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# FESTIVALS AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

Cultural festivals have a social, cultural and economic impact in the region they take place and on the citizens involved. Although much has been published on the impacts of events there is little that explores how they might contribute to the creation of active citizenship.

The Italian festival “Arona Città Teatro” was researched over twelve months using a mixed method approach, specifically field observation, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. This case study seeks to better understand how a festival can contribute to democratic construction processes.

The analysis of the Festival and its audience demonstrates the importance of the continuity of cultural festivals in small towns. This leads to the conclusion that festivals can significantly contribute to the construction of an active citizenship process. Based on the findings a festival Ecosystem is proposed that begins to explain the process of active citizenship development via events. Recommendations for further research are put forward.

## KEY WORDS

Festivals; Festival participation; Active citizenship; Active participation; Accessibility; Community welfare; Case study

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research is to explore the role that cultural festivals play in encouraging active citizenship. Festivals and events, as a moment of public and shared celebration, have long existed as significant cultural practices and are conceptualised as forms of public performance, collective celebration, and civic ritual (Quinn, 2009). Often the term “festa” overlaps ambiguously with the term “rite”, which refers to a more formal sequence of actions, and the “festa” to a more informal collective emotional experience (Giannini, 2020). Festivals, with both their rituality, and shared affective experience, therefore, have the potential to bring about change whether this is at a personal, community or wider society level (Alonzo & Rossetti, 2023). Several studies have explored how festival participation can promote individual well-being and happiness (Gorchakova & Hyde, 2022; Heldt, 2014; Saragih & Amelia, 2020), across generations (Dunne et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2018), bring communities together (Tkaczynski et al., 2022), and contribute to social well-being (Brownett, 2018; Qu & Cheer, 2022).

Rossetti & Quinn (2019) and Wilks (2011) clearly illustrate the important cultural impact that festivals can make and there is now longstanding evidence for the economic impacts that hosting a festival can have on a city or region (see Getz & Page, 2016; Wood, 2005).

Despite the now substantial body of knowledge on the wide ranging impacts of culture (Campagna et al., 2020), and of festivals (Alonzo & Rossetti, 2023; Richards et al., 2013; Wallstam et al., 2020; Wood, 2005) their role in promoting active citizenship has not yet been comprehensively addressed. Based on the evidence for other impacts it is likely that festivals can influence, albeit temporarily, the role that citizens play in their local community and beyond. In this case study active citizenship is understood as an organizational phenomenon made up of citizen actions that are unplanned and not attributable to traditional forms of political organization and are applicable to the entire public sphere (Moro, 2013) . Understanding festivals as a tool for developing active citizenship will strengthen our understanding of their impacts more broadly and highlight the elements of festival experience that might encourage greater involvement in society.

Several studies have shown how there is a positive correlation between participation in cultural activities and participation in civic and social activities, as an essential element of democracy (e.g. Flinders & Cunningham, 2014). Participation in cultural activities strengthens democracy and social cohesion in many different ways, such as voting, volunteering and participating in community activities, projects and organisations (Hammonds, 2023).

In presenting this case study of a festival that attempts to encourage active citizenship, we firstly discuss the theoretical areas related to active citizenship and participation and critique these in the context of cultural festivals. To investigate the potential for a festival to be a tool for creating active citizenship, the cultural (theatre and word) festival, "Teatro sull'Acqua Festival", was chosen as a case study. This annual festival has taken place since 2011 in Arona, on the shores of Lake Maggiore in Italy and is directed by writer and playwright Dacia Maraini. The uniqueness of the event is its relationship with the lake and every year Maraini writes the script for the flagship production, which is the show that gives the festival its name, character and uniqueness. Up until 2021, the event's purpose was stated as "the creation of active citizenship". This is because the Festival, since its inception, has involved citizens in different ways. For example, by recruiting volunteers to a variety of roles to help organise and deliver the event and by involving local schools. The Festival takes place in various locations scattered throughout the town, including streets and private homes, in order to bring the theatre to unconventional places. This is also a necessity as the town of Arona does not have a theatre.

Spreading out the activities across the town also helps to engage a wider range of local businesses in supporting the event. In 2022 the Festival rebranded with a change of name and extended the program of activities to last all year round, but maintained the primary objective of involving local citizens.

Drawing from the case study, the paper concludes with a discussion of festivals as an ecosystem, closely interconnected with the social and cultural policies in which they take place. We also suggest further avenues of exploration into new ways in which festivals can trigger citizen participation processes, making them more 'active'.

The purpose of presenting the case study is to contribute to the ongoing critical debate around if and how festivals can be transformative spaces. We aim to add further evidence to the need to design festivals as arenas for the creation of greater awareness of the role of citizens in decision making around arts and culture and more broadly in public processes. There appears to be potential for festivals to affect change even for those who do not usually participate in and enjoy culture.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Active citizenship and participation**

In order to understand the role that festivals can play in encouraging active citizenship it is important to understand the underlying concepts of citizenship and participation. Citizenship traditionally refers to a set of political practices involving specific public rights and duties in a given political community. In the concept of citizenship, the institutional and social, individual and collective dimensions converge (Moro, 2013; Moro & Sorice, 2022). Globalisation, changing identity, and the ambiguity between public and private have led to changing views on the concept of traditional society, and accelerated the transition to a modern form of society (Bauman, 1999). Beck (1986) defines this as "reflexive modernity", where a new political culture emerges, in which heterogeneous centres of sub-politics influence the process of formation and application of political decisions. In these contexts, political movements make room for "post-political" movements (Melucci, 1989), which are less ideological, and have the aim of overthrowing the dominant codes thus giving new meaning in time and space, commitment and participation (Giddens, 1991). Such transformations have not only political but also social repercussions, changing the everyday life of citizens (Zamorano & Bonet, 2020). In this new political culture, the role of citizens becomes central, as they become both promoters and participants in

collective action (Appadurai, 1996; Jancovich, 2017; Nussbaum, 2010).

Citizens are therefore the constituents whose actions shape the collective life of a political community which, in turn, reflects what citizens feel and do (Bellamy, 2008). Citizenship is therefore not only a legal status, but also a social, cultural, political and institutional process, which according to Bellamy is based on several components: 1) Membership: therefore the distinction between those who are citizens and those who are not citizens. 2) Rights: being a citizen implies the "right to have rights", therefore having a set of rights recognized by the political community and protected by institutions (Arendt, 1958). 3) Participation: the mechanism through which one's rights are recognized and collective life is given shape.

Participation is closely interconnected to the implementation of democracy in contemporary politics. In fact, debates on participation are part of a political-ideological struggle over how to define and organise our political realities (Carpentier, 2015; Eriksson, 2018). This has strong repercussions for the relationship between culture and democracy (European Parliament, 2022; Hammonds, 2023).

New forms of citizenship have arisen that find space, which mobilise people and groups, arouse the attention of public opinion, and attract the investment of public and private funds and material resources (Moro, 2013). Among these emerging citizenship forms there is the concept of "active citizenship", organisational forms through which citizens become more than mere voters but become influential actors in *policy making and change* (Moro & Sorice, 2022). Thus, assuming a role of responsibility within society and making up for a perceived deficit in contemporary democracy (Eriksson & Stephensen, 2015). Active citizenship thus includes involvement in decisions and spending on public art and cultural celebrations and dictates the inclusion (active participation) of citizens in events and festivals taking part in and for their communities.

