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Organizing abundance and shuffling at festivals: the Ferrara Buskers Festival case☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how festivals organize the abundance of their offerings. We argue that festivals organize this abundance differently depending on the interplay between organizers, artists, and festivalgoers as they negotiate their respective autonomy. The concept of 'shuffling,' inspired by digital music listening, serves as a framework to empirically explore this dynamic within the context of the Ferrara Buskers Festival (FBF). Drawing on archival material and interviews with the festival's organizers, the paper analyzes the FBF's evolution from a free-access street performance event to a ticketed, curated festival with reduced attendance. Over its 36-year history, the FBF has demonstrated shifting approaches to organizing abundance—from fostering serendipitous engagement to providing prearranged experiences—shaped by the varying roles of organizers, artists, and audience members. This study enhances festival literature by highlighting the importance of different approaches to organizing abundance in understanding the diversity of festivals across time and space. Besides, it enhances understanding of the shuffling dynamic at festivals, offering theoretical and methodological insights.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, festivals of various types, themes, and scales have proliferated worldwide. Alongside those with deep historical roots—such as the Venice Film Festival, established in 1938, and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, which began in 1947—many others have emerged in unexpected domains. Examples include the Mantua Literature Festival, launched in 1997; the St. Moritz Gourmet Festival, which has been celebrating food and haute cuisine since 1994; and the Festival of Economics in Trento, which started in 2006, to name just a few.

Festivals represent a complex organizational phenomenon that is challenging to analyze due to their inherent heterogeneity (John Lucas, 2014; Toraldo & Islam, 2019; Haynes & Mogilnicka, 2024). Despite their diverse forms and purposes, these social gatherings are often grouped under the same term, complicating efforts to understand their nature and defining characteristics. While some scholars argue that the common thread uniting festivals is their impact on social cohesion, local identity, cultural expression, and community participation (Wilson et al., 2017; Crespi-Vallbona and Richards, 2007), this study focuses on a seemingly overlooked and understudied aspect of festivals: the abundance of initiatives they offer.

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From our perspective, festivals are distinct in that they provide a (relative) abundance of specific activities—such as music, film, or cooking—that are not typically available through the ongoing operations of other organizations. In this sense, they resemble modern 'fairs', differentiated by their specialized content. Festival organizers frequently emphasize this characteristic both graphically and verbally. For example, the Glastonbury Festival promotes each edition with posters showcasing the impressive number of world-class performers in its lineup. Similarly, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe highlights its vast scope, noting that "artists and performers take to *hundreds* of stages all over the city, presenting shows for every taste" (italics added) .[1]

Characterizing festivals as events with abundant offerings evokes two distinct imaginaries. On the one hand, a festival can be seen as a space of joy, chaos, and freedom—a context of abundance where people wander around and unexpected encounters with people and artistic stimuli arise from a shared interest (Ingraham, 2019; Swartjes & Berkers, 2022). This interpretation emphasizes spontaneity and serendipity, facilitated by the convergence of diverse individuals and cultural elements. On the other hand, a festival can also trigger the image of orderly rows of attendees waiting to access specific areas and checking schedules to follow a predetermined lineup. These contrasting visions highlight alternatives in the structuring of abundance, which, we claim, is crucial in shaping the festival experience and the audience's perception of its identity. Over time, a festival may evolve, experimenting with different balances of spontaneity and structure, or freedom and constraint in managing the abundance of its offerings. This paper explores these dynamics by addressing the following research question: How does the interplay between freedom and unanticipated becoming, and structure and programming, shape the organization of a festival's abundant offerings? It does so by longitudinally studying the Ferrara Buskers Festival (FBF hereinafter).

The FBF is particularly well-suited for this analysis because, over its 36-year history, it has undergone significant transformations relating to how much it offers to the audience and, more interestingly, how to offer it. Established as a small yet unusual buskers' event, the FBF expanded during its central phase to attract hundreds of artists and hundreds of thousands of festivalgoers. By 2024, however, the festival had shifted to a ticketed event in a city park, with a more curated lineup and reduced attendance. These changes make the FBF a compelling case for shedding light on different approaches relating to structuring abundance in a festival context.

The paper employs the concept of shuffling (Quiñones, 2007; Powers, 2014; Nunes & Birdsall, 2022) as an analytical framework to interpret changes in the offerings and experiencing of abundance. In digital music listening, shuffling refers to engaging with a randomized selection of tracks from a defined set. We analytically and methodologically adapt the shuffling concept to the festival context and examine, via a key indicator labelled "rate of coverage", how much of the experience of the abundant offerings is predetermined by organizers versus how much autonomy is left to attendees, with implications in terms of more (or less) unpredictability and surprise.

The study enhances our understanding of cultural events by revealing the often-overlooked phenomenon of abundance at festivals. While previous literature has explored various aspects of festivals, it has largely neglected how this characteristic influences a festival's nature. Indeed, this paper contributes to the festival literature by proposing a novel taxonomy that considers variations in organizing the abundance of offerings. Besides, the paper shows how abundance can provide a useful framework for interpreting changes occurring at the same festival over time (Wilson et al., 2017). In particular, our research contributes to the scholarship and practice surrounding festivals by demonstrating that the dynamics of abundance accentuate key moments of change and transformation within the atmosphere of these events. In other words, our case study reveals that effective festival management demands a deep understanding of how decisions regarding abundance influence participant interactions, shape their experiences, and define the festival's overall identity.

2. Literature review and analytical framework

2.1. Designing freedom and constraint at festivals

Although not addressed directly in the literature about festivals, abundance can be seen as either a pre-condition for the overall festival experience on the festivalgoers' (or demand) side, or as an issue that has to be managed by the festival organization's (or supply) side.

Authors who have studied the audience experience at festivals have defined these events as characterized by "time out of time" (Falassi, 1987, p.4), imposing space and time-related features that are profoundly different from daily routine. Organization studies have highlighted festivals' community-laden and ritualistic aspects, the fact that festivals are gatherings characterized by a social fabric hinging upon the need of people to celebrate, sometimes in a ritualized fashion (Frost, 2016), a given culture. As emphasized by Li and Yu, "[a]s a product of the human spirit, festivals are characterized by rituals, special atmosphere and services, short duration, high level of personal contact and interaction, crowds, and repeated celebrations over time" (2023 p. 2).

