Cultural Events Communication and the Influence of Sponsoring Brands on Participants' Purchase Intention

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Abstract: The paper explores how participants of cultural events broadcast on TV perceive their communication strategy and whether the communication of sponsoring brands influences their purchase intentions. Qualitative exploratory research was conducted through an online survey with a sample of spectators attending the Sanremo festival, the most popular song festival in Italy. The analysis reveals a quite high use of social media and a general low influence of communication of sponsoring brands on purchase intention that were sponsors of the famous Italian cultural event.

The study suggests that cultural events such as music festival should manage strategically their relationship with brands to increase brand awareness, sale, and loyalty. The originality of the study lies in the analysis of how spectators interact with cultural events broadcast on TV in the digital era perceive its communication strategy and how communication of sponsoring brands influences their purchasing intentions, which has received limited empirical investigation. It reveals numerous novel elements within marketing literature, as well as managerial implications.

The study presents limits related to the sample of Italians and the specific event in one country therefore it has limited generalizability. Larger sample and different groups of participants (e.g by age, behaviour, etc.) and longitudinal studies could help to understand the phenomenon more in depth.

Keywords: communication, social media, festival, consumer behaviour, brands, sponsoring brands, purchase intention.

Introduction

The first objective of this paper is to investigate how cultural consumers interact with cultural events - specifically music festivals - through social media, and how they perceive the digital communication of these events.

Music festivals can be interpreted as "experiences" through the lenses of Pine and Gilmore's (1999). According to the Authors an experience is a novel economic offering, based on goods and services, that the consumer perceives as a personal and unique event, engaging them on emotional, physical, intellectual, and/or even spiritual levels. In the context of music festivals, the distinctive elements of the experience lie in the inherently immersive and participatory

nature of the festival and in the importance of managing artistic performances, spaces, and cultural content (Masiello et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2021).

Participation in cultural events such as festivals, concerts and exhibitions is, by nature, an aesthetic and emotional experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

However, digital communication - particularly through social media - can enrich cultural consumers' experiences by fostering engagement and interaction, thereby enhancing their overall satisfaction (Conti, 2022). Social media enable consumers to engage directly with organizations - commenting, sharing opinions, and participating in collective discussions (Kotler, 2021) - thereby extending the experience beyond the physical or broadcast dimension.

In this study, we examine a popular music festival broadcasted on TV, a cultural phenomenon that nowadays coexists and interacts with social media, generating conversations before, during, and after the broadcast. Prior research in cultural heritage management has highlighted the positive impact of social media use on satisfaction (Conti, 2022), word-of-mouth communication (Conti et al., 2024), and loyalty (Zollo et al., 2021). However, in the context of music festivals, empirical research examining the relationship between social media use, cultural consumers' engagement, and perceived satisfaction remains limited (Bacalhau et al., 2025), and it is even more scarce for broadcasted TV music festivals.

To contribute to filling this research gap, this paper presents an empirical study exploring how participants in a TV music festival perceive and interact with social media related to the event. The first objective is to examine how spectators of a televised festival engage with social media and perceive the event's digital communication - specifically, which types of content they prefer, the extent of their interaction with the event on social platforms, and how they evaluate their overall engagement and satisfaction.

The second objective is to examine how event sponsoring brands may influence spectators' purchasing decisions. While sponsorship at live music festivals has been shown to significantly shape consumer attitudes (Pitt et al., 2010) and foster favorable dispositions toward purchase behavior (Bauer et al., 2014), the dynamics of sponsorship within televised music festivals remain underexplored.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section outlines the theoretical framework concerning cultural consumers, social media marketing, and the influence of brand sponsorship on spectators' purchase intentions. The following section describes the methodology adopted to conduct the exploratory study in Italy. Next, the main results are presented and discussed, and finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and managerial implications.

Theoretical background

Cultural consumer experience, social media usage and engagement

Customer experience is a multidimensional concept that encompasses the cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensory, and social responses of consumers to a company's products or services throughout their purchasing journey (Lemon and Vehoef, 2016).

The literature on experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) has underlined that organizations can co-create diverse types of experiences with consumers or visitors by drawing on four dimensions: entertainment, education, aesthetics, and escapism. Cultural organizations offer naturally positive and memorable experience, as they offer unique spaces of beauty where audiences can more readily engage in aesthetic experiences than in many other contexts (Pencarelli et al., 2015; 2017).