The development of 'active' citizens remains a difficult to achieve aspiration for many politicians, community leaders, administrators and practitioners interested in creating fairer societies. The role of active citizenship and the power it can assume in the contexts in which it is generated can have different meanings. Among these, it can take on a political role, moving from politics to policies, or "a sub-politicization of society" (Beck, 1986). Power is shared and claimed by citizens, who become aware of their role and rights, proposing political actions aimed at change for the improvement of society and the common good (Cotturri, 2021).

From the perspective of American sociologists the concept of active citizenship takes on the generic connotation of "social practice" (Citroni, 2022; Lichterman & Eliasoph, 2014). However, in this paper, active

citizenship is conceptualised as the awareness of one's role and one's possible actions in a specific area of society. Citizens find themselves immersed in public policies that directly affect their lives and issues of common interest (Zamorano & Bonet, 2020). Active citizenship does not determine, and is not determined by social status (Moro, Sorice 2022), but connotes an assumption of responsibility, self-reflexivity and daily activism (Paltrinieri, 2019). In a participative society the demand for the activation of citizenship increases (Bauman, 2016). Consequently, it is the citizens themselves who are involved in the processes or decisions that directly concern them (Eriksson & Stephensen, 2015).

Carpentier (2015) sees participation in relation to the concepts of access and interaction, understanding these as conditions for effective participation, in the sense that access and interaction within a participatory process are necessary requirements for existence of the participatory process itself. Arnstein (1969), starting from examples of federal programs for urban renewal, the fight against poverty and model city systems, had identified eight different levels of participation, in which in each rung corresponds to the extent of citizens' power in determining the end product" (p. 25), from the lowest rung of "manipulation" to the highest of "citizen control".

Political participation, therefore, becomes social participation, in which the power of actors is equalised among themselves to achieve a common goal (European Parliament, 2022; Hammonds, 2023). According to Verba (1995), citizen participation should be more than electoral and should be based on the ability to convey messages to policy makers. However, not all citizens participate in political life. In order to increase participation it is therefore necessary to build social capital, i.e. the rules that regulate coexistence to improve the efficiency of social organisation, promoting initiatives taken by mutual agreement (Dupin-Meynard & Villarroya, 2020; Putnam, 1993). Festivals are a potential medium through which social capital can be developed (Arcodia & Whitford, 2006; Mair & Duffy, 2018).

Several policy discussions have considered participation in artistic and cultural activities as a tool to achieve broader social policy goals, such as social inclusion or active citizenship and there is a growing body of research linking cultural practices with civic participation (Campagna et al., 2020; Flinders & Cunningham, 2014; Jeannotte, 2003; Kelaher et al. 2014; Oser, 2017; Stern & Siffert, 2009). In a recent analysis for the European Community, Hammond et al. (2023) point out how participation in cultural activities strengthens democracy and social cohesion in many different ways, i.e. participation in public life, such as voting, volunteering, or participating in or promoting community activities.

## 2.2 Art, culture and active participation

“Participatory art”, as theorised by Claire Bishop (2012), centres on the active role of the spectator and the impact that the arts have in the social contexts in which they operate. Understanding the evolution of the concept of ‘audience’ is important in understanding the role that festivals can play in triggering active citizenship. The audience, previously conceived as “spectator” or “observer”, is now repositioned as co-producer or participant (Bishop, 2012). In the world of festivals, the transition was evident when the European Community dedicated the focus of the seven-year period 2012-2019 relating to culture, to the growth and retention of new audiences for cultural activities (Da Milano & Gariboldi, 2019; Laing & Mair, 2015). This triggered the birth of new culture pioneers through “a strategy of bottom-up initiatives that are changing the traditional relationship between performing arts projects and their audiences” (Bonet, 2018: 45). In this way, a paradigm shift is taking place in the concept of participation in festivals and culture where the spectator becomes aware of their role and their own empowerment (Stern & Siffert, 2009).

Art becomes an element of comparison and at the same time a symbol of union between politics and activism, acting as a social element of change, turning point and reflection. Consequently, participation in cultural practices becomes a tool for increasing social capital and for becoming aware of one's role in society and in the community (Campagna et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2022). This is based on the premise that collaboration can create a value that no individual by himself can create (Putnam, 1993).

Participation in artistic activities, such as cultural festivals, becomes an action of “cultural consumption” (Hammonds, 2023). That is, a tool for existential investment as well as for the construction and affirmation of one's own identity (Bourdieu, 1979; Morin, 2017). This ‘cultural consumption’ of festivals is particularly valuable in an increasingly digitally mediated and highly individualised society. Participation potentially transforms individuals into actors who are in control of the creation of their own cultural, intellectual, religious, and political values (Bauman, 2016). Putnam (2000: 411), in relation to cultural consumption, suggests that society should “discover new ways to use the arts as a vehicle for convening diverse groups of citizens”. In this sense, festivals can be one of the many possible “new ways”.

With its cyclical nature and relative ritualisation, the festival becomes a moment of collectivity and celebration in which to share, in the public space, the values that enrich a community (Caillois, 1950; Durkheim, 1912;

Turner, 1982). Festivals are community rituals used for religious, social and cultural purposes, which foster a sense of community (Nguyen et al., 2024; Van Winkle & Woosnam, 2013; ). The effectiveness of these rites is found in their ability to create "collective mental states" (Giannini 2020), Durkheim's 'effervescence', which determines the cohesion and periodic reaffirmation of the group.

Cultural festivals have a significant social and cultural function as they can increase the cultural and cognitive capital of the residents of the places in which they take place (Richards, 2016; Tankova & Vassenska, 2015). Such festivals also provide opportunities for the development of personal and social identity, greater sociality and a sense of belonging (Carmouche et al., 2024; Getz, 2009; Quinn & Wilks, 2013; Small et al., 2005; Wood 2005; 2008). This sociality is based on participation and sharing of experiences and emotions, which are potential tools for community development (Fiedler, Wickham, 2022; Moolaert et al., 2010), engagement (Senevirathna et al., 2023), and also address the increasing need for cocreation of an event (Azara et al. 2023). Cultural festivals can change residents' views of the place they live in (Bailey et al., 2004), and improve mutual understanding of social, ethnic, age and cultural groups (Klaic et al., 2002). Festivals can also help develop a sense of pride among citizens starting from the image that the location gives of itself (Hammonds, 2023; Maughan & Bianchini, 2004). Feeling part of a community (Van Winkle & Woosnam, 2013; Wood et al., 2009), and having responsibility towards the community leads festival participants to experience personal growth both on a cultural and social level (Getz & Page, 2016; Kisida et al., 2014; Rossetti, 2021).