Differently from simple events that can be detached from a social fabric, festivals are enmeshed into the atmosphere produced (Wilson et al., 2017). The so-called "festivalscape" (Lee et al., 2008) constitutes an integral part of the "unrestrained sensory experience" produced (Giorgi et al., 2011, p.16). In studying British music festivals, Brown (2021) found that the most valued aspect was the atmosphere, which participants described through features like spending time with loved ones, meeting new people, sharing interests, camaraderie, and a sense of community. Similarly, Massey (2019) has underlined how, during festivals, social links are loosened, allowing people to interact in public, 'common' spaces in a less constrained way. For each actor, a festival brings a meaning that can represent an opportunity for interaction and co-production of liveness (Swartjes & Haynes, 2023) while enjoying a joyful sense

[1] URL: https://www.edfringe.com/experience/what-is-the-edinburgh-festival-fringe/, last access on December 5th, 2024

of freedom. These meanings are not necessarily consistent but somehow converge into a specific festival "social rhythm" (Győri, 2019, p. 195), that "organizers can only shape by attempting to influence the actions and patterns of action of its participants" (Tjora, 2016, p.69).

The efforts by organizers have recently been addressed by a different stream of research, which focuses on how organizers channel the audience's freedom and curate the festival experience. Interestingly, these authors suggest that the work of organizers goes beyond merely creating an abundant line-up, extending to practices that aim at disciplining the behaviors of the audience and deifying the 'logistic' through which the abundant offer will be experienced. In other words, organizers must often balance the 'carnivalesque experience' with local impacts such as noise, alcohol and drug use, and safety while addressing broader social considerations, such as achieving gender balance in lineups (Haynes & Woodward, 2024).

Swartjes and Berkers (2022) emphasize strategies used by organizers to foster conviviality and trigger unexpected encounters among attendees. Drawing on the experiences of Rotterdam-based festivals, they reveal how the free movement of the audience is intentionally channeled to encourage diverse interactions. Staggered programming across stages encourages attendees to explore different areas, creating opportunities for connection. Scheduled breaks allow people to move around while blending genres at single stages fosters inclusivity by bridging symbolic boundaries. Additionally, spatial design—including thoughtful signage and layouts—promotes exploration by guiding attendees toward food areas and event spaces, encouraging discovery and mingling.

Similarly, De Molli et al. (2020) underscore the material aspects of festival curation and their role in shaping the festival atmosphere. Focusing on the Locarno Film Festival, their study illustrates how the atmosphere is crafted using "thresholds"—not just for ticket control, but to mark the transition between external and internal festival spaces— "interiors," which are intentionally designed for intimate engagement with the festival's ambiance, and "corridors," which provide continuity and guide attendees between spaces.

Despite their distinct focus areas, these studies collectively highlight an intrinsic ambivalence in articulating events characterized by abundant offerings. While the latter may provide freedom and choice, organizers also carefully frame it to shape festivalgoers' behavior, "concealing intent behind the guise of spontaneity" (Dovey, 1999, p. 11). Moreover, these works invite more profound reflections on the interplay between the planned and unplanned elements in the structuring of abundance, as the outcome of festival curation depends on how the audience enacts the setting crafted by the organizers.

2.2. Shuffling as an analytical lens to address the abundance of offerings

To better explore the interaction between the planned and the unplanned, imposition and freedom, and the intended versus emergent dimensions of managing abundance at festivals, the concept of shuffling proves particularly valuable. In the history of recorded music, shuffling represents a music reproduction technology that challenges the recent prevalence of "ordered" music (Powers, 2014). Reflecting on the Apple campaign urging consumers to 'enjoy uncertainty,' Powers (2014, p.258) argues that "shuffle completely reconfigured listening habits" by introducing a nonlinear way of experiencing music. Focusing on the psychological implications of listening in shuffle mode, Quiñones (2007) underlines the passive role of listeners in the context of modern digital devices.

Previous literature has already applied the notion of shuffling to the festival experience, although mostly in a metaphorical fashion. For example, some authors described the consumer experience at festivals in the late 1990s as a "sort of anticipation of the 'shuffle function' that is now common on MP3 players (self-quotation)". Similarly, Nunes and Birdsall (2022, p.687) discuss the analogy between shuffling in music listening and the festival experience, highlighting elements such as "reduced concert length, continual stage changes, and overlapping programming," which lead to a "random combination and simultaneity."

To apply the concept of shuffling to the context of festivals in a more thorough way, we believe it is important to first understand how shuffling operates in the realm of digital music listening. From the listener's perspective, the shuffling experience is shaped by their familiarity with the database (what they know versus what is unknown), the time available for listening compared to the length of the music in the database, and what the 'algorithm' is designed to do based on these inputs. Considering these factors together, we can identify the three distinct operations performed by the shuffle mode:

1. Ordering: When the database is small and familiar—such as with an album—the shuffle mode simply rearranges songs in an unpredictable order.[2]
2. Selecting: When the database is larger but still known, and the listener has limited time, the shuffle mode not only randomizes the order of songs but also selects them randomly from the available options.
3. Allowing discovery: When the database is large and mostly unfamiliar, such as on a music platform, the shuffling mode exposes the listener to new content. This might happen within a specific genre, depending on the playlist settings. When shuffling allows the discovery of new content, the question of 'who' designed the algorithm and 'why' emerges. It could be tailored to reflect user preferences or promote certain music or artists.

[2] Sometimes, the outcome is bizarre. Take classical music for instance. There is an explicit order to the 'movements' that are meant to be listened in that specific sequence. Concept albums and progressive rock were also strongly structured works. For example, could you listen to Pink Floyd's "The Wall" with a shuffle function on? Technically, you can but doing so would overlook much of the meaning of the album as a whole. Interestingly, Jethro Tull with "Thick as a Brick" present a different approach. The songs are structured in just two tracks—originally side A and side B—making it impossible to listen to a single song separately. Even in today's era of easily accessible music, you cannot break it down into individual tracks.

Although the shuffle mode has emerged in the field of digital music with the diffusion of MP3 players (Quiñones, 2007; Powers, 2014), in line with Nunes and Birdsall (2022) this paper argues that the way it operates is equally relevant for understanding how the abundance of offerings is organized at festivals. Shuffling compels us to consider the question of 'who' decides—examining the degree of autonomy or constraint that defines the shuffling experience at different festivals. This, in turn, has implications for the way uncertainty is experienced and to what extent it is embraced.

Quickly comparing a few festivals through this lens can help clarify our argument. Take, for instance, Woodstock—'The' festival of an entire generation. Imagine you were deeply passionate about and highly knowledgeable in that era's rock and pop music. In this scenario, the element of 'surprise' after learning the lineup of performers (determined by the organizers, the artists, and their record labels) would largely depend on the setlists each band decided to present. While not much of the music was entirely new (no one was showcasing songs that had never been performed before), some bands were relatively lesser-known. Consider, for example, the extraordinary performance by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, who, as a group, were unfamiliar to the broader public at the time. Ultimately, the artists made the choices, and the audience—many of whom were already familiar with the songs—sat through three days of curated performances. However, for someone less well-informed, the same event might have felt like a revelation, allowing the discovery of new content. It's worth highlighting that discovery is inherently subjective; the experience of novelty varies depending on each listener's prior knowledge and familiarity with the music. Shuffling operates differently at the Sanremo Festival, a popular Italian music competition that is part of the Eurovision network. The festival features a series of new songs by prominent Italian artists, carefully selected by the organizers, and broadcast over several days on national television. It primarily emphasizes the discovery of new content, which serves as the main source of surprise for the audience ('Nel blu, dipinto di blu', the winner of the 1958 edition, became an international hit). Unlike other festivals, the audience plays no role in the selection process; the order of performances is entirely determined by the organizers. In contrast, festivals like SXSW in Austin offer a vastly different experience, with a multitude of events occurring simultaneously. For the audience, this introduces the challenge of selecting which new content to explore amidst the abundance of options.