In the context of music festival, organizers can co-create various types of experiences with attendees by leveraging Pine and Gilmore's (1999) four dimensions: entertainment, education, aesthetics, and escapism. Music festivals are inherently experiential events, celebrated for their atmosphere, performances, and social interactions, which allow attendees to readily engage in aesthetic, educational, or escapist experiences. Overall, any festival represents a positive experience if it leaves a lasting and memorable impression.

Attending cultural events, such as festivals, concerts, exhibitions offer immersive, emotionally and even spiritually rich experiences (Conti, 2020). Living positive and memorable experiences depend both on the cultural organization's ability to create optimal contextual conditions - mainly through the provision of high-quality and engaging services - and on individual engagement, whether through participation, observation, or other forms of involvement (Conti et al., 2024).

Digital platforms cannot fully substitute for face-to-face interactions in the physical environment (Murray, 2020); however, they can facilitate highly immersive experiences, thereby enhancing the overall cultural experience (Conti, 2022).

A critical factor in enhancing the quality and memorability of cultural experiences is effective communication (Pencarelli et al., 2015; 2017). Cultural organizations' use of social media can strengthen audiences' relationships with events, boost engagement, and increase overall satisfaction (Zollo et al., 2021). Communicating effectively with live music festival audiences is challenging, and organizers should leverage social media advertising to boost awareness and engagement. A recent study indicates that understanding the audience is key to developing effective strategies, including the selection of appropriate channels and content (Bacalhau et al., 2025). The Authors highlight that authentic and shareable content enhances visibility, ticket sales, and brand loyalty, yet the role

of personalized social media advertising remains underexplored in the scientific literature.

Therefore, digital platforms have become essential tools for enhancing the visibility of all kinds festival. By integrating digital elements into traditional festival experiences, organizers can unlock new opportunities for audience engagement and brand development (Masiello et al., 2020). Recent research highlights that digital transformation enables festivals to reach audiences far beyond their physical locations while preserving cultural authenticity through innovative forms of online interactions (Morgan et al., 2021). Furthermore, social media usage in festivals generate high levels of digital engagement which also enhances the visibility and engagement for the places where these festivals are held (Laurell and Björner, 2018).

High-quality content and meaningful interactions on social media enhance online engagement and strengthen brand awareness and in turn, positively influence their offline purchase intentions (Dabbous and Barakat, 2020). The well-established positive influence of social media on purchase intentions (Nguyen & Nguyễn, 2020; Onofrei et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2025) suggests that, within the cultural context, both cognitive and emotional engagement can similarly shape subsequent consumer behaviours, including purchase decisions. Therefore, understanding the mechanisms through which digital communication fosters engagement and shapes audience perceptions is essential for cultural organizations aiming to enhance both visitor satisfaction and commercial outcomes.

Despite the growing role of communication and social media in music festivals, significant gaps remain in the context of broadcasted or televised festivals. In particular, understanding how cultural consumers perceive digital communication during televised music festivals is still limited. Evidence is scarce regarding the types of content audiences find most appealing, how they evaluate digital communication, and the extent to which it fosters meaningful engagement.

TV sponsorship, audience engagement in cultural events and influence on purchase intention

TV sponsorship is a promotional tactic where the advertising message appears at the beginning or end of a movie or television broadcast rather than during commercial breaks. By prominently displaying the sponsor's brand alongside specific content, the focus is on creating a strong communicative impact (Harvey, 2001). This trend is also evident in cultural programming, where events and initiatives such as music festivals often rely on corporate sponsors. These sponsors provide essential financial support while simultaneously enhancing their own brand image, creating a mutually beneficial relationship between cultural institutions and commercial partners. Evidence shows that sponsorship has a significant influence on favourable consumer dispositions toward purchase behaviour (Bauer et al., 2014).

A study on sponsorship of large sporting and cultural events shows that it can foster a favourable brand attitude toward certain brands, as well as a similar willingness among consumers to recommend them (Pitt et al., 2010).

Sponsorship offers mutual benefits: for brands it enhances visibility and enables access to broader target audiences. For festival sponsors provide financial support. However, to strengthen communication effectiveness and public reputation, cultural events must carefully select sponsors whose values and identities align with their own - a concept known as "brand-event fit" in the literature. Another study (Hutabarth and Gayatri, 2014) found that congruency between a sponsor and music festivals is a key factor in enhancing sponsorship effectiveness. The Authors underlines that a strong fit can improve brand image, foster favourable consumer attitudes, and strengthen marketing communication outcomes. It also facilitates image transfer from the event to the sponsor, increasing purchase intention, highlighting the importance of carefully selecting sponsors that share values and identity with the event.