One of the most rewarding ways that allows participants to get closer to the organisational machinery of the festival, is to become a volunteer (Blackman et al., 2017). Volunteers are fundamental to the success of many events (Bachman et al., 2016). There are several studies that associate civic participation with volunteering (e.g. Hammonds, 2023), demonstrating, on a quantitative basis, how artistic participation increases volunteering practices by up to 10% (Van de Vyver & Abrams, 2018). Volunteering at festivals, provides personal pleasure at feeling different from an 'ordinary' audience member, through being useful in society and developing new skills (Stebbins, 2014), and increasing social capital (Hallmann, 2023). It helps to break down preconceptions of culture for those who may not have had the opportunity to experience cultural events (Ponte di Pino, 2021). The festival can transform culture into free choices, self-determined and motivated by taste, pleasure and personal interest (Stebbins, 2014). Volunteering opportunities, therefore, can create a sense of active participation which leads to personal growth (Lancini & Buday, 2013). In the case of adolescents, citizens who are forming their identities and questioning their role in society (Charmet, 2013), cultural festival volunteering allows them to better understand their capabilities, to try out new skills within a group setting albeit



temporarily, and positively affect altruistic behaviours (Van de Vyver & Abrams, 2018). Culture, in this situation, can become something exciting, which brings young people together and makes them feel part of the same group with similar interests. Being a volunteer, as long as it is a free choice, is in an area of potential interest and in a supportive group environment can be a tool for a cultural coming together and self-development on the one hand, and creation of active citizenship on the other (Hustinx et al., 2010).

To conclude, the concepts of citizenship and participation have received wide scholarly attention and yet the terms remain ill-defined. As we have seen, in the context of cultural events and festivals, there is more clarity on what is meant by participation and some indication of what can be achieved through greater involvement of citizens in cultural festivals. This case-study aims to explore the related concept, and potential benefit, of active citizenship in the context of festivals. The objective of this paper is to understand how festivals, by activating participation processes, can contribute to increasing the civic awareness of citizens in a society. The focus of the research is the analysis of the case study, the Festival Teatro sull'Acqua, in Italy, with a mixed method approach. After the analysis of the case study, an ecosystem model of festivals is proposed. The model illustrates that being an active citizen implies proactivity not only in the cultural field, but also in the social and political field, thus attributing to the festivals, and to the cultural sector more generally, their role as co-creators of well-being.

### **3. THE CASE STUDY: ARONA AND THE TEATRO SULL'ACQUA FESTIVAL**

#### **3.1 Festival context**

Arona is a town of around 10,000 inhabitants on the Piedmontese shore of Lake Maggiore. During the weekend the town changes, losing the peace and quiet of the week and filling up with cars and tourists arriving for Lakeside walks and boutique shopping. On a cultural level, the town has a public library, three bookshops and the Mineralogical Museum. Arona is a relatively wealthy town and the inhabitants display their wealth by promenading through the centre amongst the chic and expensive boutiques.

Even though the Festival is located throughout the town, it is difficult to stumble upon the shows by chance. Those who participate do so intentionally, as regulars at the event or those who follow a certain writer or the

company on stage. What you may come across are the volunteer school students who move between locations, running errands, and stand out in their branded festival t-shirts.

The Festival takes place in different locations in the town. The "Word" section events take place in Piazza San Graziano, the heart of Arona, with a capacity of 190 seats. The events are free, but booking is recommended to guarantee a seat. Barriers limit access to the square during the events, blocking passage and those who are not interested in the event. The "Theatre" section is spread over several locations, in the garden of a private villa, the public library, a car park and a boat. This allows the Festival to reach a wider audience, breaking down the barriers and prejudices usually linked to the theatre world.

The "Teatro sull'Acqua" show, the highlight of the festival, takes place in Piazza del Popolo and is a closed-door event. The access section to the lake where the event takes place is cordoned off every evening so that only those who have paid can view the spectacle. All shows are charged for other than the circus shows.

During the 2021 edition, a group of under 30s belonging to the festival association created the "Young Board" committee, which organises a meeting independently but in line both with the program and the characteristics of the festival. This initiative did not continue in the 2022 edition.

### **3.2 Festivals, citizens and rebranding**

Since its beginning, the Festival has established collaboration networks with local government, residents, institutions and businesses to enable the event to take place and grow. The objectives of the various stakeholders differ and include cultural transmission, social cohesion, community development, enhancement of the town's identity through cultural participation, enhancement of the territory through the Festival and its relationship with the lake. Over time, these values have combined with the ongoing participation of citizens and the consolidation of a network of collaborations in the town. This has led to the Festival presenting itself as an instrument of active citizenship and thus, rethinking its communication and branding with a view to becoming a festival integrated into the town. In 2022 the festival changed its name, becoming "Arona Città-Teatro" (Arona City-Theatre), emphasising how the whole of Arona puts itself on stage. The name change has been the first step in a change of nomenclature to everything related to the festival (for example the stage was renamed Lakestage).

This rebranding aims to highlight the activities that the Festival association carries out all year round, managing

to create a theatrical and literary audience in an area that has no theatre venues. This entails two main activities: "Theatre in the homes", theatrical events organised and managed by a group of residents of Arona hosted in their living rooms; and the "Children's Theatre", a series of events including workshops and shows dedicated to children to introduce them to the world of theatre in a town without theatres. In June 2021, a spin-off of the "Teatro sull'Acqua" festival entirely dedicated to children was introduced, livening up the town streets to give children the opportunity to enjoy theatre and cultural activities post Covid 19 lockdowns (Stevenson, 2023). In the 2021-2022 winter season the Association's winter activities restarted but the children's festival did not continue.

Despite the non-continuance of the children's festival, one of the founding elements of the Festival is its relationship with the high schools of Arona. This relationship manifests itself in the mass participation of teenagers in order to complete their PCTO project (Paths for Transversal Skills and Orientation). This relationship has been embedded since the first festival and has a number of objectives. Firstly, to bring young people closer to the world of festivals, exposing them to and teaching them about the backstage organisation of the event. Secondly, to grow an audience by attracting younger people who will then return each year as audience members and also as volunteers in the organisational, logistical and communication part of the event. To reach school children, some festival members go to schools in May to explain the Festival and talk about the opportunity to spend their PCTO hours at the festival. Before delving into the specifics of the implementation of the PCTO project, a semantic clarification is needed. The organisers of the festival call the PCTO students "volunteers", as they assume that the request for participation is made voluntarily. The PCTO, however, is an educational obligation imposed by law in order to be able to graduate, so even though the children decide where to spend their compulsory PCTO hours, it is unfortunately assumed, among those who organise festivals and cultural activities, that many students look for easy, comfortable and fun jobs, without a real interest in the project they will join.

A week before the start of the festival, the students from the PCTO project begin a team building and approach journey. At the end they are then divided into the different sections of interest: communication, production, photography, and data collection.

Engaging teenagers through this program with high schools was not the Festivals' initial strategy. In the first years the festival made a public call to recruit a limited and selected number of volunteers. Some of whom are still part of the festival today. However, since the PCTO project began, very few of the young people involved

have actually developed a lasting interest in the activities of the Festival association. This disaffection demonstrates the difference between voluntary and enforced participation. Volunteers participate due to a personal interest in the event, which can generate longer lasting interest in the activity carried out, feeling ownership of it. The non-voluntary PCTO helpers see it as an educational obligation to be completed.

