

Assessment of Communication Effects: Cultural Events in Varna, Bulgaria

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Abstract

In recent years, interest in the creative industries has grown globally in the context of current trends in consumer behavior. The public interest in creative activities in Bulgaria has also grown, as evidenced by the development and adoption of national strategies and state incentives for enterprises operating in the sector. Specialists predict that as a dynamically developing economic sector the creative industries will become a preferred field of professional realization and will create a sustainable competitive advantage of Bulgaria on the global market in the conditions of globalization and digitization. In this context the importance of organized cultural events could not be understated, with key factor in their success being the communicating and informing target audiences. Different theories of consumer communication patterns and the variety of methods of research and measurement of effectiveness dictate the main challenge facing modern marketers: selecting the right set of methodologies on the basis of which to carry out the evaluation and modify the communication strategy, which outlines the main problem this paper aims to solve. The conducted study is based on a methodology developed by the author specifically for the evaluation of the effective realization of cultural events from the cultural calendar of Varna Municipality for 2016. The methodology includes a survey of organizers, attendees and general public. Based on the results of the multidimensional study, recommendations are made to cultural operators for their next projects, as well as potential prospects for further research in the sector.

Keywords: Marketing communication effectiveness, creative industries, cultural events.

JEL classification: G14, M31, L82

1. Introduction

In response to the ever changing communication paradigm, today's marketers define the process of communication as a dialogue between the company and its customers that takes place during the decision making process, the consumption or usage of the product or service and most importantly continues afterwards in the form of feedback and customer service. (Kotler, Ph., 2003). As a result of this evolution of classical communication models, ensuring the effective implementation of the communication plan in order to achieve the goals set is increasingly difficult to achieve. Thus the interest in efficient ways of communication and the adequate measuring of the efficiency is ever – growing in both academic and business circles. The key to solving this problem is the careful selection of communication channels in order to meet the target customer's demands.

2. Communication efficiency models and buyer's behavior

In a recent paper, analyzing the implications of Integrated Marketing Communications, Litovchenko and Shkorpustia highlight three aspects of IMC performance and describe three main types of communication process goals (Figure 1).

This model of the objectives of integrated marketing communications leads to the conclusion that, in order to achieve economic and social efficiency, the effectiveness of the communication process should be ensured first and puts a strong emphasis on the problem of adequate evaluation of the communication effects.

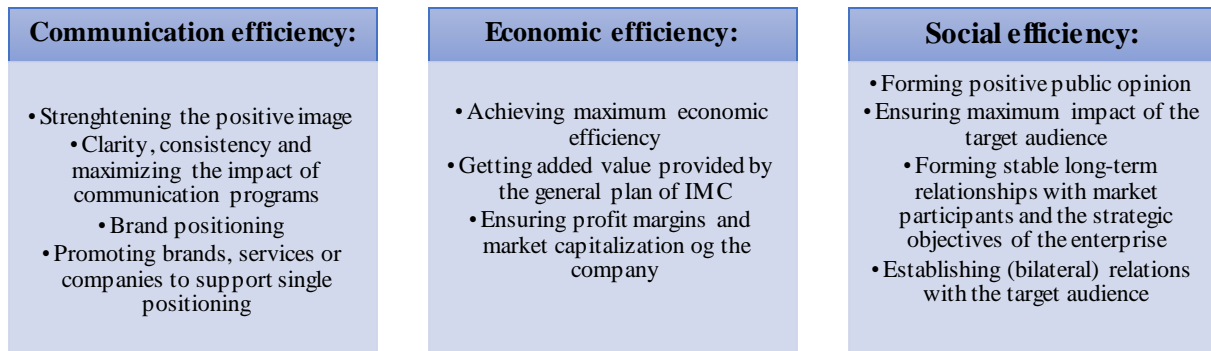


Figure 1. Objectives of Integrated Marketing Communications

Source: Litovchenko, I., Shkurupskaya, I., 2016

In the early years of consumer behavior research, it has been determined, that customers rarely make spontaneous and thoughtless decisions (Belch and Belch, 2011). It is assumed that before the purchase the consumers pass in succession through certain stages until they reach the decision to make a purchase. Numerous models have been developed to illustrate this concept, united by the designation Communication Impact Sequence Models. These models can be divided into the following three groups: Traditional response hierarchy models, Alternative response hierarchies, and modified response hierarchies (Vassileva, 2015). Some of the key models and their authors are illustrated in Table 1.

