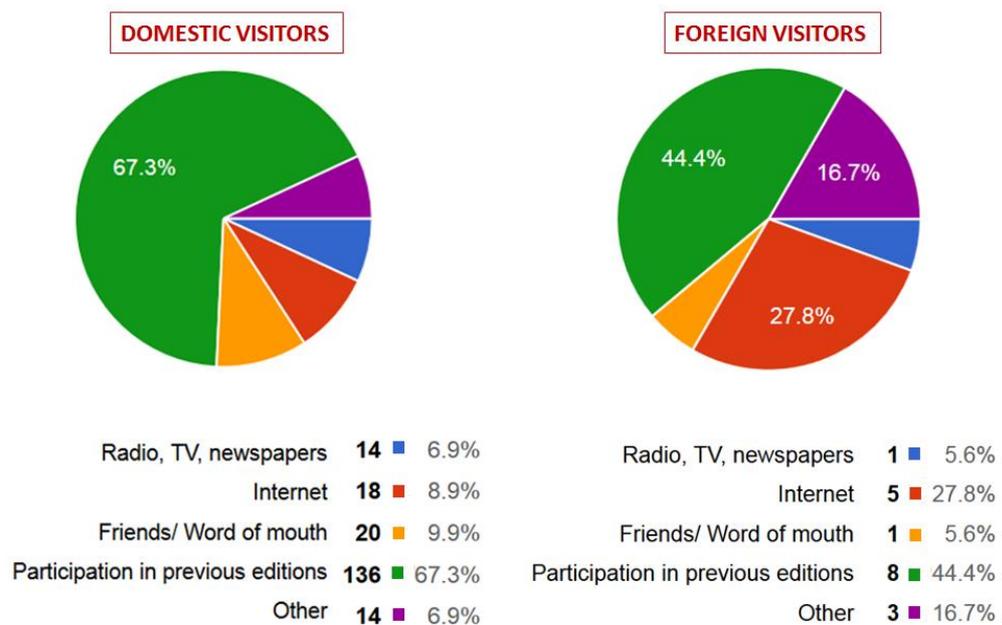
The data related to the profession shows a direct correlation with the age of respondents (figure 7). Indeed, a large part of both domestic and foreign visitors are retired (39% and 33%).

Figure 7: Profession



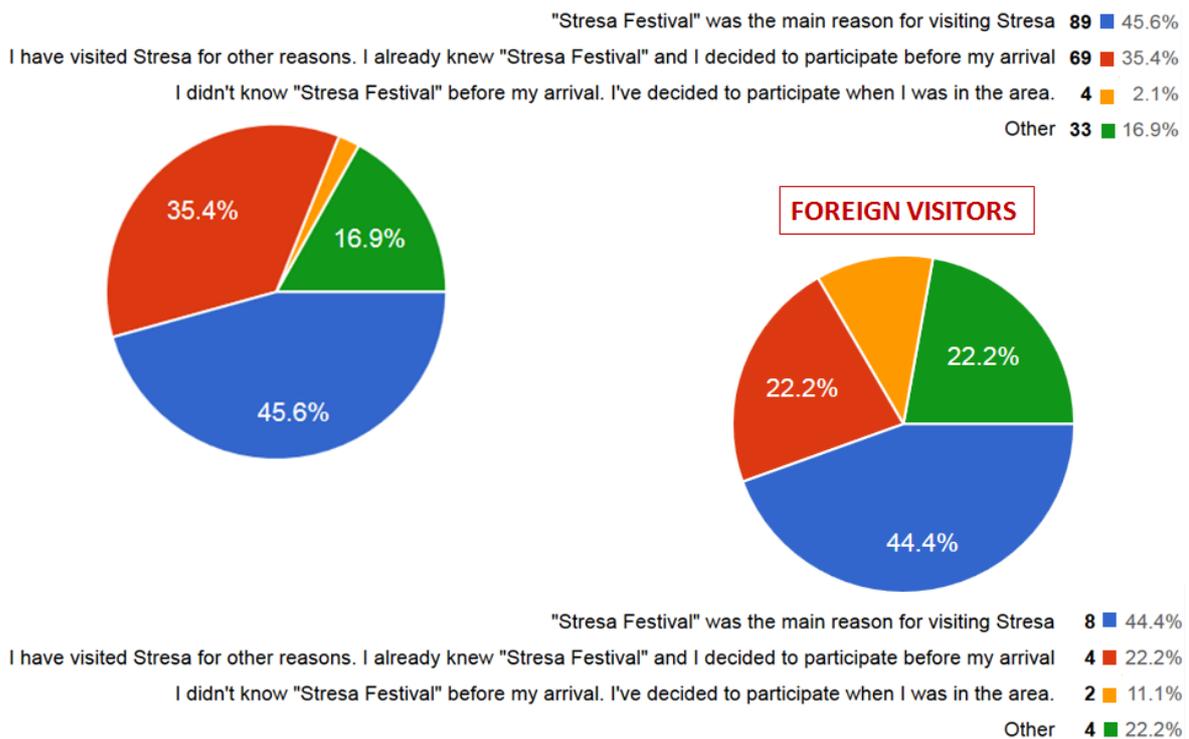
Data reveals that most of the respondents state that they found out about Stresa Festival because of their participation to its previous editions (67% of domestic visitors and 44% of foreign visitors, figure 8). Other sources of information are represented by the Internet (especially for the international audience), Friends/word of mouth and Radio, TV, newspapers (especially for the Italians).