The students involved in the PCTO project were reduced from 62 (in 2021) to 31 in 2022 to be able to better manage their involvement. One of the objectives of the committee's annual project is to try to also involve students in cultural activities outside of the festival context, to see if interest can be created and better maintained. The Festival's commitment to involving high school students therefore makes it an ideal case study in exploring the role of cultural events in fostering active citizenship.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

In order to explore the case study festival and its role in active participation a mixed methods approach was chosen as a way to explore the nuances and depths of complex phenomena. Mixed methods require an integration of methods in both data collection and analysis, and ultimately in the interpretation of evidence (Shorten & Smith, 2017). This targeted combination allows a view of the research context from different perspectives, so that the researcher can have a broader and deeper overview of the case study (Shorten, Smith, 2017).

An "Explanatory sequential" research design was used, i.e. the qualitative data were used as a starting point for the analysis of the case study, while the quantitative data were used to empirically test the results, using an inductive logic ( QUAL → QUAN). This approach was useful during the field observation phase in order to both confirm or refute the primary data collected and then be able to compare the data with what was stated by the festival organisers.

The research began with a first phase where the researcher was immersed in the case festival during three different moments: one week in June 2021, two weeks in September 2021 and one week in September 2022. This entailed keeping a reflective journal of the experience. In this phase the researcher was able to observe the organisation of the festival, observe the work of the volunteers, and directly observe the relationship with the audience and with the territory. The observation was agreed with the festival organisation, which gave free access to a series of preparatory meetings: one with the press office of the festival, two meetings with the co

director of the festival, and the preparatory course of the volunteers. In the next phase we opted for semi-structured interviews and three quantitative surveys.

#### **4.1 Semi-structured interviews**

The semi-structured interview method was adopted both for interviews with organisers and for interviews with residents, staff members, volunteers and the town's administration (e.g. those involved in the town's governance and tourism development). The interviews gave them space for insights, anecdotes and pauses for reflection. There were 26 interviewees belonging to two distinct categories. The first relates to the Festival organisation and included the artistic director, the organisational director and president of the association that organises the festival, and the organisational secretary, who coordinate and manage the staging of the project. Secondly, we interviewed twenty-three residents who in various capacities have connections with the Festival. All interviews were conducted between 6th May and 13th September 2021, lasting between 20 and 110 minutes. All were recorded with the approval of the interviewees, subsequently transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach.

The choice of interviewees was decided during the preliminary observational and context stage with a recruitment criterion based on a heterogeneous stratification. This entailed collecting the testimonies of the different professional figures who worked on the 2021 edition of the festival and various members of civil society who directly or indirectly had relationships with the festival or were impacted by the presence of the festival. The 23 residents were suggested by the festival organisation or identified directly in the field. The objective of these interviews was to understand how the festival was perceived by the participants and, as learned during the interviews, their social circles. The interviews also explored whether the festival had any impact on their attitudes towards cultural activities and their choices. The interview schedule was formulated by the authors and was developed based on previous observation at the festival and the literature on active citizenship. The objectives of the interview were to understand the link with the festival, in which an attempt was made to establish what the relationship between the interviewee and the event is and what this relationship meant in their networks (Dunne et al., 2023; Gorchakova & Hyde, 2022; Heldt, 2014; Saragih & Amelia, 2020; Tkaczynski et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2018); to understand their perception of the possible economic (Getz & Page, 2016; Maughan & Bianchini 2004; Wood, 2005) and social outputs of the festival at a local level (Brownnett, 2018; Fiedler, Wickham, 2022; Moulaert et al., 2010; Qu & Cheer, 2022; Senevirathna et al., 2023); and, the possible future impact of the festival both on a cultural and social level (Getz & Page, 2016; Kisida et al., 2014; Rossetti, 2021), and for the volunteers (Hallmann, 2023; Van de Vyver & Abrams, 2018).

With many of the interviewees, thanks to the rapport established during the interview, further conversations took place during the festival.

See Table 1 and Table 2 for an overview of the interview topics.

**Table 1 – Interviewees and interview topics**

| <b>Role</b>  | <b>Methods and length</b>                               | <b>Interview topics</b>   |
|--|---|---|
| Artistic director of the festival  | Written.<br>Requested questions in advance.<br>2 pages. | 1) The history and organisation of the event: How and why was Teatro sull'Acqua born? How has it changed over the years? What objectives were set? What is the organisational structure of the festival? How many people work at the festival and in what ways? Where do the festival workers come from? How many volunteers are there at the festival? How do you recruit them? Do you give them benefits? Has the structure of the festival changed over the years?   |
| Organisational director of the festival and president of the Association that organises the festival | Zoom call<br>2 hours + several times in person          | 2) The programming and cultural intentions of the event: How is the festival program chosen? What does the festival offer? In addition to the shows and events, are there any other activities? Are there any spin offs during the year? What is the relationship with digital?   |
| Organisational secretariat of the festival until 2021  | Zoom call<br>2 hours.                                   | 3) The relationship with the location, the audiences and local government administration. How many attendees are there? Who are the audiences made up of? What is the age, education, gender breakdown? Have policies to approach the public been implemented? During these years, have you noticed the creation of a "hard core" audience? If so, who and how does this affect programming? Do children and young people participate in the festival? If so, in what way?); Is there a relationship with the local |

|  |  |  |
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|  |  | government? Have collaborations ever been started for tourist or cultural purposes? Have there ever been regional promotion activities using culture or festivals? |
|--|--|--|

**Table 2 – Interviewees and interview topics**

| <b>Role</b>  | <b>Methods and length</b>                        | <b>Interview topics</b>   |
|--|--|---|
| Artistic director of the festival  | Written, 2 pages. Requested questions in advance | <p>1) The relationship between the interviewee and the event and what this relationship meant in their networks. The starting questions were:</p> <p>How did you approach “Teatro sull'Acqua”? What do you do for the festival? Why are you doing it?</p> <p>Do you have anyone in your family who is part of the festival?</p> <p>2) The output of the event, which investigates the possible economic and social outputs of the festival at a local level. The starting questions were:</p> <p>How did you approach “Teatro sull'Acqua”? What do you do for the festival? Why are you doing it?</p> <p>Do you have anyone in your family who is part of the festival?</p> |
| Organisational director of the festival and president of the Association that organises the festival | Zoom call   2 hours<br>+ several times in person |   |
| Organisational secretariat of the festival until 2021  | Zoom call   2 hours<br>+ several times in person |   |
| Social media manager since 2021 and president of a cultural association                              | In person   40 minutes                           |   |
| Festival PR since 2021   | In person   30 minutes                           |   |
| Photographer of the festival since 2013  | In person   30 minutes                           |   |
| Volunteer manager for the 2021 edition   | In person   40 minutes                           |   |
| Communications manager since 2018  | Phone   2 hours                                  |   |
| Pizzeria owner   | In person   30 minutes                           |   |
| Bookshop owner in Arona  | In person   30 minutes                           |   |
| Bookshop owner in Arona  | In person   30 minutes                           |   |

|  |                        |   |
|--|------------------------|---|
| Bookshop owner in Arona                                    | In person   30 minutes | <p>3) The future of the festival, where starting from one's own experience of the festival, an opinion was asked on the possible developments of the event. The starting questions were:</p> <p>Does the number of customers/tourists increase during the festival? Do you have regular customers during the festival? Or do you notice tourists/ audiences during the festival? What does the festival do to involve citizens? Do you know anyone who has approached certain disciplines thanks to the festival? Do you do what you do also thanks to the festival? What is the festival's strong point? What is the festival's weak point? How do you imagine, or how would you like, the festival in 10 years?</p> |
| Bookshop owner in Arona                                    | In person   50 minutes |   |
| Owner of the hotel where the festival artists stay         | In person   30 minutes |   |
| Former volunteer   | In person   40 minutes |   |
| Volunteer  | In person   30 minutes |   |
| Volunteer  | In person   1 hour     |   |
| Former volunteer   | Phone   45 minutes     |   |
| Former volunteer (now president of a cultural association) | In person   30 minutes |   |
| Professor and PCTO project manager                         | In person   1 hour     |   |
| Former volunteer   | Phone   40 minutes     |   |
| Teacher and owner of a villa where some events take place  | In person   1 hour     |   |
| Local newspaper director                                   | Phone   20 minutes     |   |
| Member of Italian Parliament and Deputy Mayor of Arona     | Phone   1 hour         |   |
| President of the Pro Loco                                  | In person   1 hour     |   |
| Ex festival PR   | Phone   20 minutes     |   |