Model Group	Model name	Author
Traditional Response Hierarchies	AIDA model	E. St Elmo Lewis (1920)
	Hierarchy of Effects model	Lavidge and Steiner (1961)
	Diffusion of Innovations model	Everett Rogers (1983)
	Information processing model	William McGuire (1999)
	ACCA model	Russel Colley (1961)
Alternative Response Hierarchies	Information processing model (standard learning, dissonance/attribution, and low-involvement)	Michael Ray (1977)
Modified Response Hierarchies	The FCB Planning Model	Richard Vaughn (1980)

Table 1. Response hierarchy models

Communication hierarchy models for many years have been the approach to studying the impact of marketing communications on consumers. The attention of the theorists and practitioners is focused on the search for specific controllable variables to measure the source of the message, the message itself and mostly its effect on the target audience. Indicators that measure the effectiveness of communication are difficult to quantify directly. Typically, they are defined in stages by first identifying the goals of the communication, subject of the message, target audience. On this basis, the most suitable communication channels are defined, the communication message is prepared and the effects on the potential buyers' behavior are sought.

The variety of models and methods for measuring communication efficiency highlight the complexity of the marketing communications process and the research and economic interest in terms of effective allocation of funds for such activities. It is essential to build an effective communication strategy to determine the type of user response, select appropriate communication channels (according to the preferences of the targeted audience) and define measures (financial and non-financial) to control the communication Process and determine the results. As a result of the research of communication effectiveness, a sustainable strategy

of maintaining contact with the target audience can be built to meet the organizational management and economic objectives.

3. Creative industry sector in Bulgaria

Creative economies are a relatively new trend in the current economic realm where information, knowledge and original works, such as the products of an individual or a working group, are driving forces in economic development. The main advantage of creative economies is inexhaustible raw material - human capital with their creative skills. Nowadays the material assets of the company or the degree of influence are no longer the most valuable resources - intellectual capital, human resources involved in the work of the organization contribute in a bigger way to successful corporate development.

According to an official report by the United Kingdom's Ministry of Culture, Media and Sport from 1998, creative industries are "those industries that originate from individual creativity, skills and talent and which have the potential to create value and jobs through production and the use of intellectual property" (Higgs et al., 2008). This definition has been criticized as too general (Newbigin, 2010), as a result of which the UK's Ministry of Culture, Media and Sport narrows its definition, including 13 specific sectors of cultural and economic activity: advertising, architecture, Antiques, crafts, design, fashion design, movies, interactive entertainment software (video games), music, performing arts, publishing, software solutions, television and radio (Newbigin, 2010).

According to the classification of UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), the creative industries comprise four large groups, taking into account their distinct characteristics. These groups, which are heritage, arts, media and functional creations, are described in Figure 2. The wide array of industries, that are pictured, prove the growing interest in the field, with the huge range of target audiences, involved with these sectors.

The public interest in creative activities in Bulgaria has also grown in recent years, as evidenced by the development and adoption of national strategies and state incentives for enterprises active in this sector. The strategy for the development of the knowledge industries in Bulgaria aims to become one of the most dynamically developing sectors of the Bulgarian economy. It is envisaged that by 2020 the creative enterprises will employ about 8% of the employed, creating at least 10% of the country's GDP (Business Center for Supporting SME's, 2016). Specialist predict that as a dynamically developing economic sector, the creative industries will become a preferred field of professional realization and will create a sustainable competitive advantage for Bulgaria in the global market, especially in the conditions of globalization and digitization.

The development of culture is a key factor in building the identity of each city and municipality. The arts and culture sector has a significant contribution to the economic development of Varna Municipality, the focus of this paper, and is an incentive for the development of local business and local arts. The high communication efficiency in conducting cultural events helps to make the city of Varna one of the active cultural centers in the country, recognizable at European level.