While, on the one hand, shuffling is a powerful analogy for understanding how a festival's abundant offer is experienced, on the other, operationalizing this concept requires further formalization, especially if we want to use it to systematically compare different festivals or the same festival across time. We propose analyzing the concept of shuffling at festivals using two main indicators: abundance of offerings and rate of coverage. While the first indicator parallels the size of a digital music database, calculating it in the context of festivals is not always straightforward. Broadly, three key aspects are involved:

- Casting: The number and selection of artists featured in the festival.
- Timing: The structuring of time, including the number of performances, total hours of shows, the duration of the festival (in days), and any possible repetitions of performances during the festival period.
- Placing: The arrangement of venues, including the number of stages (and whether performances occur simultaneously across multiple stages), their locations, and the rules governing how artists are allocated to stages over time.

The configuration of these elements, along with the time available to the audience and the rules governing access to performances, determines the rate of coverage—that is, how much of the offered content an individual attendee can experience during the event. From this perspective, an important distinction emerges between festivals. 'Sequential' or 'linear' festivals present events one after another in a linear sequence, requiring no decision-making from the audience. Attendees can simply sit back and enjoy the entire program, as in the case of Sanremo. 'In parallel' festivals, on the other hand, feature events occurring simultaneously across multiple venues or stages, requiring attendees to make choices about which performances to attend. This introduces a significant element of decision-making, as the audience can only experience a portion of the overall offerings. Examples include the SXSW Festival in Austin and the Literature Festival in Mantua.

From this perspective, interpreting the coverage rate can be informative regarding the relative importance of each shuffling operation (ordering, selecting, allowing discovery) and the actors involved in shaping the experience. A high rate of coverage suggests that the shuffling experience is largely predetermined by the organizers. If the festival is structured to allow the audience to experience everything, unpredictability is limited primarily to the order of songs in the setlists—for example, as seen at Woodstock. While the audience is always free to leave, this remains their only available choice. Conversely, a low coverage rate implies greater freedom for the audience, allowing them a higher degree of autonomy in shaping their shuffling experience. These elements can be explored through a comparative approach, either by examining a variety of festivals in different locations or by analyzing changes over time within a specific context, as we do with the Ferrara Buskers Festival.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research method and data collection

Our study employs a longitudinal research design to examine how abundance was organized at the FBF over 36 years. The data collection builds on earlier research conducted by one of the authors through interviews, document analysis, and participant observation (the author performed as a busker during the 1999 edition). The original work traced the origins and consolidation of the FBF up to the year 2000. This study revisits the FBF two decades after the initial research (blinded self-quotation), providing an opportunity to revisit and update earlier findings (see Ferri & Zan, 2014; Ferri et al., 2023, for similar approaches).

The present research integrates data from the original study with three additional sources (see Table 1): nonparticipant

observation, documents, and interviews. Regarding nonparticipant observation, the authors individually attended the festival several times after the original study and before initiating systematic data collection. While these visits did not result in detailed field notes, they contributed to a richer contextual understanding of the data and facilitated rapport during interviews.

In terms of documentary sources, we collected a wide array of materials, including festival guides, brochures, statutes, reports, financial statements from the organizing association, meeting minutes, agreements with the municipality, newspaper articles, and book chapters about the FBF covering the period from 2001 to 2024. However, it is important to note that some data was unavailable for the entire study period. For example, due to the FBF's free admission policy, no official records of attendee numbers or demographics exist. This implies that even the organizers have never had access to information on the festival's audience size or composition.

Interviews with festival organizers were conducted in 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2024 to complement documentary sources. The organization responsible for the festival is a small association initially founded by a group of relatives and close friends. The core team of organizers remained largely stable until 2019 when there was a significant change, and two out of five co-founders departed. We are not allowed to disclose the reasons behind that change to protect respondent confidentiality. However, our interview sampling strategy reflected this shift, including individuals who held leadership roles at the FBF during different periods (see Table 1 for details). We interviewed some organizers twice and in distinct periods to capture ongoing changes.

Interview data were frequently triangulated with documentary sources to minimize retrospective bias (Denzin, 2007). Overall, our data collection is sufficiently comprehensive to cover the festival editions spanning the 1988–2024 period, providing over-arching evidence of a festival's evolution over time.

3.2. Analysis

Longitudinal analysis seeks to identify patterns of stability interspersed with moments of significant change (Pettigrew, 1990; Van de Ven & Huber, 1990; Saldaña, 2003). Applying this approach to the FBF, we observed early in our analysis that while the festival's thematic focus and broad spatiotemporal structure—a week-long festival dedicated to busking in Ferrara— stabilized over time, there were important shifts in how the festival's content was shaped, presented, and experienced.

Using an iterative process that involved moving between data and theory, we concentrated on the concept of shuffling and began systematically analyzing our data. Building on the notion that the shuffling experience depends on the abundance of offerings and the associated coverage rate, we sought data to help quantify these aspects. Consistent with the idea that the abundance of offerings is shaped by casting, timing, and placing, we turned to archival materials, especially the festival's guides, for information. Specifically, we used the number of artists–individuals or groups–as an indicator of casting, the number of festival days and shows per day to capture timing, and the linear meters of streets dedicated to performances to approximate placing as the precise number of pitches was unavailable. Besides, we created a database of all additional activities offered during the festival, such as exhibitions, laboratories, and social gatherings. In this phase, interview data helped to better understand the overall logistics of the festival.

While conducting a detailed analysis of each edition, we encountered significant data gaps, making a complete year-by-year examination impractical. However, our preliminary findings indicated distinct turning points. To balance data availability with empirical relevance, we selected four editions as representative snapshots of different stages in the evolution of the FBF's shuffling experience:

- 1988: The first edition, originally planned as a one-shot event.
- 1999: Representative of a prolonged phase characterized by incremental rather than transformative changes.
- 2019: Marked by a significant modification in the shuffling perspective.
- 2024: The most recent edition, which is radically different from the previous ones.

Table 1
Data collected.