## 4.2 Surveys

The "Teatro sull'Acqua" festival, although begun in 2011, had never carried out a structured survey of its



audience and their level of festival participation. Therefore, it was important to analyse the festival audience in a structured way. The objectives of the first questionnaire were to ascertain: 1) the socio-demographic profiling of the users of the "Teatro sull'Acqua" festival (questions 1-6); 2) the analysis of the cultural consumption of the individuals who participated (questions 7-8); 3) understanding the methods of participation in the event and other cultural events present in the area (questions 9-16); 4) the evaluation of the experience at the festival in terms of satisfaction and evaluation of the services offered to users during the days of the event (questions 17-44).

The research instrument was written in Italian and structured into 44 items. These were grouped into 19 closed-ended questions mainly based on numerical and verbal scales (Likert), to facilitate administration and analysis.

The construction of the questionnaire was determined in three phases:

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

Before launching the full survey a pilot administration (pre-test) was carried out to identify possible setting or production anomalies. The pre-test sample was made up of individuals across gender and age groups, mainly workers in the cultural sector. From the pre-test it emerged that three questions were ambiguous and the time taken to respond was too long, exceeding six minutes on average.

Following the notes, one ambiguous question was removed and the other two merged, thus lowering the response time to around five minutes.

The distribution took place during the days of the festival, from 7 to 12 September 2021, via QRCode and via paper questionnaires. In this way the festival provided "Teatro sull'Acqua" branded pens to give away as thank you for completion. The sample was intercepted at the entrance, before the events and shows, and encouraged to fill out the form while waiting before the start of the event. 284 questionnaires were collected, of which 194 were via QRCode and ninety in paper form (copied to digital form).

In the following year, 2022, to evaluate the level of active citizenship among the festival participants. This survey was constructed and tested as before. Since the objective of the questionnaire was not to investigate the audience from a socio-demographic point of view, from the pre-test the researchers decided to simplify the survey to 38 questions, for an average completion time of approximately three minutes.

The objectives of this second questionnaire were:

- to conduct socio-demographic profiling of the users of the “Teatro sull'Acqua” festival and their feelings towards the festival, to then correlate them with the profiling carried out in the previous questionnaire (questions 1-7);
- to evaluate the impact of the festival on the town of Arona and on the creation of cultural experiences for the participants (questions 8-21);
- to understand whether the Festival creates active citizenship, therefore whether it raises awareness of certain social issues, and whether it creates opportunities for participation (questions 22-38).

This survey targeted only the participants of the 2021 festival in order to compare them with the sample already analysed the previous year. The survey took place between 1 July 2022 and 13 September 2022 via QRCode and via paper questionnaires. The audience was then digitally contacted using contacts taken in 2021 and also physically intercepted during the festival, at the entrance before the beginning of the shows, asking them if they participated in the 2021 edition and then encouraged to fill out the forms while waiting. 86 questionnaires were collected in total.

The analysis of the material collected was initially carried out between September 2021 and January 2022 and subsequently between May 2022 and October 2022. For the analysis of the questionnaires, the pro version of SurveyMonkey was initially used, the same system with which the data were collected. Once the data had been "cleaned", a program for analysing data and carrying out statistical tests called Jamovi was used.

## **5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews and from the results of the questionnaires with the Festival audience. The main themes are discussed here under the headings 'territory', 'active citizenship and participation' and 'accessibility'. Other sub-themes have been discussed during the analysis phase, such as volunteering and the participation of young people. In order to understand whether festivals are devices for the creation of active citizenship, and consequently for the growth of the well-being of the region, attention was paid to the literature and reflections on the theme of active citizenship.

As we have seen, culture and festivals have a crucial role to play in terms of social cohesion, welfare and sustainability (Hammonds, 2023). Several case studies on artistic participation have analysed the social repercussions in Italy (Bodo & Sacco, 2017) and abroad (Arcodia & Whitford, 2006; Alonzo & Rossetti 2023; Campagna et al., 2020; Fiedler & Wickham 2022; Flinders & Cunningham, 2014; Gorchakova & Hyde 2022; Jeannotte, 2003; Kelaheer et al. 2014; Leroux & Bernadska 2014; Mair & Duffy, 2018; Oser, 2017; Stern & Siffert, 2009; Tkaczynski et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2018). The enjoyment of art helps to broaden one's personal experience towards a public perspective, thus sharing individual experiences with a wider audience, with whom a dialogue and discussion is then established (Kelaheer et al., 2014). This can raise issues never faced before, and perhaps arrive at moments of introspection that question one's fundamental assumptions (Stephenson, 2005).

Participation in cultural events also promotes social cohesion, the creation of new communities or the consolidation of others already established (Matarasso, 1997; Nguyen et al., 2024), through engagement practices (Azara et al. 2023; Senevirathna et al., 2023; Stern & Siffert, 2009) and subjective empowerment (Getz & Page, 2016; Kisida et al., 2014; Rossetti, 2021). Artistic and cultural production connects people by activating dialogues and social discussions, even on previously unexplored topics. Art, with its universal language, manages to simplify and communicate complex issues, allowing for insights and dialogues (Kelaheer et al., 2014).

From this perspective, cultural festivals, as moments of celebration and social cohesion of local and temporary communities, can, like other artistic and cultural practices, promote pluralism, and civic and voluntary participation (Blackman et al., 2017; Hallmann, 2023; Stebbins, 2014).

Before exploring the results of the analysis of the case study, it is important to understand the characteristics of the Festival's audience and how this then influences the potential for the Festival to positively impact active citizenship and participation. The first section therefore explains the survey findings, and outlines the profile of those who participate in the Festival.

## **5.1 The Audience**

First of all, it is noted that the audience of the Festival conforms to the statistics of participants in other Italian cultural events (Gemini et al., 2018) and to the ISTAT 2021 data on cultural enjoyment. The audience of the Festival is predominantly female (70.4% are women and 29.2% men), is mature (62.3% of those interviewed

are over 45 years of age), has a high level of education (over 50% have a degree or higher) and belong to a middle class, given the professions carried out by the respondents. Over the ten years of the event, the festival has cultivated its own audience, and is now made up mainly of regulars (83.7% of respondents have participated in at least two editions of the festival), local residents (82.4% of respondents come from a radius of less than thirty kilometres from where the event takes place), and by highly cultural consumers (based on the higher percentages in many of the cultural items investigated compared to the national average).