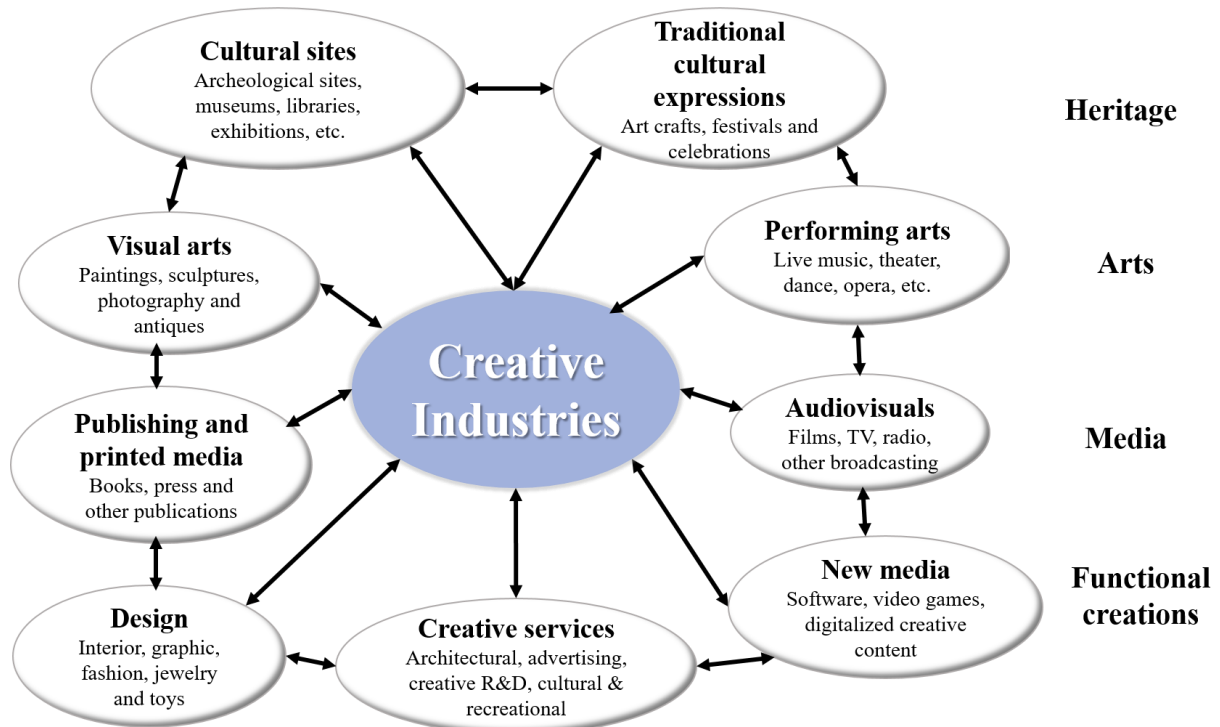


Figure 2. UNCTAD classification of creative industries

Source: UNCTAD, 2010, p. 10

The monitoring and evaluation of the cultural events in Varna, carried out in 2016 ad presented in this paper, aims to measure communication effects based on a system of indicators. The proposals and the recommendations on the basis of the monitored events have the task of contributing to the development of a sustainable model of cultural production in the Municipality of Varna, preserving what is already achieved and creating conditions for future development of the sector, encouraging greater activity on the local artistic scene.

4. Methodology

In order to fully and adequately monitor the effectiveness and success of cultural events and to develop a strategy for the positioning and promotion of such cultural products, a methodology has been developed based on a system of indicators for monitoring and evaluation of key public objectives. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods based on both primary and secondary data has been selected and the conceptual model is presented in Figure 3.