Interviews	Interviews	In charge	Length (minutes)
Organizer	3	2005–2024	230
Artistic director, co-founder	3	1988–2024	211
Organizer, co-founder	2	1988–2019	122
Organizer, co-founder	1	1988–2024	70
Organizer, co-founder	1	1988–2019	80
Organizer	1	2012–2024	70
Organizer	1	2008–2024	55
Total	12		838
Archival sources	**Documents**	**Years**	**Length (pages)**
FBF Guides	19	2000–2004; 2007–2020	750
FBF Brochures	4	2012; 2013; 2016; 2018	244
FBF Association Statutes	2	1988; 2019	26
Reports and other sources	20	Various	74
Total	45		1094

After identifying these four snapshots, we deepened the analysis of offering abundance and a coverage rate.

Table 2 presents the main data used for analyzing snapshots. The upper section contains descriptive information collected through guides and interviews. The subsequent two sections pertain to our modeling of the abundance of offerings and the coverage rate. We decided to quantify the abundance of offerings in terms of shows per day and for the whole festival. As detailed in Section 4, the festival has different rules regarding the number of shows and the number of days designated for invited and credited artists. Due to the changing nature of these rules and the absence of consistent data relating to who performed and when for each snapshot, we calculated the abundance of offerings for the first three snapshots based on potential capacity rather than actual capacity – i.e., the maximum number of shows that could be offered under the assumption that all artists were performing in all available time slots (note that the rules changed significantly for the 2024 edition). Thus, the daily potential abundance of offerings is calculated by multiplying the number of artists by the number of shows, considering the artists' status - invited or credited.

The rate of consumption relates to how much offerings is experienced by the festivalgoer. Calculating it requires considering together choices on the organizations, artists, and audience's sides. While the FBF is organized into shows, which were two for most of the years, one in the afternoon (roughly 6–7.30 PM) and one in the evening (roughly 9–12 PM), we assume that artists repeat the same session within each show. In 2024, the organizers set the session length at 45 mins.

We used the 45-minute session as a standard to compare different festival editions, assuming that a festivalgoer listens to each artist for an average of 45 mins. On the demand side, to calculate the daily rate of consumption, we divided the total number of artists participating in the festival by the number of 45-minute sessions available each day for the selected year. The overall rate of consumption for the entire festival is instead calculated by multiplying the daily rate by the number of days the festival runs. Attending one complete 45-minute session differs from the typical FBF experience, where visitors can freely wander and sample parts of multiple sessions in a single show. However, our focus is not on precise year-by-year coverage rates but on comparing the patterns across editions. Even assuming higher rates of consumption—such as attending six, seven, or eight artists per day—the relative differences between the selected editions would remain unchanged.

Once we achieved a clearer understanding of the abundance of offerings and the coverage rate for each snapshot, we turned again to interview material and searched systematically for comments that would allow us to make additional sense of the differences between snapshots. We complemented each snapshot also with information regarding the additional activities introduced (or canceled) in that period.

4. Shuffling at the ferrara busker's festival: evidence from selected snapshots

4.1. Snapshot #1: 1988 – almost an oxymoron: a festival of street performing

The FBF was run in 1988 for the first time; curiously enough, it was conceived as a one-shot event. The concept was quite unusual: a 'festival' of street artists, which can be seen as a contradiction in terms, almost an oxymoron. Busking has been defined as one of the most 'anarchist' forms of art (Kaul, 2014; Macchiarella, 2015; Williams, 2016), as artists choose their pitch in the street and attempt to engage an audience that is typically preoccupied with other activities. Busking operates outside institutionalized frameworks of interaction, such as organized events or festivals, and artists, especially at that time, often faced the risk of penalties from the police. FBF provided artists with a protected area where they could collect money 'on the hat.'

The 1988 edition of FBF comprised 20 street artists. Artists were performing in parallel twice daily – one hour and a half in the afternoon and two hours and a half in the night – over seven days, thus offering a (relative) abundance of an unusual form of art: 40 shows per day, equal to over 280 for the whole festival (see Table 2). At that time, particularly in Italy, it was implausible to encounter street artists, especially in such a significant number gathered in one location over an extended period, as giving was not legal.

The historical center of Ferrara, particularly the castle and cathedral area, provided a unique set for performances, with each artist having its own pitch (see Fig. 1). The festival was free access, but the public was expected to show their appreciation by dropping money in the hat. It was a non-competitive event: no winners, no awards, simply performing, interacting with the audience, and, in case, collecting money.

When considering the distribution of shows in time and their spatial arrangements, we assume as a working hypothesis that each session lasts 45 mins and that a visitor would experience it at its full length. In theory, a visitor could enjoy a maximum of five unique sessions by different artists per day. This means the daily coverage rate would be 25 % (five out of 20 artists). If a visitor attended the festival for seven days, she could easily enjoy all the artists (five sessions per day for seven days equals 35 sessions). This would result in a coverage rate exceeding 100 % of the available artists. The percentage is informative regarding the shuffling experience offered to the audience. In this case, the festival organizers pre-determined a large part of the selection as they decided who could perform at the festival. Artists also had a role in defining their setlist. Yet, given the characteristic of multistage events with repeated shows, there was limited freedom in self-designing the shuffling experience. Still, only in terms of ordering and discovery of new content discovery: the audience could attend all shows in the order they prefer and be surprised by the new content.

4.2. Snapshot #2: 1999 - a permanent festival characterized by abundant and unpredictable offerings

The 1999 edition retains several elements of continuity with the first edition, primarily the title (the alleged thematic focus on buskers), the location —Ferrara's central area— and the timing and duration, the last week of August. However, some significant changes are also evident.

One of the most intriguing elements in the FBF history relates to something never anticipated. Soon after the early editions, people

Table 2
Modeling shuffling at the FBF.

	1988	1999	2019	2024
Descriptive data				
Artists - invited	20	20	20	57
Artists - credited	0	175	256	0
Artists - total	20	195	276	57
Days	7	7	8	5
Shows per day – invited	2	2	2	1
Shows per day – credited[1]	0	2	1	0
Hours of shows per day	5	5	4	3
Linear meters	NA	5.883	4.297	1.907
Abundance of offerings				
Shows per day	40	390	227	57
Shows for the whole festival	280	2.730	1.815	285
Coverage rate				
45′ session equivalent per day	5	5	4	3
Coverage rate - day	25,0 %	2,6 %	1,4 %	5,3 %
Coverage rate - whole festival	175,0 %	17,9 %	11,6 %	26,3 %

[1] For the sake of simplification we omit that on the last day of the festival, there was only one show for invited and credited artists.

