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## **Creating a Stir: The Role of Word of Mouth in Reputation Management in the Context of Festivals**

### **ABSTRACT**

*This qualitative case study examines the role of word of mouth (WOM) in reputation management in the context of networked festival productions. Particularly, it explores the ways in which WOM marketing (WOMM) is employed in festival marketing and brand building. The paper links reputation and WOM to the concept of cultural branding with the aim of providing a framework for analysing how a festival's reputation shapes the creation of a culturally meaningful message. The empirical analysis is based on a multiple-case study involving three Finnish festivals hosted in the city of Pori: the Porispere Festival, the International Pori Jazz Festival and the International Lain&suojattomat Theatre Festival. The cases represent festivals of different sizes and varying organisational structure, content and life cycle. The findings indicate that the meaning and use of WOMM vary depending on key constitutive differences that affect the nature of the festivals' reputation and brand-building processes. Although the importance of external and internal stakeholders in these processes is evident, it seems that when the power of networks is recognised as crucial for festivals, WOM has a leveraging role in reputation management and brand building. In these processes, the value of the festival leader's persona becomes crucial.*

### **KEY WORDS:**

Festival management, reputation, word of mouth (WOM), word of mouth marketing (WOMM), cultural branding

## **Introduction**

This qualitative case study examines the role of word of mouth (WOM) in reputation management in the context of networked festival production in Finland. Our research interest in the Finnish festival field and its development is warranted by changes in this sector in recent years, especially in the Nordic countries. A transformation from niche voluntary-based productions with an ideological basis and a passionate emphasis on the festival's content towards multidimensional productions is apparent. Culture festivals have in many cases shifted from being strictly artistic, genre-related productions to being productions of holistic experiences that reflect 21st-century changes to consumption practices (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Gursoy, Spangenberg, & Rutherford, 2006). Subsequently, festival productions have become increasingly business-like operations, although the available resources of festival organisations have remained moderate compared to the growth of the events they produce.

Today, memorable festival experiences might be seen as being based on both artistic content and the surrounding service provision (Getz, 1989; Morgan, 2008). As a result of their growth, festival productions now often require the involvement of a range of commercial partners and other actors in addition to the core festival organisation and its volunteers. Thus, the growth of individual festival productions has resulted in the strategic management of cultural production based on networks of different stakeholders (e.g., Getz, 2012; Getz & Andersson, 2010; Getz, Andersson, & Larson, 2007; Larson, 2009a; Larson, 2009b). Consequently, the role of communication among stakeholders and the significance of reputation and brand building have become crucial for the success of festivals (e.g., Yeoman et al., 2015).

However, there is currently little research on the nature and role of reputation and WOM per se in the field of creative productions in general and in the context of festival management in particular (for some exceptions, see Hausmann, 2012a). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to contribute to the literature on festival marketing by exploring how WOM and reputation are understood and enhanced by festival managers in establishing a festival's position among both stakeholders and competitors. The article advances the understanding of the complex role of reputation in festival management and explores the role of WOM in the management process. Conceptually, the article situates reputation and WOM within a cultural branding framework to facilitate an understanding of festival reputation as a means of creating a culturally meaningful message. In this sense, the article extends the current literature on WOM and reputation building by providing a sociocultural lens through which the relevance and effectiveness of marketing messages can be analysed.

Drawing on 13 interviews ( $N = 11$ ) conducted with managers from three Finnish festivals organised in the city of Pori, this study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What is the meaning and role assigned to festival reputation and WOM by festival managers?
- (2) How is word of mouth marketing (WOMM) employed in festival-related marketing and brand-building activities?
- (3) How do these activities affect management in networked festival production?

The strong development of festivalization in Finland makes the country a favourable context for this study. Furthermore, the city in question, Pori, has a long history of event production that has positively affected the brand equity of the city (Lemmetyinen, Go, & Luonila, 2013) and contributed to the development of higher education provision in the city (Suomi, Lemmetyinen, & Go, 2013; Suomi, 2014; Luonila & Johansson, 2015). As such, the festival sector constitutes an important part of both the ‘hard’ (infrastructure, employment, business development) and ‘soft’ (image, heritage) features of the city, as is the case with many other cities following the cultural-city branding paradigm (Hall, 2009; Marling, Jensen, & Kiib, 2009; Smith & Von Krogh Strand, 2011). Consequently, there is a need to explore the roles of reputation and WOM for managing festivals and how these processes are intertwined with the context within which festivals take place (see Butler, 2000).

Empirically, the study presents an interesting example of networked festival management in the context of cultural-city strategies. As the profiling of cities based on their cultural content becomes increasingly common, the mobilisation of festivals in particular for such profiling represents an important research opportunity (see Luonila & Johansson, 2015).

The article is structured as follows. The next section, which discusses the current literature on reputation and WOM, outlines the conceptual framework of the study and introduces cultural branding as a novel approach to analysing the context in which festivals occur. Next, the research context and the festivals that were included in the study are introduced. The analysis focuses on two key themes, the meaning and role of WOM and the application of WOMM, and how these overlap and differ between festivals. The implications of the analysis are discussed in the conclusion section, and suggestions for future research are outlined.