Brand exposure during highly recognizable cultural events, such as the iconic Italian Festival di Sanremo, can substantially enhance brand awareness, image, and purchase intention. The festival's extensive visibility - across both television and social media - amplifies recognition and contributes to shaping a collectively shared brand identity, reflecting the third-person effect (Davison, 1983), whereby individuals perceive media as exerting greater influence on others than on themselves.

Cultural authenticity and event-brand fit further strengthen sponsorship credibility and consumer purchase intention, while social media communication reinforces audience engagement and brand reputation. This study examines the Sanremo Festival to empirically explore how spectators interact with the event and perceive its communication on social media and how sponsoring brand communication influences their purchase intentions.

This study analyses the event to empirically investigate how spectators interact with it through social media and to what extent communication involving sponsoring brands affects their purchase intentions.

Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does the audience interact with the Sanremo festival and evaluate its digital communication?
2. Does the Festival' s digital communication influence audience' purchase intentions toward sponsoring brands?

Methodology

This exploratory study employed a survey as a quantitative research method. A brief questionnaire was developed as the primary research instrument, consisting mainly of closed-ended items, and was administered to a sample of individuals who have followed the Festival over the years and considered themselves capable of responding to questions regarding the event's

communication strategies. Respondents who never or only occasionally watched the Festival were not included. No restrictions were applied based on age, educational background, or level of Festival engagement, as overly stringent criteria were avoided; the objective was to obtain an exploratory understanding of audience perceptions of the Festival's communication. The survey was disseminated via social media platforms (Facebook, LinkedIn) in January 2025 as part of a master's thesis conducted under the author's research guidance. Data collected from respondents were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to summarize trends and patterns.

The questionnaire is structured into three main sections. The first section collects demographic and behavioural information (gender, age, educational level, media used to watch the festival, frequency of watching the festival over the years). The second section addresses the first research question, focusing on the audience's online interaction with the Sanremo Festival and perception of communication strategy in the digital era. It explores how individuals experience and participate in the event, particularly through digital channels, with items concerning the intensity of digital platforms usage during the festival, the types of social media most employed for interacting with the Festival content, the motivation to watch the festival, and the most appreciated content. , and the perceived level of engagement fostered by online communication. The third section responds to the second research question, investigating the audience's interaction with partner brands and advertising during the Festival. It examines how viewers perceive and engage with advertising campaigns and promotional messages of sponsoring brands, as well as the extent to which these influence purchase intentions.

A total of 334 completed responses were collected last January-February 2025 through Facebook.

Findings

Sample characteristics

As shown in Figure 1, the sample of 334 respondents is composed predominantly of women (60%). The demographic distribution is diverse, with the 25–34 age group representing the largest segment (41.6%), followed by the 18–24 group (18%) and respondents aged over 55 (16.5%). In terms of education, 42% of respondents hold a secondary school diploma, while 46% possess a bachelor's or master's degree. As expected, most respondents (88%) reported watching the event on television, while 7% use online streaming services and 5% follow it via social media. Moreover, respondents are generally very familiar with the event: 65% reported following it every year, 30% almost every year, and only 5% in several (but not all) editions.
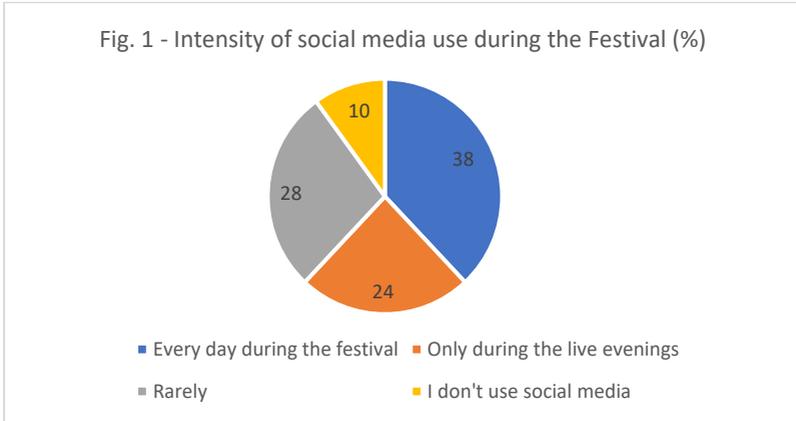
Table 1 - Sample description