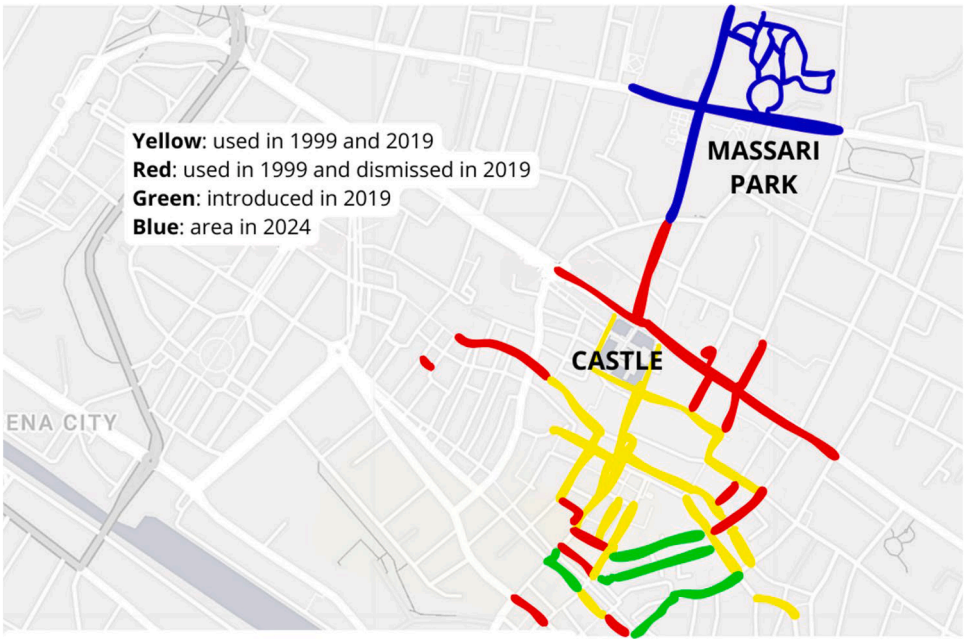

Fig. 1. Pitches at the Ferrara Buskers Festival over time.

started appearing at the festival, wishing to perform despite not being included in the organizers' selection. The influx of performers of various types in a completely disorganized manner became a serious problem. To avoid sanctioning uninvited performers, the organizers decided to regulate their presence. In 1995, they introduced a new category of artists alongside the invited ones: the credited artist. To be accepted as credited, artists had to apply by sending in a demo. After a selection process, they were assigned this status and could perform at the FBF following specific rules.

In the 1999 edition, as many as 175 credited artists were present in addition to the 'traditional' 20 invited ones. To host this impressive number of performances, the festival took over many streets in the central area of Ferrara, including those with the heaviest traffic and the most commercial activity (see Fig. 1).

A complex set of rules, with possible variations every year, disciplined the presence of invited and credited artists. For instance, in 1999, invited artists were supposed to perform every day (ten of them had to perform every afternoon in the week, and all of them at night), while credited artists could decide how many days they were going to perform. Organizers would allocate them in different pitches on different days. The different degrees of commitment between invited and credited had implications for reimbursements and incentives. While the festival would reimburse travel costs and accommodation only for invited artists, both invited and credited artists were allowed to collect money 'hat in hand'.

Given these rules, the precise quantification of shows would require analytical data that was not preserved over time, especially

relating to the number of shows by credited artists. Only a maximum number, a potential offering, can be calculated: for the 1999 edition, that meant 390 shows per day, or 2.730 shows for the whole festival (195 artists performing twice per day for seven days – see Table 2). This represents a change of magnitude compared to the first edition, with ten times the number of shows. The organizers' official communications also reflect the incredible abundance of performances. The 2003 promotional materials describe the festival as "1221 shows, lasting 2.312 h, the equivalent of 96 days non-stop" (FBF, 2003). Although employing a different counting system than ours,[3] the organizers' data confirms the astonishing number of shows compared to the first edition.

This has implications in terms of the coverage rate indicator, both daily and for the whole event: the daily coverage rate drops from 25 % in 1988 to 2,6 % in 1999; the overall coverage rate from 175 % to 18 %. Such change is caused primarily by the increase in the number of artists performing simultaneously (195), as the number of sessions by different artists that a festivalgoer can experience in full remains the same compared to 1988 (five sessions of 45 mins per seven days). The visitor could only fully enjoy 18 % of what is offered: the percentage signals a large degree of freedom on the audience side in building up the listening experience. For the audience, that implies the possibility of choosing between a huge set of distinct performances in a highly unanticipated way: if the scheduling of invited artists was always provided in the guide, very little could be found about credited artists in terms of who, where, and when. That meant a collective and intense shuffling attitude, walking around and being surprised by unknown genres and repertoires five hours every day: in this case, a complex shuffling involving ordering, selection, and the discovery of new contents, largely determined by festivalgoers.

The 1999 arrangements in terms of quantity, time, and space also had implications for the artists: a vast potential audience, an unusual opportunity to perform during the week (up to five hours a day for seven days!), and substantial earning potential for those interested in making money—provided they could succeed in the highly competitive environment among performers. Our original study highlighted the heterogeneous nature of artists' profiles: not only 'full-time' or 'real' buskers but also professional musicians and amateurs who were enjoying the experience of busking (blinded quotation). In parallel, the variety of artists involved suggests that there are multiple motivations beyond (or on top of) just 'making the hat': these include the joy of playing 'for free', reminiscent of the lyrics in Joni Mitchell's wonderful song, as well as the interactions with other artists off stage, such as listening to others or joining jam sessions.

Certainly, the magnitude of abundance also generates tensions, as previously discussed in (blinded self-quotation). For the audience, this can lead to a sense of overwhelm and a compulsive tendency to quickly shift from one artist to another, akin to a 'hopping' syndrome. Some artists have already identified this as a negative factor, one that threatens deep and authentic interactions in busking by fostering an overly transient audience engagement.

Other non-core elements contributed to augmenting the distinctive shuffling experience observed in this period, of which the 1999 edition represented an exemplary case. The most distinctive were the Buskers' House, the Busker Garden, and the free camping. The Buskers' House was a large courtyard where artists could meet after the shows and go on with music and jams for hours. The location played a twofold role. On the one hand, it provided a solution to minimize noise during night hours. On the other, it introduced an additional space for socialization between artists (often leading to late-night jam sessions), adding value to the overall festival experience. Located in a side position within the city center, the Busker Garden played a similar function for the audience. At the end of the night performances, the audience could get there having fun, drinking, and listening to recorded music until late: this, again, enriched the experience of the audience while solving the problem of night noise. In addition, free camping by the city walls provided a cheap accommodation option for visitors. Other initiatives were less strictly linked to the performing part, such as various exhibitions and some charity and fundraising initiatives.

Interviews shed light on additional elements that can help qualify the FBF during this period. The interviews performed in the original study and the most recent ones provide vivid descriptions of the *carnivalesque* atmosphere characterizing the festival—an extraordinary phenomenon for a city like Ferrara. One of the founders describes it as follows:

> Our job was to find a balance between a somewhat 'posh' city and the overwhelming presence of so many people over such a long period. I mean, in Ferrara, you rarely see people without shirts, yet for a week, there was a strong influx of alternative and colorful figures.