Figure 8: How did you found out about Stresa Festival?



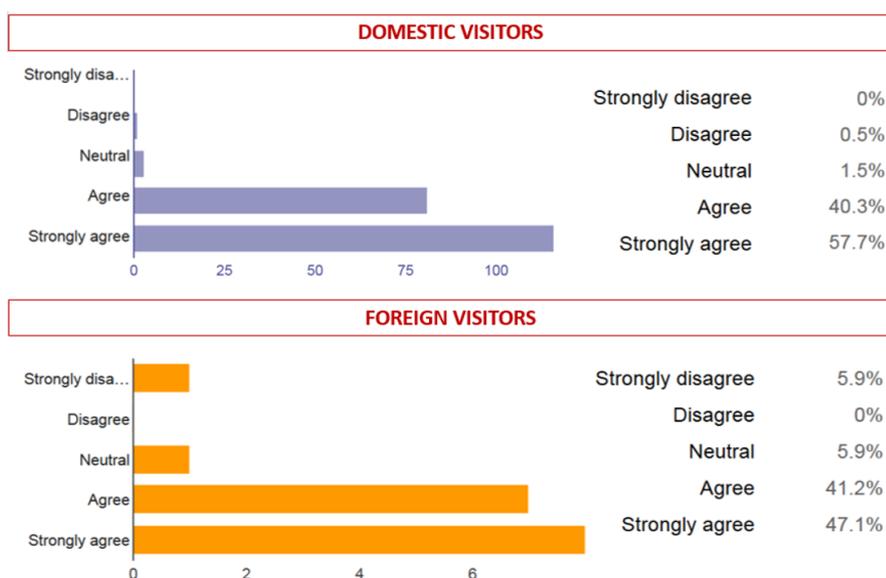
As concern the motivations for attending Stresa Festival, 45 % of Italian respondents and 44 % of foreign respondents stated that Stresa Festival was the main reason for visiting Stresa. A smaller part of respondents specified that they have visited Stresa for other reasons, but they already knew Stresa Festival deciding to participate before their arrival (35% of domestic visitors and 22% of foreign visitors). A few number of respondents didn't know about Stresa Festival before their arrival and they decided to participate when they arrived in the area.

Figure 9: What was the role of Stresa Festival in your decision to visit Stresa?