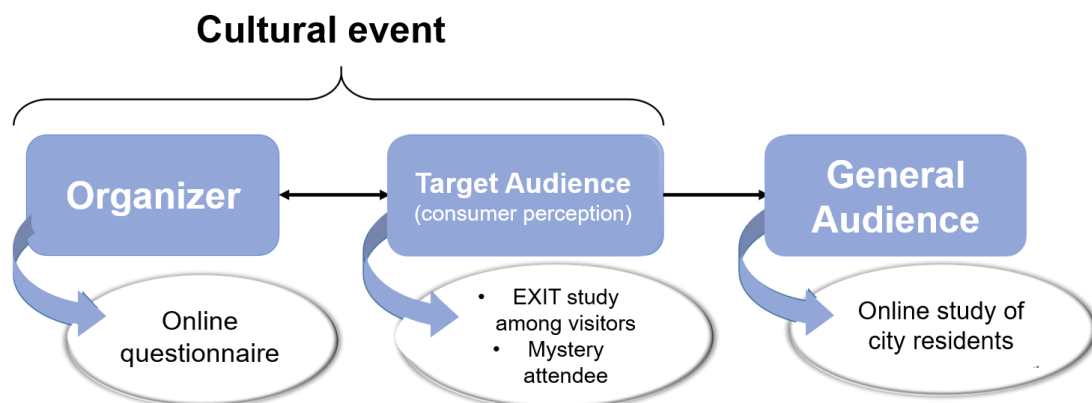


Figure 3. Conceptual model of methodology for monitoring and evaluating cultural events

The methodology has been developed for the purposes of the survey, conducted in the period July - November 2016. The study concerns events from the cultural calendar of Varna Municipality for the period. The event and projects, which are analyzed, represent the different Creative industries, shown in Figure 2. The methodology of this study is based on the following modules, developed consecutively, defining different areas of research interest for the individual target groups. The main focus is on the organization of cultural events and their effectiveness, on the preferred communication channels and consumer reactions.

4.1. MODULE 1: Evaluation of events and their effectiveness from the organizer's POV

Within this module, a questionnaire is distributed to organizers of cultural events to collect insider information about particular elements of the event.

The Cultural Events Survey tool, focused on the organizers' impressions, consists of questions covering the following topics:

- General information about the event - besides the name of the event visited, date, time and venue, type of access, information is required about previous editions of the project, number of employees and the type of relationships - labor, volunteer, Main target audience
- Organization of the event - requires information on the effective organization of the event, incl. Organization of crossing points, existence of indicia, allocation of space, adherence to the pre-announced program, number of visitors, responsiveness of the organizational team;
- Event audience - assessment of public reactions and moods, incl. Visitors' over-age, feedback methods used by the organizer, information provision in other languages;
- Partnerships - includes questions about used advertising media and media coverage, provided promotional materials, partners and sponsors, other organizations involved in the project.

The questionnaire was sent via email to all organizers whose events are the subject of this study. Within the deadline set, 22 questionnaires were filled in.

4.2. MODULE 2: Consumer perceptions and event assessments

The activities in this module include a mystery visitor survey and audience survey after events (EXIT research).

4.2.1. Mystery visitor survey

The methodology of the mystery visitor survey of organized cultural events is based on the practice of a mystery shopper, where the organizer has no prior information that the visitor has a research task. The questionnaire was developed following the structure of the questionnaire provided to the organizers. Questions are based on the same topics (general information about the event, organization of the event, event audience, partnerships) with some questions being modified to fit the goals of the survey.

The mystery visitor were briefed on the questionnaire and expected information, and were instructed to remain unnoticed, not to record, photograph or take notes during the event (unless the rest of the audience does so).

The study was conducted through the online LimeSurvey Research System. A total of 25 observations from experts were carried out during July - November 2016.

4.2.2. EXIT Survey

The EXIT study methodology requires a pre-developed questionnaire to be completed after the event, interviewing people who attended and left the event location. In conducting the interviews, equal participation of representatives from different age groups was observed.

The developed EXIT questionnaire consists of eight closed questions, the volume and format being selected for quick and easy completion by the interviewee. Information is collected about

the information channels through which the visitor learned about the project, the size of the group that visited the event, the satisfaction with the event organization, etc.

The survey was conducted via the mobile research platform Surveo. For this purpose, the developed questionnaire is translated into an easy and accessible form (with pictograms and slides), and the questionnaire itself is conducted via tablets. A total of 180 polls were conducted during various events in the months of July - November.