At this stage (and somehow but also at later), the audience's motivations, as seen by the organizers, were primarily about being together and celebrating rather than attending specific programmed events:

> It's a mixed audience—unlike the one going to see Vasco Rossi at Modena Park with tickets and reservations. It's spontaneous. This has always been the case—even last year, and I hope this year too. People come because they want to celebrate, to feel part of a festivity, as many told me.

In addition to its social character, evidence from interviews confirms how unpredictability defined these festival editions. One of the founders reflects on this aspect, describing as follows:

> Unlike other festivals with a set program, you're there for the element of surprise and the ability to engage the audience in unexpected performances. For instance, with roaming street bands or performers descending from walls, there's always something unplanned.

[3] The 2003 figure likely refers to the actual shows, which we are unable to calculate for all years. In any case, although estimated differently, the number of shows in 1999 and 2003 reflects the festival's extremely abundant lineup of performances.

4.3. Snapshot #3: 2019– streamlining the festival

If we look at the festival twenty years later (2019), important elements of continuity can be found. The event is still accessible for free and based on performers getting money 'with the hat.' It lasts now eight days and it is hosted in the central area of Ferrara. However, crucial changes were introduced in organizing the abundance of offerings in time and space. First, for the first time in the history of the festival, in 2019, credited artists could perform exclusively during the night. Due to the cancellation of the afternoon shows, the abundance of offerings was reduced in absolute terms (227), and festivalgoers could potentially attend fewer sessions than they could enjoy in 1999 (four rather than five).

Second, the 2019 edition was characterized by a significant reduction in space, both quantitatively – minus 27 % of linear meters compared to the 1999 edition – and qualitatively, as the festival moved away from the busiest streets (see Fig. 1). Assuming that pitches cannot be compressed because of interference between artists, the number of shows that could take place is simultaneously reduced. While in prior editions, each artist was assigned a pitch and, therefore, the number of shows taking place in any shift was potentially equal to the number of artists, in 2019, we had to introduce a discount rate to account for the reduction in space. This implies that, unlike in former editions, the number of artists potentially performing in parallel is lower than the number of artists joining the festival (201 vs 276).

Combining all these aspects can reveal major differences with the previous snapshot. On the supply side, despite the increase in the number of artists and days compared to 1999, shows actually decreased from 2.730 in 1999 to 1.815 in 2019. On the demand side, and quite paradoxically, the reduction in absolute terms of the offer does not lead to an increase in the coverage rate: new limitations of time and space also affect the audience, which could now experience only 1.4 % of the shows of different artists.

In other words, the cancellation of the afternoon shows, the reduction of space (streets used), and the turning of more artists in a smaller space substantially changed the historical features connected to FBF specificity, the potential level of interactions between artists and audience. The audience had to select more but out of a smaller offer, which is likely to have increased the 'hopping syndrome' compared to 1999.

Significant changes are also evident in the additional activities. In 2019, the Buskers' House, Busker Garden, and the camping areas are no longer part of the offerings. Instead, all the nighttime events are grouped under Nights at the Castle. Every night during the festival, some rooms of the castle host DJ sets, a bar, and dance halls. The format of Nights at the Castle follows the structure typical of regular shows: entry is restricted, security personnel frisk participants to ensure safety, and performances take place on stage. Additional activities also include Stories of Buskers, which are presentations introducing invited buskers to the audience; the Buskers Experience, a tourist package designed to make the FBF experience truly inclusive and immersive (FBF, 2019, p.38); the Buskers Lab and Buskerini Lab, music workshops led by artists for adults and children, respectively; and Buskers in the City, a space for the citizens of Ferrara who wish to perform as buskers during the festival. These initiatives are priced around 10 euros and are seemingly marketed to young adults and families.

What has happened to the festival? If we turn to interview data, we observe different arguments and perspectives regarding the changes. The first consideration concerns the change in the audience, which, for various reasons, is said to have become less transgressive, curbing the carnivalesque experience. On one hand, one of the founders links this change to an external contingency. According to him, the cancellation of free camping under the city walls, due to earthquake-related safety measures introduced in 2012, made the festival less 'backpack-wearing,' instead leaning more toward families.

On the other hand, busking itself is said to have become less transgressive. Citing a survey estimating how many people in Italy had attended a street performance, the founder states:

> Busking has become habitual, a constant presence, and ultimately, the fact that 26 million potential spectators have attended a street performance in the past year means that we are not dealing with a niche phenomenon or an insignificant number. Therefore, when 26 million people engage in something, we can no longer claim that transgression is its defining element.

The loss of transgressiveness and the opening up to a more family-based audience are not generally perceived as negative aspects, as the festival remains an important moment for gathering and sharing public space.

Although the transgressive nature of this type of event has slightly diminished, I believe it has not reduced its social and civic role. On the contrary, it continues to affirm the power of music and art, but above all, the necessity of reclaiming and making public spaces—shared spaces, the spaces of the city—feel familiar and accessible.

Regarding changes to the core components of the festival, the revision of spaces was influenced over time by anti-terrorism safety concerns, which led organizers to increasingly avoid streets without escape routes or those difficult to manage in case of an emergency. Concerning the abolition of the afternoon shows for credited performers, the current organizers justify this decision by citing excessive management complexity in dealing with the credited artists and coordinating with the public administration and shop owners. In the words of an organizer:

> Each year, I had to double-check everything twice. Artists arrived too early, tried to cheat, or there were last-minute changes—like moving equipment or even bike racks. So, I decided: let's start at 8:30 p.m. with one show, when the streets are free from traffic and shops are closed.

Interestingly, while original funders view this streamlining as diminishing the festival's spirit, others—especially current organizers—see it as a practical solution, reducing complexity and the organization's workload.

Changes in other activities elicit different comments, which are also interesting for understanding how the organizers' approach has evolved. For current organizers, adding more structured, often paid, non-core activities reflect the festival's positioning within

Ferrara's broader tourist offerings:

> We must consider tourists who come to Ferrara not just for the festival but to explore the city. Ferrara can be seen in a day, so we offer supplementary events, like the Leonardo exhibit, featuring musical instruments inspired by his designs.

On the other hand, former organizers lament the loss of Buskers' House and Busker Garden and criticize the current nighttime activities.

Instead of expanding, the festival has taken the opposite direction—with greater control and lower setup costs. It's moved away from the Woodstock-like idea toward a nightclub model: regulated attendance, smaller but more controlled. Easier to manage.