In order to better profile Teatro sull'Acqua's audience it is helpful to compare the survey data with The Audience Agency's cultural segmentation categories. The Audience Agency is financed by Arts Council, England, and has created ten major cultural segments. These are the high participation segments of *Metroculturals*, *Experience Seekers*, *Commuterland Culturebuffs*; average participation segments of *Dormitory Dependables*, *Trips and Treats*, *Home & Heritage*; and those with lower participation, *Up Our Street*, *Frontline Families*, *Kaleidoscope Creativity*, *Supported Communities*. Each segment has in turn been divided into two sub-segments to allow for more precise targeting of cultural users, between metropolitan areas and rural areas.

Starting from the audience segmentation proposed by The Audience Agency, we have identified three current audience segments for the Teatro sull'Acqua festival.

The first profile found is comparable to the *Commuterland Culturebuffs* / C2, who are largely middle-upper class consumers, often retired, with children who have left home. They have a comfortable lifestyle and tend to live in rural areas. The C2 identified for "Teatro sull'Acqua" are lovers of acquired culture and take advantage of every public and social occasion both to show off their social belonging and to enrich their already substantial cultural capital, as can be seen from the data from the survey on cultural consumption. The data shows that participants are "strong readers" (97.2% against the national average of 40%), "attend concerts" (58.1% against the national average of 20.2%), "go to the theatre" (66, 2% against the national average of 20.3%), "Visit exhibitions/museums" (83.1% against 31.8%). Furthermore, 47.7% are volunteers and 59.3% of respondents declared that they are members of an association, the majority are men (68.6%), are over 45 years old (66.7%), and have a degree (49.1%). For them, the Festival is a time for relationship building, of new experiences and of social sharing.

The second profile can be identified as being akin to the *Home & Heritage* / sub-segment H2. These are averagely engaged consumers who are likely to be wealthy pensioners from small towns attracted by daytime activities and historical content. For this segment participation in the festival is also an opportunity for experiential and social sharing, but, for them, this is enjoyed opportunistically, and is not motivated by real

cultural interest. As a relational moment, the Festival becomes an opportunity to be seen as supporting the Festival. They view the festival as a source of pride for the entire town and for the entire community and, therefore, taking part in it is pleasurable as a source of personal pride, and for their own reputation.

The third profile of those who enjoy the festival is related to the *Kaleidoscope Creativity / K2* segment. These are younger people who have low levels of engagement with the arts and public culture, but a high level of digital engagement. For the "Teatro sull'Acqua" this segment is made up of two overlapping groups. Firstly, the students who participate in the festival to get the necessary hours for their school-work (for high schools and 150 hrs for technical institutes). This group emphasises how the experience is exciting for several differing reasons. These include, "Working in a group and with other young people" (13 respondents), "Meeting new people my age" (13 respondents) and "The family environment between the students and staff" (12 respondents). Furthermore, 55 out of 56 students would recommend this experience to others. The other group within this segment are young people from the Arona area who often participate because there is not much else to do and out of curiosity. However, they complain that the Festival is either not designed for them or does not take into consideration the needs and requirements of the 25-34 age group. This group expressed the most negative opinions in the questionnaires. This is a concern as they also represent the "new audience" segment, i.e. the audience who attended the festival for the first time in 2021, driven by curiosity and boredom.

These segments provide a sound basis on which to better understand the potential of the Festival to encourage active citizenship and participation. The first segment, Culturebuffs, are already highly active, the second segment, Home and Heritage, are unlikely to become more so but will support the Festival. The third segment, Kaleidoscope Creativity, is made up of younger people and presents a conundrum. The group that actively choose to attend the Festival are the most negative towards it (we have categorised them as 'disinterested volunteers'), but the group who are 'encouraged' to participate through the school/college requirement are positive after the experience and would recommend it to others (we categorise these as 'enthusiasts'). Clearly these two groups have very different experiences of the Festival with one being far more active in their participation and the other merely spectators.

## **5.2 Territory**

The first theme that emerged across all the interviews is the location of the festival's events, spread throughout the entire Arona area. These decentralised venues are important in building festival networks amongst the private individuals who make their homes or properties available. This also adds an attraction to the festival

experience in that attendees can visit places that are usually inaccessible giving rise to a re-semantization of spaces. Several respondents explained how this motivated them to attend theatrical events as there was the added opportunity to explore their own town. Some respondents also recognised that the involvement of local entities is fundamental for the festival to provide a social and economic boost for the territory.

The entire town becomes a theatre, to host the speakers, performers and artists. This relationship with the town also encourages the participation of numerous traders, creating collaborations and synergies. Although they thought that the Festival is not so popular with people outside of the Arona area, all the traders interviewed remarked upon how the atmosphere in the town changes, because, in their view, the participants are different from the usual "Sunday tourist". One interviewee stated that the strong point of the festival is its ability to bring people to Arona who would have no reason to go to the town, and who then discover a welcoming place.

For those who have a business, participating in the festival is not just a question of image, but becomes a social action, an act of community. They see it as an opportunity to take advantage of something different, "a cultural proposal very different from everything we have seen". It is noted that within the Festival there are few spaces for sociality, where community creation, relational exchange and interaction between artists and the audience can actually take place.

## **5.2 Active citizenship and Participation**

For all the citizens interviewed, the term "active citizenship" implies participation in the community, from volunteers to pensioners, from families to children.

Analysing the interviews with the organisers, it emerges that the objectives of the Festival - to create active citizenship and participation - are perceived in a distorted way by the festival collaborators themselves who either associate a different meaning to the term, or are not aware that these are the Festival objectives. One of the festival's organisers, describing the rebranding project from "Teatro sull'Acqua" (Theatre on Water) to "Arona Città-Teatro sull'Acqua" (Arona Theatre-City on Water), speaks of a transformation that lasts all year, which involves the whole town and which transforms it into a large open-air stage, "in which instead of being normal citizens the inhabitants have a role within this theatre town, a role with a double meaning: a role as a citizen in a utopian town, and a role as a performer". In fact, the rebranding emphasises that the festival is just one of the many events organised by the association: there are courses and theatre performances throughout the year, readings and presentations of books, and activities for children...

Other interviewees recognize the great value of the event's relationship with the district. This vision of active citizenship assigns a central role to being rooted in the region: the whole community takes part in the success of the event which brings prestige and prominence to the town, but is also socially useful to the residents.

In general, according to the responding citizens, being a volunteer at the festival is a useful path even if you subsequently take other paths, because it triggers "cultural knowledge": it activates interests and broadens the overview of what is known. However, these positive views do not necessarily become actions as only three subjects had taken on other volunteering roles after their participation in the "Teatro sull'Acqua" festival.

The main thing that emerged from the interviews is participation. Participating means taking part, that is, acting to promote the interests and needs of an actor (Melucci, 1998); but, at the same time, also being part of, that is, recognising to belong to a system, identifying with a community (Vitale, 2014). Participation is one of the mechanisms for recognizing one's rights, giving shape to collective life. Participating has a strict political connotation, as it implies acting to promote the interests and needs of an individual who identifies with a community (Melucci 1989; Carpentier 2015). In relation to cultural capital, participation in cultural activities can help develop an awareness in participants which can enhance social development and bring about a change in thinking (Kelaher et al 2014; Fisher 2017).