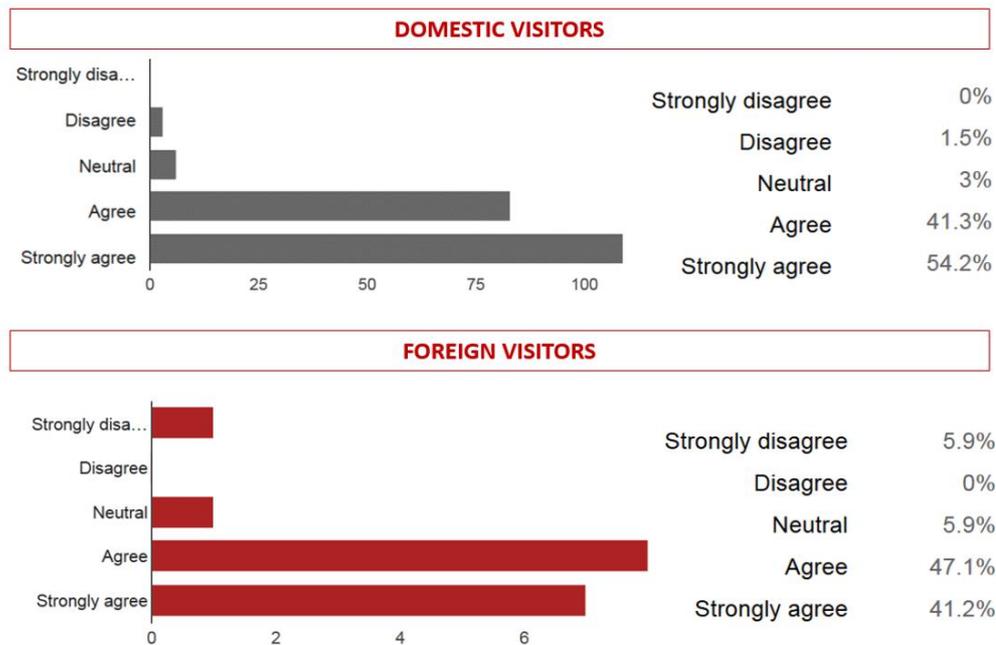
The second type of findings is represented by the perception of the visitors on the impacts that Stresa Festival has on the process of image destination enhancement. Regarding the contribution that Stresa Festival gives to the enhancement of Stresa tourist image, the majority of respondents agreed that this cultural event plays a fundamental role. Indeed, 40% of Italian respondents agree and 58% strongly agree. Among foreign visitors 41% agree and 47% strongly agree (figure 10).

Figure 10: To what extent do you agree that Stresa Festival contributes to enhance the image of the city of Stresa?



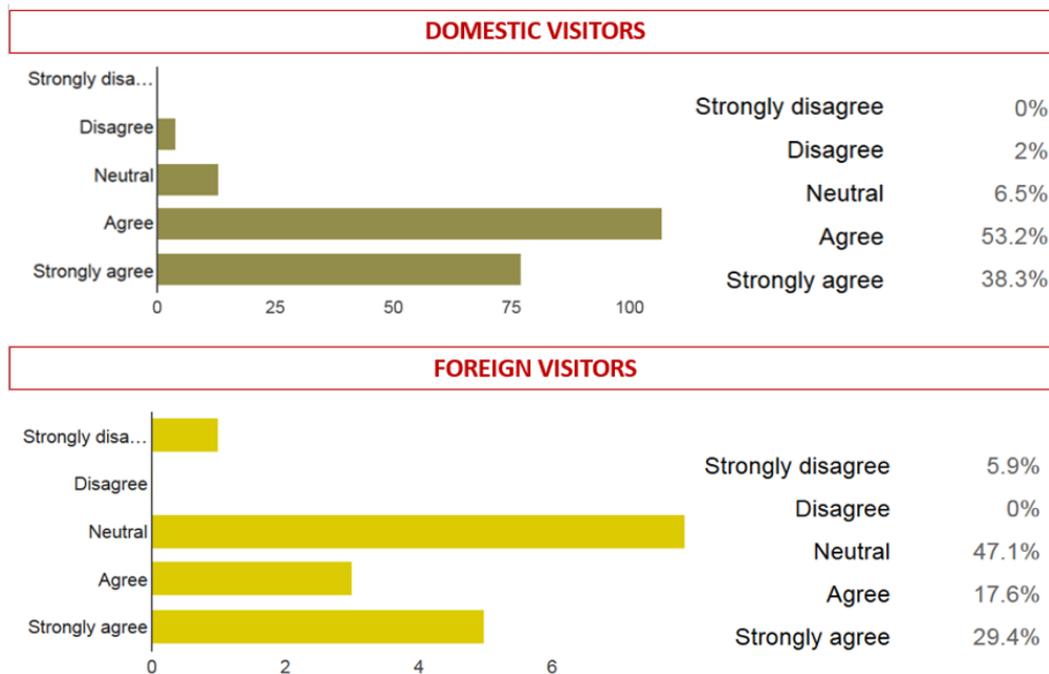
Also regarding the capability of Stresa Festival to represent a tourist Brand that identifies the City of Stresa, most of the respondents (figure 11) strongly agree (54% of Italian respondents and 41% of foreign respondents) or simply agree (41% of Italian respondents and 47% of foreign respondents).