Overall, 2019 represents a turning point: while many features of the original versions are still retained, key decisions are progressively transforming it. That this is a moment of transition is clearly reflected in the presence of different sense-making perspectives: on the one hand, some criticize the changes, while on the other, there are those who emphasize their necessity or inevitability. It is no coincidence that 2019 marks a substantial shift in governance, which will lead to a clearer definition of the festival.

4.4. Snapshot #4: 2024 – focusing in or fading out?

In 2024, the festival has undergone significant changes. For the first time, an €11 entrance fee is being charged. The event is held in a public park, with the area enclosed by fences to facilitate ticket control, creating a sense of separation from the city. The festival now lasts five days and features only 57 invited artists. Credited artists—once a defining bottom-up feature of the festival's history—can no longer participate. Within the park, there are twenty designated pitches. Each artist is assigned a pitch where they perform a 45-minute session each night. With three 45-minute sessions per night, twenty artists perform simultaneously during the first session, followed by the next group of 20, and so on.

If we analyze the 2024 edition event under the light of abundance and shuffling, a drastic reduction of the offerings can be observed compared to the prior editions. Curiously, while the first and last editions provided less abundant offerings, they are diverse regarding coverage rate. In fact, time and space solutions for the last edition make its offer less accessible. The audience can now experience only 5.3 % of the shows of different artists per day, or 26.3 % if attending for five nights. However, attending the festival in 2024 would be more expensive than any other edition because of the daily ticket.

The 2024 edition is distinctive in terms of the shuffling experience. The audience still has autonomy in ordering the festival's offerings, which is now poorer than before, both in terms of artists and shows. The organizers regain control over the selection, as they are responsible for establishing the whole festival's lineup, given the suppression of credited artists.

In 2024, several activities are included with the ticket, such as exhibitions, workshops for adults and children, and talks on a variety of topics, including music, social, and environmental issues. These activities take place within the confines of the garden, which is a notable shift from previous editions, where events were spread across the streets of the city

The interviews reveal that this dramatic change is rooted in dissatisfaction with the festival until 2019 and a new vision regarding the audience's expectations. These aspects were previously discussed in the interviews of 2020 and 2021 and, in hindsight, take on a predictive connotation. For the organizers, the new format addresses the limitations of previous editions. In the words of one of the current organizers:

> Before [2019], nobody was even aware of what time of the day the festival was supposed to start. There was no possibility of doing business in such a way.

Yet, it is argued that the recent edition does not just reflect an increasingly streamlined version of the prior ones; it underpins a new idea of 'what the audience wants'. While early editions thrived on spontaneity, today's festival emphasizes predictability:

> Audiences no longer wish to wander and see what happens; they want clear schedules and precise locations. Knowing what's on and making choices is now central.

This approach, reflected in the 2024 edition, aims to enhance satisfaction by offering clearer and more focused experiences:

> In the past, you could see 3–4 groups out of 100 at night, and it could be hit or miss depending on your musical preferences. Now, you know you'll see something unique—like a Mongolian band with traditional costumes and instruments. That certainty draws people in.

Where unpredictability once defined the festival's charm, predictability now drives the expectation of success. Organizers argue this change fosters deeper audience engagement:

> Now, you know exactly which groups are playing, where they are, and their genre. This strengthens your connection to the festival, not just as an event but for the music itself. You come because of the quality of the artists.

The new setup also introduces different measures of success:

> Busking isn't piano bar. I want audiences to focus on performances—not sit around with beers. Instead of 800,000 distracted visitors like before, I prefer 6000 highly engaged attendees. As an organizer, it's not about numbers but about creating a focused experience.

5. Discussion

The 36-year history of the FBF shows how the abundance of offerings represents a fundamental characteristic of the festival. While it fluctuates over the years, the essence of the festival is centered around this feature. This principle applies even to 1988, when featuring 20 busking artists was an extraordinary display of abundance for the time. It is important to note that abundance is a relative concept, varying across different times and spaces.

Besides, this study's findings highlight the diverse ways in which the abundance of the offerings is organized, revealing significant implications for the dynamics of freedom and constraint, as well as predictability and unpredictability. The concept of 'shuffling' has proven particularly valuable, especially when its operations—ordering, selecting, and allowing discovery—are unpacked, and the distinct responsibilities of the organizers, artists, and audience are outlined. This dual focus on abundance and the organizational processes of shuffling contributes to a nuanced understanding of the interplay between structure and spontaneity within the festival's evolution and the connected power game between various actors. In more analytical terms, continuity and discontinuity at FBF can be understood with reference to the interplay between the organizers, the artists, and the audience in defining the experience of performing and listening, with reference to ordering, selecting, and discovering.

Starting with the ordering function, it is evident that throughout the period under consideration, the audience has been free to follow performances in the order of their choice. The decision by the organizers to adopt a multi-stage festival format, albeit with varying intensity over the years, consistently introduces an element of unpredictability in deciding *'what to listen next.'* Wandering around remains a defining feature of the FBF; what changes is the context—whether it occurs in the city center or a park—and the number of pitches through which the experience is organized (many vs few). The individual artists also have a role in this regard, as the order of what they play affects how the audience designs its path within the festival.

Instead, deep transformations emerge when focusing on who and what shapes the *selection* of sessions. The first edition (1988) and the most recent one (2024) share significant similarities. In these cases, the organizers determine the entirety of what takes place: they are responsible for casting, selecting all the performers, and defining the rules of timing and placing. Acting as cultural mediators for an unconventional genre—busking or street performing—the organizers leave the audience in a largely passive role. The individual artists still played a role in structuring what they would perform out of their repertoire, which was likely to be largely unknown to the audience, and not defined by the organizers. In contrast, the intermediary years, particularly 1999 and, to a lesser extent, 2019, demonstrate a shift where the audience and artists take a much more active role, despite potential tensions associate with the 'hopping syndrome'. In these editions, the festivalgoers autonomously construct their own listening experiences in an environment where information about who was playing, what, and when was largely unknown. This represents a radical shift towards a bottom-up approach, highlighting an impressive example of audience involvement in selecting what to listen to. Beyond the standard interactivity inherent in busking—where shows are co-created by artists and spectators (blind quotation)—the audience's role here expanded significantly. Artists have had a crucial role in determining this situation of overwhelming freedom. They –particularly the newcomers and unforeseen credited artists – actively disrupted the festival's machinery, asserting their presence and shaping its evolution even before the credited artist role was formally established. The artists were primarily responsible for the remarkable abundance that characterized the festival during its central phase, driving coverage rates to shrink progressively year after year. At the same time, the organizers could adapt to this challenge, not only from a logistical perspective but also, in our view, in terms of its cultural implications. They stepped back, slightly altering the event's structure compared to previous years. While they still selected the 20 invited artists, they mainly filtered and regulated the participation of credited artists, who numbered between 175 and 256 over the years.