4.3. MODULE 3: Survey of city residents

The module aims to explore the behavior and habits of the residents of Varna in terms of attending events from the cultural calendar of the Municipality. The research is conducted outside the context of a specific event and looks at the general behavior of information provision and visits of such events. The questionnaire is administered online.

5. Results

Since the current paper is under volume limitations, only some of the key findings of the conducted survey are analyzed. All other data is available by request. The results are listed in the order determined by the conceptual model.

5.1. MODULE 1: Evaluation of events and their effectiveness from the organizer's POV

In the first part of the survey, event organizers indicate whether the event in the current 2016 is new for the audience or is a continuation of a previous project. More than half (52%) of the respondents indicate that the event is not new and list the previous editions of the project (Figure 4). There is a tendency for the successful projects to continue and to develop and promoting the events as “annual” contributes for building loyal. There is a good balance between new projects and old ones – a guarantee for variety but also traditions in the Varna cultural calendar.

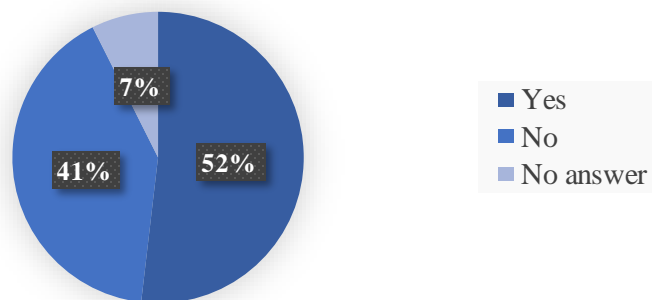


Figure 4. Is the project continuation of previous events?

On the question about the target audience of the cultural project, the respondents point to people in active age (63%). Relatively few are the projects targeting young people (Figure 5), which is surprising in the context of the choice of Varna as a European Youth Capital for 2017. The results also correspond to the collected data from the mystery visitor study, where the experts indicate a similar proportion of attendance rates.

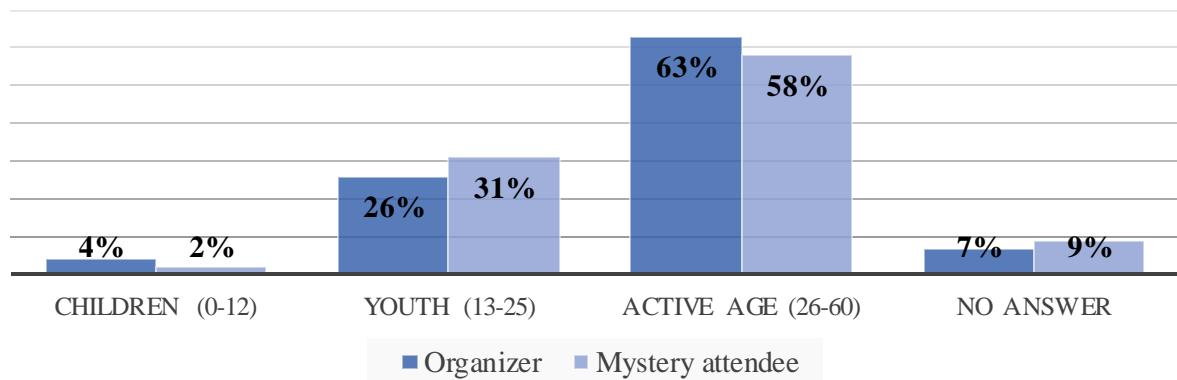


Figure 5. What is the target audience of the event? (Comparative results of organizers and mystery visitors)

Some discrepancy between the visitor and organizer's observations is recorded regarding the proper organization of the event area especially with regard to the need for indicative signs (including advertising materials). Organizers note with certainty that enough signs and posters have been distributed or aren't needed (e.g. due to a single entrance, location renown, and open space) (Figure 6).