| Description	N.	%	Description	N.	%
Gender			Media used to watch the festival		
Male	134	40	TV	294	88
Female	200	60	Streaming online	23	7
Total	334	100	Social media	17	5
			Total	334	100
Age			Frequency of watching the festival over the years		
18-24	50	15	Every year	217	65
25-34	140	42	Almost every year	101	30
35-44	47	14	Several years	17	5
45-55	57	17	Total	334	100
Over 55	40	12			
Total	334	100			
Education Level					
Primary/Middle School	17	5			
Secondary School	140	42			
Bachelor/Master degree	154	46			
Post-Graduate	23	7			
Total	334	100			

Online interaction and participation with the Festival

Although 88% of participants watch the Festival on TV (Table 1), most of the sample (61%) affirm to interact with social media during the Festival which lasts 5 days (Figure 1). In fact, 38% read content on Festival on social media

during the Festival, 24% interact with social media only during the evening lives while 28% use social rarely. Only 10% do not interact at all on this content.

Fig. 1 - Intensity of social media use during the Festival (%)

- Every day during the festival
- Only during the live evenings
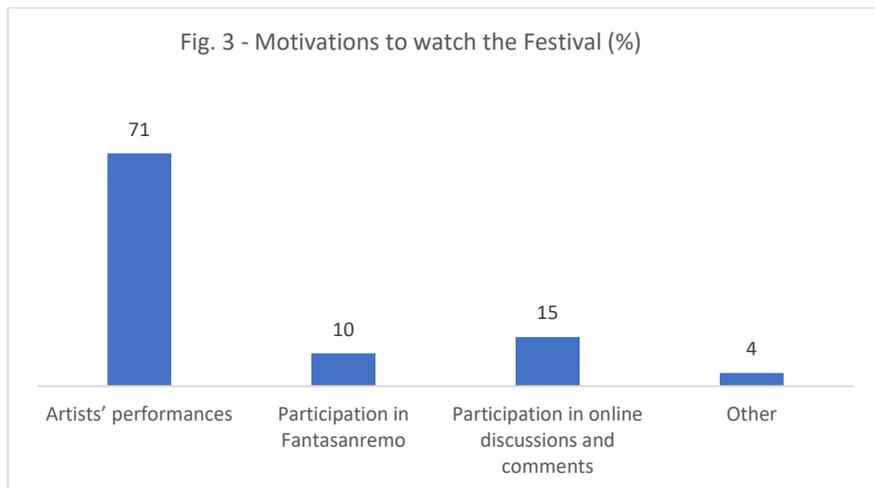- Rarely
- I don't use social media

Concerning types of social media used, Instagram emerges as the dominant platform used to follow the Sanremo Festival (70% of respondents), followed by Facebook (44%), TikTok (26), and YouTube (22%).