Finally, allowing the discovery of new content has been a cornerstone of the festival for approximately 30 years. Artists were performing largely unknown content given the nature of the festival and the type of artists involved—distinct from a rock-star, Woodstock-style event. Organizers, in turn, were letting things happen. Besides, for much of its history, audiences did not attend the festival to listen to already familiar artists but rather to be surprised by encounters with new, largely unknown styles, sounds, and people. Interestingly, this fundamental principle undergoes a radical revision in the 2024 edition. In the mind of organizers, attendees are now expected to arrive prepared, with a clear idea of what they want to see, engaging in a more deliberate selection process. This shift significantly departs from the festival's traditional emphasis on serendipitous discovery.

Over the years, there has been a clear trend toward normalizing the festival's offerings and how they are experienced. The element of surprise has progressively diminished, along with the intensity of enjoyment. The initial adrenaline rush of making choices upon entering the festival and navigating through a myriad of options until late at night has been simplified into a more curated selection of evening shows. The evolution of additional activities and the changing profile of artists further underscores this dynamic. Concerning additional activities, more recent editions increasingly favor activities that diverge from the festival's original core—street performing. Rather, it is a highly type-tested kind of event, with participants' (both artists and audience) interactions channeled to an opposite direction, towards the 'typical' atmosphere of a limited access event: a prestigious location, yet a sort of self-segregation from the city, an overall sense of exclusivity offered to participants and, perhaps more importantly, nothing resembling the immediacy of street shows.

The evolution in the artists' profiles is also worth noticing. In its inaugural edition, the event could be described as the *Ferrara Buskers Festival*, where most performers were professional buskers, complete with the bohemian ethos traditionally associated with this art form. However, with the introduction of credited artists, the festival underwent a significant transformation, evolving into a *festival of busking* rather than a festival exclusively for buskers. This shift marked a redefinition of its identity, integrating a broader range of artists—both professional and amateur, street performers and others—who, for one week, engaged in an artistic practice characterized by a unique interaction pattern between artists and audience. This interaction occurs in a context with no barriers to entry and exit, where the audience can leave at any time, and where individual performances are rendered unique due to their interplay with the

urban environment. While the sociological profile of these artists is less transgressive —eschewing the bohemian archetype of individuals living on hat offerings—busking remains an unconventional form of music production and consumption (Kaul, 2014; Macchiarella, 2015; Williams, 2016). Under this lens, the 2024 edition's emphasis on creating a more structured audience experience comes at the cost of disrupting the delicate balance between discipline and anarchy that defined the festival as a *festival of buskers/busking.* Returning to the oxymoron we used to describe the first edition, while the festival may have long since moved beyond its original buskers, there is now a risk that it may lose the essence of busking altogether. There is, in fact, an inherent irony in presenting 'street performing' outside the streets, confined to a segregated and curated space, undermining the spontaneous and interactive nature that has historically been its hallmark. We argue that the loss of transgressiveness does not lie in the disappearance of 'freaks' among artists and festivalgoers but rather in a profound transformation of the formula of abundance and selection itself, preceding or complementing other sociocultural aspects.

6. Concluding remarks

In this paper we have examined the evolution of the FBF under the light of abundance and shuffling. Our study contributes to the understanding of what makes festivals similar – an abundant offering – and different – how abundance is organized. This provides a criterion to make sense of the heterogeneity of festivals over space or time. Considering the organization of abundance, a crucial distinction is between 'linear' and 'in parallel' festivals. This is one of the contributions of our paper, which help addressing underlying elements in the organizing of different kinds of festivals, a new tool for classifying them. Within this context then, differences are particularly intriguing within the 'in parallel' mode. As the FBF case study shows, festivals organizing their offerings 'in parallel' may vary in terms of coverage rates, which can be very high (1988) or very small (1999), with important implications in terms of interactions between all actors involved (organizers, artists, and audience).

We claim that the structuring of abundance represents an important element in curating the festival experience that are somehow the underpinnings of softer aspects, like spatial design (De Molli et al., 2020; Swartjes and Berkers (2022) or the "more-than-music' aspects" of a festival (Haynes & Woodward, 2024 p.14). Although crucial, the implications of various ways of structuring abundance have largely remained overlooked in the literature: the nature and dynamics of abundance are here conceived as a crucial element in order to characterize an individual festival, compared to other festivals or in its transformation over time.

Curiously, the structuring of abundance tends to be a somewhat hidden phenomenon, even for festival organizers. While data on the abundance of offerings is often explicitly advertised, the concept of a "coverage rate" is rarely addressed, and obtaining the necessary data for its calculation likely requires significant effort. This is not without consequences, in terms of awareness about the intrinsic values of a festival. For instance, the deliberate transformation of the FBF into a more 'traditional' concert format in 2024—motivated by the preference for 6000 engaged listeners over 800,000 distracted ones—reflects this lack of understanding of a hidden characteristic of the festival. We suspect that the deeper significance of the festival's original identity, rooted in its bottom-up participatory logic involving both artists and the audience, was not fully understood. Had the concepts of abundance, selection, and the meaning of a low coverage rate been properly appreciated, a more cautious and conservative approach might have been adopted.

Moreover, our findings deepen the understanding of the shuffling experience at festivals. While the work of Nunes and Birdsall (2022) introduces shuffling at festivals as a "random combination and simultaneity," this paper analytically unpacks the operations of the shuffling experience, drawing from music listening—namely ordering, selecting, and discovery of new content. At the same time, we highlight key differences between shuffling in music listening (Power, 2014; Quiñones, 2007) and shuffling at festivals (Nunes & Birdsall, 2022). In music listening, shuffling typically results from the interaction between a human and an algorithm. In contrast, shuffling at festivals is shaped by the interplay between different actors: organizers, artists, and the audience. Besides, while the literature on music listening in shuffle mode addresses the passive role of the listeners (and the power of music providers), at festivals there is room for participation and active involvement. As we have demonstrated, the configuration of a seemingly random shuffling experience depends on how much influence each actor exerts over ordering, selection, and the discovery of new content. This creates situations that may be more (or less) top-down in design or more (or less) influenced bottom-up.

Lastly, the study makes a methodological contribution. Numerical data rarely appear in the literature on festivals, aside from audience quantifications (Tull, 2012) or more-or-less reliable calculations of a festival's economic impact on a city or region (Dwyer & Jago, 2018). In this paper, we developed a methodological approach to quantify the abundance of the offerings, considering casting, timing, and placing. We also introduced the concept of the rate of coverage to measure the relative linearity or the degree of simultaneity within a festival. The extreme case of the FBF—where no precise data about the festival's schedules was available— shows how missing data concerning a hidden phenomenon could be estimated. Such assumptions are particularly valuable for analyzing less structured festivals over time, as demonstrated with the FBF, or for comparing different types of festivals.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Paolo Ferri: Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Simone Napolitano:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Luca Zan:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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