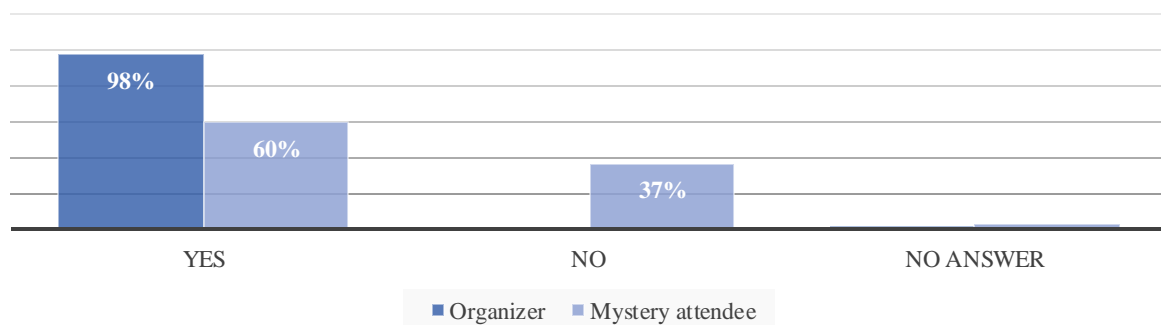


Figure 6. Availability of signs and advertising materials (Comparative results of organizers and mystery visitors)

Larger percentage of the events receive a positive assessment from the mystery visitors, but there is also a significant share of negative ratings. Expert comments take into account the difficulty of visitor orientation, especially when the event is held indoors. A problem with some outdoor events is the lack of any information about the name of the project, the organizer, the idea and the goal, which causes confusion in the audience and reduces the communication effectiveness - the chance for permanent impression and remembrance, feedback, image benefits for the organizer is not capitalized.

5.2. MODULE 2: Consumer perceptions and event assessments

Based on the completed interviews via EXIT research, a comprehensive assessment of consumer perceptions concerning events held in Varna in 2016 was generated.

Table 2 presents the preferred sources of information for the surveyed visitors. The most commonly used is word-of-mouth communication (WOM) with family, friends and other accessible contact audiences, and Facebook (via official page of organizer / event, shared posts, news). Together, the two channels are preferred by more than half of the respondents and should be preferred to the promotion of the events by the organizer.

The high rating of the events by the respondents in the EXIT survey is also confirmed by the Net promoter scales, where high scores (over 8) are considered a guarantee for positive WOM and future participation in similar events (loyalty).

Information source	% of surveyed visitors
Friends, family, colleagues and other acquaintances	48.6
Facebook	27.4
Informational websites	8.6
Official website of Varna Municipality	15.4
Radio and TV	1.1
Posters, leaflets, flyers, etc.	11.4

Table 2. How did you find out about the current event?

The most common grade (Mode) is 8, and the question of whether the attendee is willing to recommend the event to their contact audiences, the respondents give the highest score (10) in 33.9% of the cases.

Extremely high scores indicate good organization and realization of cultural events and the accumulation of positive impressions on the part of visitors. Positive attitude also influences the decision to follow a similar cultural event and supports building of consumer habits.

Question	Mode	% of respondents
On a scale from 0 to 10, how would you evaluate your overall impression of the event?	8	23.6
How likely are you to recommend this event to friends and acquaintances?	10	33.9

Table 3. Evaluation of overall impression / propensity to recommend

5.3. MODULE 3: Survey of city residents

Module 3 of the survey is aimed at the habits and perceptions of the citizens of Varna regarding the cultural events. The questionnaire is administered online and is sent to respondents outside the context of a specific event. 112 respondents with different demographic profiles for gender, age and education were counted for the survey period.

Figure 7 presents the results regarding the frequency of cultural events. 60% of respondents say they last visited a cultural event more than a month ago, while less (21%) attended an event within the week.

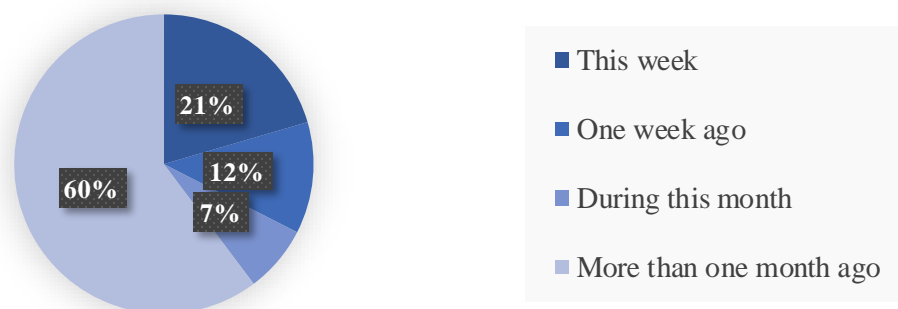


Figure 7. When did you last visit a cultural event in Varna?