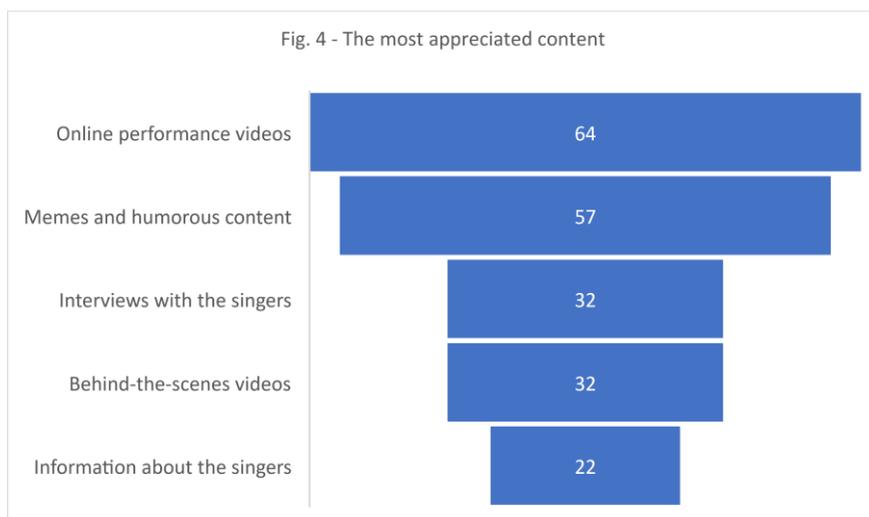Fig. 2 - Types of social media used during the Festival (%)
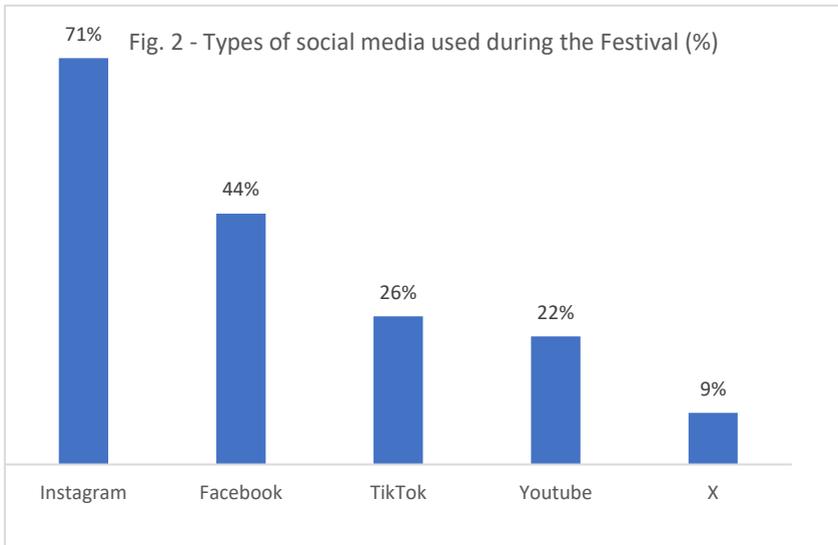
This reflects a trend among the audience to prefer visual and interactive platforms that encourage users to engage with each other, such as TikTok, where challenges between users are often launched to the tunes of their favourite songs competing in the festival. It is interesting to note that (Figure 3) 71% of respondents follow the Festival for the artists' performances, 10% participate in Fantasanremo, and 15% engage for the pleasure of joining online discussions. This shows that while the audience remains primarily focused on the artistic and

cultural aspects, interactive initiatives like Fantasanremo have strong potential to attract younger viewers. It is a fan-driven fantasy game based on the Sanremo Music Festival, where participants predict outcomes and score points based on the performances of competing artists. Similarly, online discussions highlight that the Festival is increasingly seen not just as a passive event, but as an opportunity to actively join a collective conversation.

Fig. 3 - Motivations to watch the Festival (%)

- Artists' performances: 71
- Participation in Fantasanremo: 10
- Participation in online discussions and comments: 15
- Other: 4

The most appreciated contents on social media (Fig. 4) sono i video delle esibizioni live (64%), seguiti da meme e contenuti umoristici (57%), interviste ai cantanti e video dietro le quinte (32%).

Fig. 4 - The most appreciated content

- Online performance videos: 64
- Memes and humorous content: 57
- Interviews with the singers: 32
- Behind-the-scenes videos: 32
- Information about the singers: 22

While artistic and informative content related to performances remains important, users also seek light and entertaining moments during the Festival. The popularity of memes and humorous content highlights the growing role of playful entertainment in Sanremo' s communication. Such content allows viewers to engage actively, not just passively, fostering online interaction, increasing the event's visibility, and creating a sense of community among the audience.

Perception of Festival's digital communication and influence of brands on purchase intention

A 1-to-5 Likert scale was used to measure perceived engagement with the Festival through digital communication and social media (Fig. 5). Most respondents chose central or positive values: 35% selected 3 (moderately), 22% chose 4 (quite a lot), and 14% chose 5 (very much), indicating that around 71% of the audience felt moderately to highly engaged. Conversely, 19% reported low engagement (2), and 10% reported no engagement (1). This suggests that while digital communication has a meaningful impact, it does not engage all viewers equally. Two distinct audience segments emerge: one more engaged, likely drawn to interactive or exclusive content, and another less engaged, showing limited interaction despite the organizers' efforts. Overall, the data highlight variability in audience responses and differing levels of social media engagement and perception of the Festival's digital strategies.