Figure 11: To what extent do you agree that Stresa Festival represents a brand that identifies the city of Stresa?



Finally, in answer to the question “to what extent do you agree that Stresa Festival is a key element in attracting tourists in this area?” Italian visitors stated that they strongly agree (38%) or simply agree (53%). On the other hand, foreign visitors have expressed a more neutral opinion on the role of Stresa Festival as a main pull factor of this tourist destination.

Figure 12: To what extent do you agree that Stresa Festival is a key element in attracting tourists in this area?



Conclusion

This paper therefore offers discussion points on the analysis of the towns and cities that are increasingly using cultural events to improve their image, stimulate urban development and attract visitors and investment (Richards and Wilson, 2004). The type of tourism generated by Stresa Festival is a proximity tourism that involves mainly senior tourists who tend to repeat the destination driven by cultural motivations. Events can convey and reinforce the positioning of tourism destinations, as desirable places to visit but also as desirable places to work and live (Jafari, 2008). By spreading their image of a destination, visitors can help other tourists to build their own image of the place they are visiting (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; Gallarza et al., 2002), and, subsequently, they can positively and effectively communicate the destination to other potential targets (do Valle, Mendes, and Guerreiro, 2012).

This research was conducted in order to uncover perceptions of tourists attending Stresa Festival. Visitors' perceptions are important because, as the tourism industry becomes increasingly competitive, tourist destinations should differentiate themselves to be more attractive for potential visitors and tourists. The data collected through the use of the structured questionnaire enabled to draw some final considerations on the main features of Stresa Festival's visitors and the related types of tourism generated by these targets. The research shown that the majority of visitors come from Italy (90%) and from nearby areas (25%). Both domestic (72%) and international (87%) visitors are mostly age 50-60 or 65+ and retired. Both domestic (53%) and international (78%) visitors have a high level of education. The majority of visitors know about Stresa

Festival due to their participation in previous edition (Domestic tourist 67%, International tourists 44%).

The research has also revealed some elements which confirm the positive relationship between cultural events and tourist destination image. Almost half the tourists (46% of domestic visitors and 44% of international visitors) have stated that Stresa Festival was the main reason for visiting the city of Stresa and its surrounding area. The absolute majority of visitors (domestic 98%, international 88%) have agreed that Stresa Festival contributes to enhance the image of the city of Stresa. They have also argued that Stresa Festival represents a brand which identifies the city of Stresa (domestic 96%, international 88%). Therefore, Stresa Festival coincides with the destination "Stresa" and with "Stresa" brand, contributing to strengthen its destination image. As a consequence, it is considered as a key element in attracting tourists in the area, especially for domestic visitors (91% of the respondents). International visitors (47%) recognise the importance of this cultural festival in improving the image and the attractiveness of Stresa, but they perceive other elements of the local tourism offer as key attractors (e.g. Lake Maggiore, the Borromean Islands).

This research represents a further validation of how cultural events have increasingly become a significant part of destination image and branding processes, it has some limitations. Since this research was conducted on a small-scale festival, some problems were faced in obtaining a sufficient number of responses. Accordingly, the research doesn't rely on a wide sample. It is assumed that if a study is made over a wider sample, the generalization level of the research results may increase and give better results (Bertan and Altintaş, 2013).

In order to guarantee the validity and the reliability of the findings, this study needs further exploration to assess the perception of Stresa Festival visitors on a more extended time frame than a single edition. Moreover, a further future direction would be to replicate this study in other locations and in other type of cultural festivals. The current findings can be assessed in upcoming investigation focusing on the correlation among cultural events and destination image, in order to confirm these results and explain in more depth the factors which determine the image of a place.

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¹ All figures have been personally elaborated by the authors.