Respondents are asked to reflect the communication channels they prefer and use when selecting a cultural event to visit (Figure 8). The results unmistakably reveal Facebook as the most widely used information channel (46%) followed by WOM communication (23%). The traditional advertising volumes are not as effective as a communication channels when promoting cultural events.

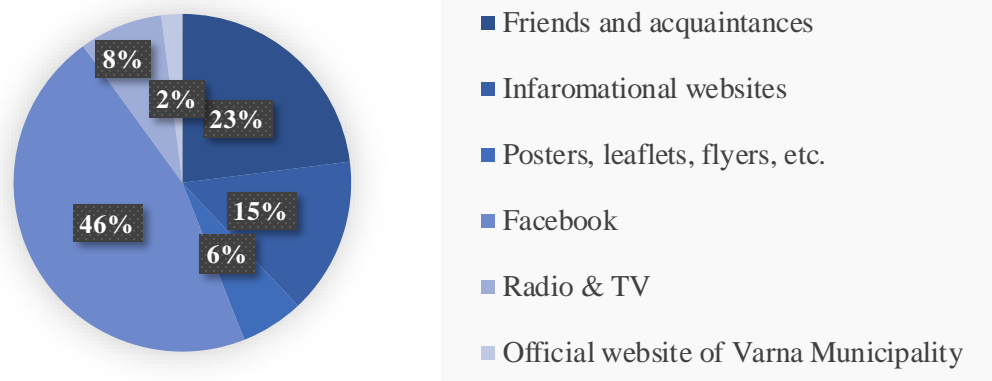


Figure 8: What informational sources do you use when picking a cultural event to visit?

The results are in sync with the paradigm shift in the marketing communication channels in the last decades. Most of the potential visitors use digital information sources, especially high is the usage of social media websites with the huge popularity of Facebook among Bulgarians. It is surprising that in the described situation most of the event organizers still use convenient media channel to promote their events and gain popularity, instead of switching to more cost-friendly volumes.

6. Conclusion and further implications

As a result of the multi-component study conducted with organizers and consumers of cultural products on the territory of the city of Varna, the general trends in the behavior and attitudes of the Varna public can be taken into account as well as certain shortcomings in the implementation of the events and recommendations regarding the communication efficiency of such events.

In view of the expert interviews (with organizers and mystery visitors), there is a lack of a comprehensive strategy regarding the targeted audiences for Varna. Municipal support and policy of publicizing priority audiences and forms of cultural events in the context of the strategy for the development of cultural and educational activities in the city would mediate and support organizers and audiences to achieve synergy in the process of searching for and offering cultural events.

Meanwhile high audience ratings for the events visited (both judging by individual factors and overall assessment) show a positive attitude and high satisfaction to visitors of cultural events and confirm the high public interest in such products. The survey of the general public also shows persistence regarding the frequency of the visit and the size of the group - factors revealing a positive tendency for the development of the cultural and creative sector.

From the organizer's point of view, missed opportunities are noticed in regards to the promotion and general information distribution to the audience before the realization of the cultural event. Information channels are of particular importance and the results of the study confirm the importance of electronic media and WOM communications. These communication channels are more cost effective than the classic media advertising channels preferred by the organizers. Consumer habits on information sources focus on modern forms (social networks, electronic media) and leave behind the classic radio, television and the press. The trend is confirmed by both the EXIT survey and the survey of the general public.

The findings of the study suggest future application of the methodology and open up opportunities for further analysis of communication aspects in the creative industries. It is

important to trace and rationalize consumer behavior, habits and attitudes of information flows for similar services. The proposed toolkit suggests an in-depth analysis and tracking of changes in cultural projects with more than one edition in order to identify the effectiveness of the proposed measures.

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