Fig. 5 - Engagement with Festival's digital communication (%)
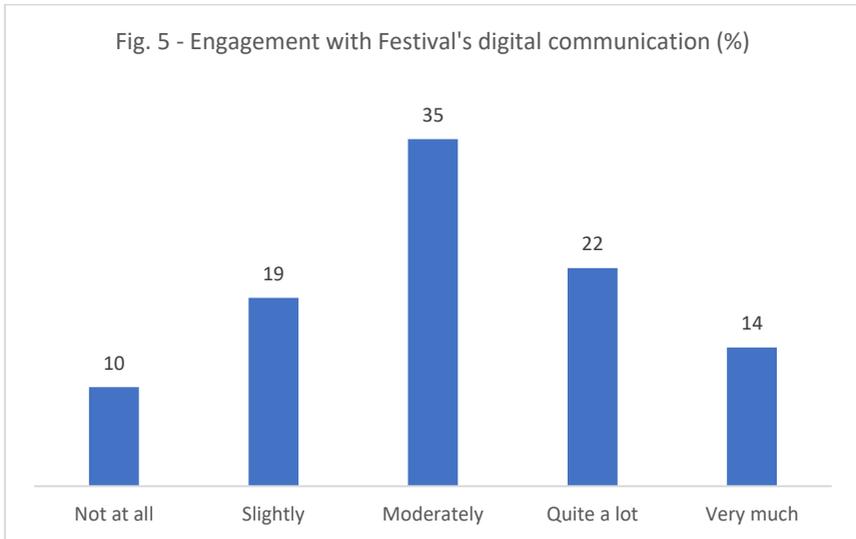
A notable finding concerns the audience's behavior on social media toward the Festival's sponsoring and partner brands.The 2025 Sanremo Festival was supported by major sponsors such as TIM, Suzuki, Costa Crociere, Eni (through Plenitude and EniLive), Coca-Cola, Generali, Veralab, and Cioccolato Novi.

Despite brand promotion through ads, product placements, and TV mentions, most respondents do not actively engage with these brands' social media profiles. Specifically, 65% never interact, 21% rarely do, 11% interact occasionally, 2% often, and only 1% always. This indicates that audience engagement with sponsoring brands is generally low, ranging from disinterest to occasional interaction.

Fig. 6 - Interaction with sponsoring brands on social media (%)
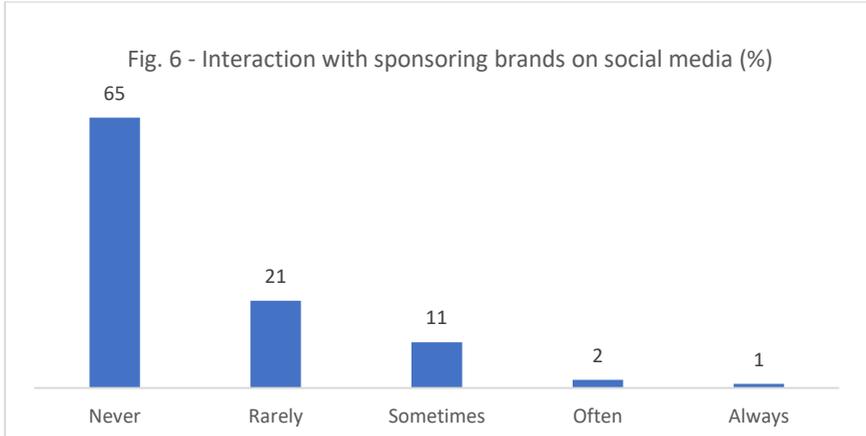
Another interesting result concerns the purchase or search for advertised products: only 17% of respondents reported having bought or searched for information about a product advertised during the Festival, while the remaining 83% have never taken this action. This data confirms that advertising campaigns are not particularly effective in turning visibility into concrete actions by the audience.

Fig. 7 - Have you ever bought or searched information for sponsored brands? (%)
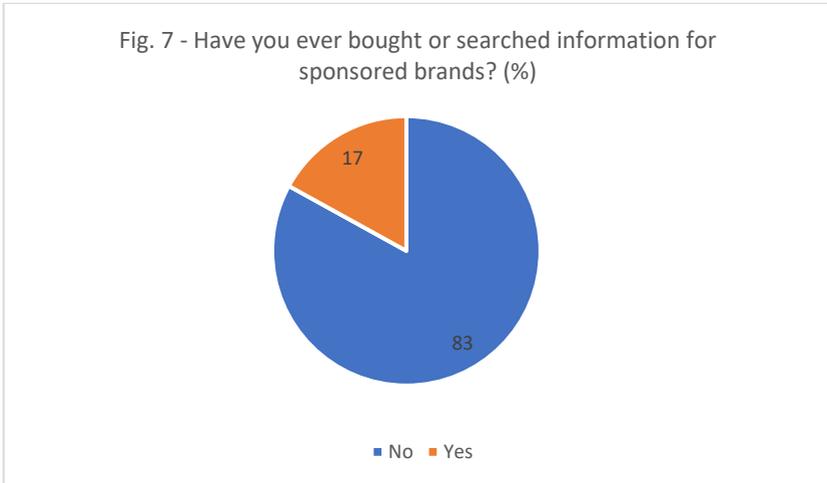
The data further highlight the limited influence of advertising on purchase decisions (Fig 8): 58% of respondents are not influenced by ads, 25% are only slightly influenced, and just 3% report being strongly influenced. This suggests that, according to the surveyed sample, advertising does not have a direct impact on purchasing behavior or on the level of interaction with the brand.