From the analysis of the interviews, participation in "Teatro sull'Acqua" tends to correspond to a more passive role. However, even though the public and spectators of the festival have no role in decision-making or intervention, several have highlighted how in recent years, thanks to the festival, new cultural interests have arisen in the town. For example, there are now theatre reviews for children during the winter, the opening of two bookshops, and several new cultural associations. Despite this, according to the former volunteers interviewed, the involvement of young volunteers does not automatically imply continued or new interest in cultural activities such as literature and theatre. In fact, one interviewee states that after the experience at the festival the students no longer seem passionate about theatre as culture, but instead see it as a potential profession understanding that theatre can also be a career.

Asking about youth participation, for the majority of interviewees this coincides with the school/work alternation project (PCTO). The Director of the fFestival speaks of "pride for the town" in hiring dozens of teenagers every year willing to spend their time in cultural activities. An investment also for the future, given that three of the members, after having been volunteers, have in turn founded new cultural associations, "fertilising the territory". For all categories of interviewees, the PCTO project is a strong point, because it demonstrates that

the event and its organisers have on the one hand the ability to weave social relationships at a local level, and on the other, the interest in interacting with young people , giving them training and moments of knowledge. In fact, one of the collaborators of the festival says that before his experience as a volunteer at "Teatro sull'Acqua", he had never been to the theatre, but thanks to this participation he changed his mind on the matter, so much so that he founded his own cultural association which deals with organisation and promotion of events.

The PCTO may show some structural fragilities, as it is not comparable to a true voluntary service, but despite this, a collaborator maintains that, even if some of the children participate only to reach the number of school hours, others become passionate, ask questions and stay beyond the agreed time. Apart from the PCTO project with the high schools of Arona, youth participation remains low, as found by the same organisers who in 2021 launched the experimental attempt of a Young Board, therefore giving the floor to members under 30. The attempt was then abandoned in 2022.

But volunteering is not the prerogative of young people alone. Some of the festival's historic volunteers, "pillars", are pensioners who make their skills and time available. A citizen makes her home available because she loves the atmosphere at the festival and she likes the idea of making her home a place of culture. All of them approached "Teatro sull'Acqua" through word of mouth: acquaintance with the director, friends of friends, the son who attended the PCTO and who got to know the festival... There are different ways of interacting with culture when it comes out of designated places. The director underlines how a festival that occupies the streets of a town offers the opportunity for a "stumble into culture", because it arouses the curiosity of passers-by, and offers families and children a different experience. The aim of the organisers is to break down prejudices linked to theatre and culture through new ways of interaction and participation. Now, after eleven years of the event, the people of Arona are expecting the festival in September.

Based on these analyses, at a first level the festival seems to be a tool for creating active citizenship, in a location with a poor cultural offering. Especially in the years of the pandemic, the festival offered an opportunity for conviviality (Stevenson 2023), marking the return to sociality for adults, and an important knowledge experience for teenagers. The festival also attempts to compensate for the structural shortcomings of Arona, which has no permanent theatre. It is no coincidence that the success of the event has generated a more ambitious project, that of "Arona Città-Teatro", which includes cultural and theatrical activities throughout the year, of which the festival represents the pinnacle.



The work of the festival, being the only event of its kind in the area, has remained mostly unchanged over time, bringing social, cultural and political value to the community. In recent years the positive aspects and successes of the project have been more greatly valued. However, based on the analyses and programming of the festival, the picture appears more nuanced. There is a risk of adapting to a narrative that legitimises the present instead of challenging the existing, without deepening the analysis of the festival as a political action (Jancovich, Stevenson 2021). The empirical data shows that the festival is an effective cultural driver only for those who already frequent cultural activities and the event. The creation of active citizenship only affects regular spectators of the festival. Questions around accessibility and participation therefore emerge.

### **5.3 Accessibility**

On the accessibility side, "Teatro sull'Acqua" has experimented with innovative forms of approaching and involving citizens through dissemination. In the various editions the festival has visited multiple locations throughout the town, offering free shows, in the tradition of street theatre. These free offers, without an adequate approach to cultural practices, can be misleading in recognizing cultural work as such.

However, this perspective of proximity and approach is contrasted with the installation of temporary obscuring barriers for the Teatro sull'Acqua show (which takes place on the dock in Piazza del Popolo) and the need to purchase a ticket for the shows. On the one hand, the festival eliminates the barrier of prejudice, culture is no longer just something for the *élite*, but for everyone. At the same time, however, the festival raises a barrier both with the audience and with the local community. The physical barriers underline the dichotomy between those inside and those outside the festival, which otherwise would be broken down in street theatre. This creates a feeling of exclusion within the local communities which is made worse by the fact that it is only able to take place due to their support.

The Festival involves the community and the territory through various processes. Since the first edition, "Teatro sull'Acqua" has worked with the town's high schools to bring new audiences together. Although volunteering is one of the most effective tools for activating citizenship this can be diluted by the 'ulterior motive' of completing the PCTO programme.

Overall the festival audience indicated in the survey that they were satisfied with the program offering however, during the interviews, many complained about shortcomings in the management, organisation and timetabling of the events (37 out of 133 respondents); about cultural programming and offerings (25 out of 133 respondents); and about communication (20 respondents out of 133). These aspects were also underlined in the last open question, in which the respondents also put forward proposals to improve the management,

organisation and timetables, programming and cultural offer and communication.

As seen in the analysis of the survey, despite these suggestions for improvement, the audience remains almost passive, identifiable at level 2 on the Arnstein scale (1969). There is no co-direction, co-management or any co-planning practices. Even listening to citizens' opinions has not so far been taken into particular consideration. The volunteers, in addition to the school children from the PCTO project, are used to carry out very basic roles without developing skills and responsibilities.

From a participatory perspective, stakeholders, including artists, participants and supporters, should be involved in all phases of the project, in a process of continuous comparison, from the definition of objectives to the evaluation of results, encouraging critical dialogue on any failures and how to prevent them from happening again. This practice would also contribute to underlining the value of culture, emerging from a self-celebratory insularity (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2021), which does not allow the analysis of the objective situation and the cultural and political growth of the project.

Empathy with one's audience is a necessary step to escape from self-referentiality: listening to the needs of the community, without limiting one's own creative proposal, rethinking participation as a key element of artistic practice. The audience voluntarily participates in festivals if they already have a mindset that allows them to decode the language and contexts they are approaching.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

As emerged during the analysis of the case study of the "Teatro sull'Acqua" Festival, festivals showcase and welcome diversity, preserving individual visions (Leroux, Bernadska, 2014). Moreover, cultural festivals, often used as a ground for experimentation, have over the years investigated new ways of relating to the audience, and therefore can be considered tools for creating active citizenship. Taking our case study as a point of reference, this happens specifically in three different moments, 'territory', 'active citizenship and participation' and 'accessibility', as seen in the analysis of the interviews.