Fig. 8 - Influence of sponsoring brands adv on decision purchasing process (%)
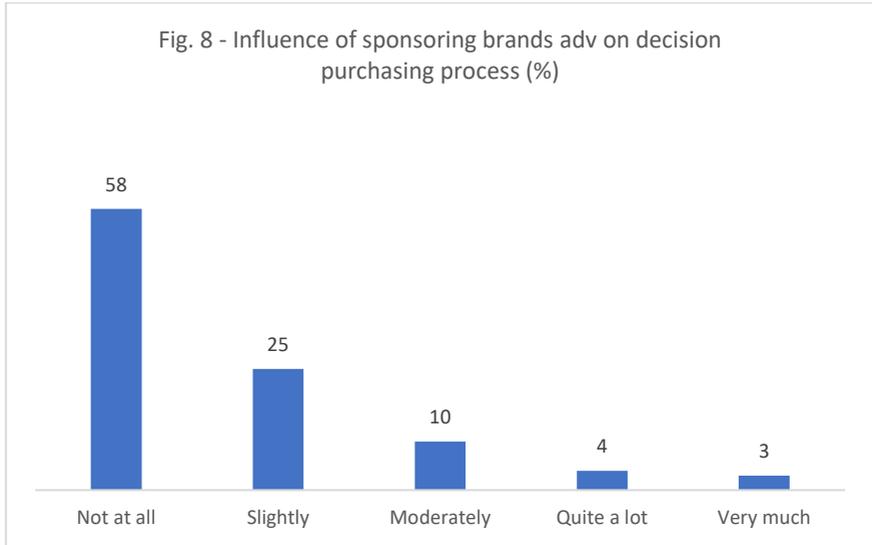
Finally, The analysis of the final questionnaire responses highlights the audience's main expectations for the Festival's future communication.

Table 2 – Expectations from next Sanremo Festival Communication

Frequency (%)	Word
69	Content
36	Influencer
31	Social media
18	Approaches
15	Young People
13	Artists
13	Music
9	Engagement
9	Communication
9	Interaction
5	Fantasanremo

The most frequent terms - *content, influencers, social media, young people, artists, music, engagement, interaction* - point to an interest in a modern, digital Festival that blends performance, authenticity, and active participation.

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study was twofold. First, it sought to explore how participants of a broadcasted music festival interact with social media and perceive its communication. Second, it aimed to understand how sponsoring brands influence respondents' purchase intentions. An exploratory quantitative approach was adopted, using an online survey with a sample of 334 respondents.

Regarding the first objective - how the audience interacts with social media and perceives engagement with the Festival's communication - the findings show that social media plays a central role in shaping the audience's experience of the Festival di Sanremo. Most participants (61%) actively engage online during the five-days Festival, particularly through platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which foster visual and interactive forms of communication. This highlights a shift toward participatory and entertainment-driven consumption, where users not only follow performances but also contribute to the creation of humorous and community-oriented content. Engagement is motivated primarily by interest in the artists and the pleasure of shared online discussions, illustrating how the festival extends beyond the television screen into a broader digital conversation. A smaller portion engages through interactive initiatives such as *Fantasanremo* suggesting that although artistic content remains the core attraction, participatory formats like a fan-driven fantasy game based on the Festival's performances, offer valuable opportunities to engage younger and more digitally active audiences.

Overall, the results confirm the literature, highlighting integration of digital media into traditional cultural events (Masiello et al., 2020), maintaining Sanremo's authenticity while revitalizing its relevance through innovative online participation (Morgan et al., 2021).

Further findings show that most respondents reported moderate to high engagement toward communication festival, while roughly one in four showed low or no involvement. This indicates that digital communication surrounding the Festival di Sanremo effectively reaches a majority of viewers but does not engage all audiences equally. Two distinct segments emerge: a highly participative group attracted by interactive or exclusive content, and a less responsive group with limited social media interaction. Overall, the results highlight varying levels of engagement and suggest that the festival's digital strategies resonate more strongly with audiences seeking active, participatory experiences. Concerning the most appreciated content, while artistic content remains important, audience also look for seek light and entertaining moments during the Festival. The popularity of memes and humorous content highlights the growing role of playful entertainment in Sanremo' s communication. Such content allows viewers to engage actively, not just passively, fostering online

interaction, increasing the event's visibility, and creating a sense of community among the audience.

This underlines the popularity of memes and humorous content underscores the increasing role of playful, community-driven entertainment in enhancing engagement, visibility, and collective enjoyment of the event.

These results contribute to the literature examining the links between social media use, cultural consumers' engagement, and perceived satisfaction which remains scarce (Bacalhau et al., 2025).

Regarding the second research question – how sponsoring brands influence purchasing decision - despite extensive brand promotion through ads, product placements, and TV mentions, most respondents do not actively engage with sponsors' social media profiles. Similarly, only a small fraction (17%) reported purchasing or seeking information about advertised products, highlighting a gap between exposure and actual consumer action. This suggests that while sponsorship increases brand visibility, it does not automatically translate into consumer engagement or purchase behavior, emphasizing the need for more interactive or targeted strategies. This finding is further supported by data on advertising influence: the majority of respondents (72%) report being unaffected by advertisements, 25% are only slightly influenced, and just 2.8% indicate a strong impact on their purchasing decisions.

The study indicates that audience purchases of brands sponsored during the Sanremo Festival are limited, likely because the brands are not perceived as fully authentic or aligned with the cultural values of the event. Despite the festival's high visibility on television and social media, which enhances recognition and shapes a shared brand image, this does not automatically translate into immediate purchase behavior. In today's fragmented social media landscape, traditional effects such as the third-person phenomenon appear less relevant (Davison, 1983), as audiences are diverse and selectively engaged. Cultural authenticity and strong event-brand fit remain critical for sponsorship credibility, and social media can strengthen engagement, reputation, and purchase intentions when effectively integrated. While immediate sales impact is low, sponsorship can build long-term relational and emotional capital, contributing to brand equity over time. Future research could employ additional digital metrics - such as social media analytics, QR codes, and app tracking - to better assess the sustained effects of sponsorship on brand perception and purchase behaviour.

This study sheds light on TV-broadcasted music festivals. Research confirms that congruency between a sponsor and a music festival is a key factor in enhancing sponsorship effectiveness (Hutabarat & Gayatri, 2014) and that such events do not only generate immediate sales but can also foster recommendations (Pitt et al., 2010) and build lasting relational and emotional capital, thereby strengthening the brand's long-term equity. Consequently, the impact of sponsorship should be assessed over time.

The study suggests several managerial implications. The findings suggest that the Sanremo Festival should adopt a differentiated communication strategy to effectively reach its diverse audience. Younger viewers are more responsive to dynamic, humorous, and interactive content on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, while older audiences prefer more informative formats on Facebook and YouTube.

To enhance engagement, the Festival should invest in creative and participatory content, encouraging co-creation through polls and challenges that foster emotional connection and audience loyalty. Collaborations with influencers should be carefully selected, favoring those who embody the Festival's artistic and cultural identity to ensure authenticity.

Brand communication requires greater integration within the Festival's narrative. Increasing the visibility of sponsor initiatives - through storytelling, behind-the-scenes content, and live mentions - can strengthen perceived authenticity and connection with the audience. The Festival should carefully select their brand partners through strategic sponsorship, choosing brands that reflect the event's core values and resonate with its broad target audience.

Moreover, festival management should focus on experience design, as sponsorship alone is not sufficient; it is essential to create memorable moments of interaction (e.g., installations, workshops, experiential activities).

Finally, the Festival's management should balance tradition and innovation, using digital media to extend the experience beyond television and build a lasting relationship with both long-time followers and younger generations, reinforcing its long-term brand equity.

The study presents limitations inherent to exploratory research. The relatively small sample size (334 respondents) is not sufficient to ensure representativeness of the entire population following the Sanremo Festival. Moreover, most respondents belong to the 25–34 age group, which may have biased the results, while the online administration of the questionnaire might have excluded segments of the audience less familiar with social media.

Qualitative research to gain deeper insights into audience behavior and perceptions, along with adopting a longitudinal approach, is also recommended.

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