- 1) Festivals transform cultural participation into a moment of celebration and leisure, lowering the threshold of access to culture, overcoming the concept that culture can only be enjoyed by the elite. With their informality and "lightness" they can bring citizens and spectators closer to new authors,

themes and subjects, with a view to inclusion and broadening their cultural horizons, as we have seen in the analysis of “Teatro sull’Acqua festival”. In this regard, the delicate issue of gratuitousness is crucial. Lowering the access threshold does not automatically mean making a proposal that does not require payment, because this can devalue the value of culture: a free event can in fact be perceived as having no social, as well as economic, value. Furthermore, there is a risk of debasing the professionalism of artists, delegitimizing the value of culture in general and consequently also calling public investments into question.

- 2) Cultural festivals require the involvement of the audience, the administration and the territory. As shown in our case study, the events, even those that arise from the bottom, exist in relation both with the audience and with the environment, requiring a dialogue with the administrations and - directly or indirectly - involve local activities, bodies, structures: the businesses that welcome the staff, the artists and spectators; schools and universities; the non-profit associations, the surrounding commercial activities...
- 3) On the accessibility side, in many cases festivals occupy public spaces (starting with streets and squares) that citizens often consider “theirs”. Prohibiting or limiting the use of that space to citizens can therefore have a counterproductive effect, as noted by some residents of Arona in the interviews about participating in the festival's flagship show.

Cultural festivals can be co-programmed with the direct participation of inhabitants, based on their needs and desires. In this way the festival grows and is nourished by ideas from below, from citizens and participants, in a transformation process that listens and responds to the stimuli it receives. Designing and organising a festival means sharing common needs in shared spaces (which are often public), and allowing people to reclaim those spaces to participate in a ritual that distracts them, even if only temporarily, from their daily routine, creating socialisation based on sharing experiences and emotions. In this scenario, the festival stands as the fulcrum of a social ecosystem.

Based on these previous considerations, the festivals respond to a push for cultural welfare (Alonzo & Rossetti 2023). This then contributes to community welfare and active citizenship, starting directly from the social body and/or through the intermediate bodies of society, or through the associations that organise the festivals. As we have seen, festivals can generate various effects. For example, increasing participation in social and cultural life (Brownnett, 2018; Qu & Cheer, 2022); increasing individual well-being (Gorchakova & Hyde, 2022; Heldt, 2014; Saragih & Amelia, 2020); improving people's quality of life, also across generations (Dunne et al.,

2023; Wood et al., 2018); establishing processes of social inclusion and accessibility; and above all triggering community creation processes (Tkaczynski et al., 2022) within this cultural and social ecosystem.

At the same time, users can enjoy festivals through different levels of participation. Some types of participation, such as volunteering, co-creation, co-planning, co-direction and citizenship activation, encourage cultural welfare and active citizenship, thus closing the circle of the ecosystem. The “passive” audience remains part of the festival ecosystem but with little direct effect on levels of active citizenship and community and cultural welfare. Similarly, citizens who are not currently participating are also involved (participation deficit), due to the communicative and social impact of the event. This “potential public” is also part of the ecosystem. As shown in Figure 1, the ecosystem could be a potential new way of viewing the wider social and cultural implications of a festival for the creation of active citizenship.

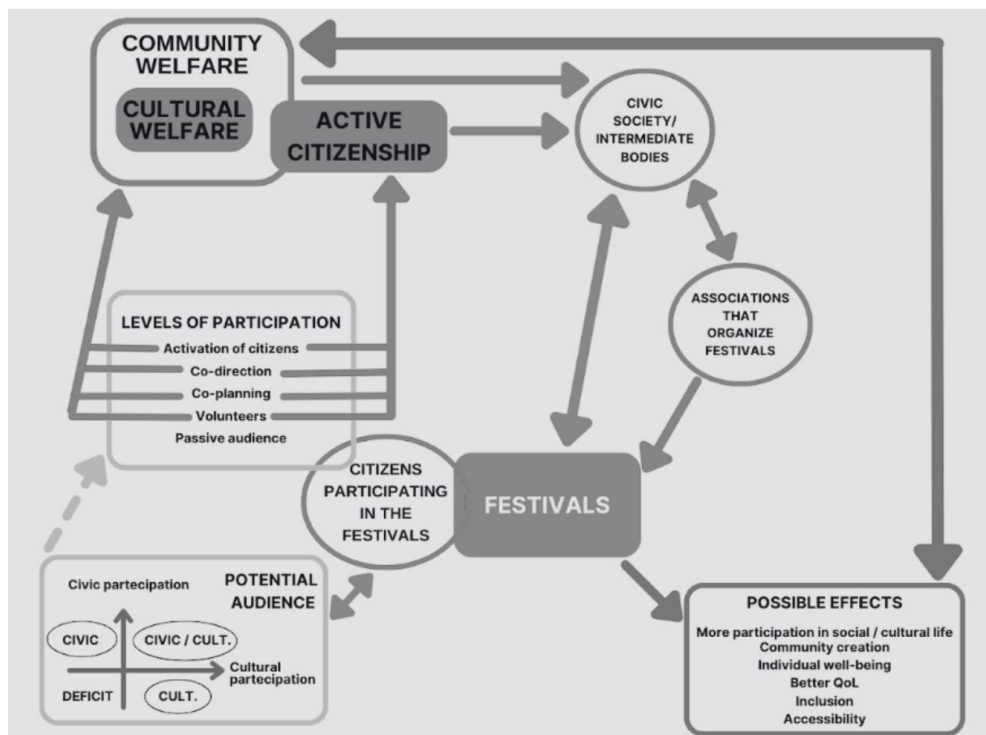


Fig. 1 Ecosystem Scheme (authors' own)

## 7. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Starting from the case study of the “Teatro sull'Acqua” Festival, the aim of this research was to explore the role that cultural festivals play in encouraging active citizenship. However, during the analysis, some limitations emerged.

The first is linked to the very nature of festivals: the ephemeral and temporal nature of festivals implies that the

processes of creating active citizenship are, inevitably, limited in time. As we have seen, the practices of creating active citizenship imply constant and ongoing work in the territory, even when the festival lights up. A possible future investigation could be to both observe how practices develop in the territory during the year and to understand how citizenship creation practices change after 3-5 years of application.

The second limitation is linked to the concept of artistic quality. There are festivals designed only to be a moment of entertainment: do these festivals still put into practice, perhaps unconsciously, actions to create active citizenship? And furthermore, do the practices of creating active citizenship imply a choice on the quality of the artistic proposal? This topic was not taken into consideration in this paper, but we recognize that further investigation is necessary.

The third is the awareness of those who organise a festival of their cultural and social role in activating citizens. During the analysis phase, we realised that citizen participation often occurs as a consequence of an organisational choice. This implies a lack of planning aimed at developing the public's capabilities, which instead are the starting point in conscious processes of creating active citizenship.

In summary, festivals can be a tool for creating active citizenship. For those involved in cultural policies, the objective should be greater involvement in the participation of a young audience that is not accustomed to cultural participation. This primarily involves listening to the needs and desires of the public, but also creative proposals to trigger new ideas and new cultural stimuli. Secondly, active citizenship also requires shared planning, which takes into account the capabilities of individuals. But to do so, it would be important to start from the assumption that this requires commitment beyond the festival and even the town as cultural policy changes are required at a higher level.

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