## **Conceptualising Reputation and WOM through a Cultural Branding Approach in Networked Festival Production**

Since the early 1990s, festivals have claimed an increasingly important position in the tourism and leisure industries (Arcodia & Whitford, 2006), creating a global branch (Yeoman, Robertson, Ali-Knight, Drummond, & McMahon-Beattie, 2004) of the creative economy and cultural industries (e.g., Florida, 2002; Frey, 2003; Moeran & Standgaard Pedersen, 2011). The significant role of festivals is encapsulated in the concept of *festivalization*, which refers to the increased role of festivals as tools for tourism development and place marketing (Andersson & Getz, 2008) and as primary vehicles for reflecting identities and lifestyles (Bennett & Woodward, 2014). This view of festivals as valuable cultural and economic resources has been accompanied by an increase in the research on festival management and marketing. A commonly applied perspective is the stakeholder or network approach (e.g., Getz, Andersson, & Carlsen, 2010; Larson, 2009a), according to which a festival constitutes a complex set of relations within which a multitude of interests needs to be managed. Aspects often explored in relation to the network approach relate to the motivation and attitudes of audiences (e.g., Abreu-Novais & Arcodia, 2013; Crompton & McKay, 1997; Pegg & Patterson, 2010), cooperation with business partners (e.g., Larson, 2002), engaging the host city (e.g., Crespi-Vallbona & Richards, 2007), and managing the strong interdependence between partners (Collin-Lachaud & Duyck, 2002).

As a product-driven production, a festival simultaneously faces both the need to innovate and the need to establish a stable position due to its temporal and project-based nature (Collin-Lachaud & Duyck, 2002; see also Andersson & Getz, 2008; Getz, Andersson, & Larsson, 2007). Interestingly, prior studies of festival production have not considered the impact of the festival's reputation on visitor attendance (e.g., Lee, Petrick, & Crompton, 2007) and stakeholders' motivation for collaboration (e.g., Larson, 2002). However, as Getz and Andersson (2008) have argued, flexible and innovative marketing and managerial actions are necessary for building market popularity, political support and access to resources in the long term (Carlsen, Andersson, Ali-Knight, Jaeger, & Taylor, 2010; Rentschler, Radbourne, Carr, & Rickard, 2002; Colbert, 2007). The aim of such actions is to create positive WOM and attitudes and to build trust in the festival (e.g., Collin-Lachaud & Duyck, 2002; Larson, 2002; Lee et al., 2007; Getz & Andersson, 2010). This is important for festivals to be considered an attractive experience producer by audiences and stakeholders in a complex operational environment (see Larson, 2009a; 2009b), which is characterised by increased competition among producers in the leisure sector and uncertainty regarding audience attendance. These conditions shape

the nature of marketing management in the cultural field (see Colbert, 2003; 2007), which places an emphasis on effective interaction with the audience and other stakeholders.

*The Interactive Nature of Marketing Management in the Festival Context*

Generally, creative goods and services such as festivals “are consumed in a social context, not by isolated hermits” (Caves, 2000, p. 175) as people find pleasure in “the presence of other people at the event itself and shared residue of memories of the experience” (ibid.). Festivals encompass cultural, ‘holistic experiences’ as well as a sense of community (see, e.g., Falassi, 1987; Morgan, 2008; Frith, 1996), which “provide a space and time away from everyday life in which intense extraordinary experiences can be created *and shared*” (Morgan, 2008, p. 81, our emphasis). The consumer’s desire to share the festival experience creates an important foundation for festival marketing according to which ‘getting people talking’ is imperative. As Kerr and May (2011, p. 455) argue, “Positive word-of-mouth promotion may be viewed as highly significant when exploring marketing communications for festivals because of the experiential and social characteristics of the product”. Further, WOM promotion is relevant due to the temporal nature of festivals (Allen, Toole, McDonnell, & Harris, 2005).

The role of community and shared experiences is not restricted to the consuming of experiences during the event itself. The employment of innovative marketing approaches is not limited to the time immediately preceding the event but is also “needed to maintain connections with consumers throughout the year” (Kerr & May, 2011, p. 451). Hausmann (2012b) and Kerr and May (2011) point out the importance of face-to-face interaction with audiences during the festival and Web-based contact with audiences before and after the event (see also O’Sullivan, 2010). Social media plays an important role in this respect by enabling audiences to share information about their festival experience with peers and to act as commentators on public Web-based platforms (Yeoman, 2013). Creating platforms for communication between the audience and the festival has been shown to enhance loyalty and to ensure visitors’ future attendance (see Rentschler et al., 2002; Colbert, 2007). Websites and social media thus constitute important elements of interactive marketing. Hence, project-based cultural productions emphasize the role of the audience and particularly the significance of frequent attendees as ambassadors for spreading positive WOM (e.g., Unwin, Kerrigan, Waite, & Grant, 2007; Getz, 2012).

Attendees’ sharing of information about their festival experience forms part of the event’s consumption and at the same time contributes to its marketing (see Allen et al., 2005; White, Hede,

& Rentschler, 2009; Chaney, 2012). Therefore, as Hausmann (2012b,) suggests, the role of attendees is evolving from that of passive consumers to that of active (co-)producers, or ‘prosumers’, particularly in the context of creative productions (see White et al., 2009; Kerr & May, 2011; Chaney, 2012; Getz, 2012; Yeoman et al., 2015). However, although this role transformation enables a stronger degree of participation, it also involves an element of uncertainty as consumers are afforded a more active role in the production process. Particularly, negative WOM may have a significant impact on festivals’ reputation and market position.

Interestingly, recent research has pointed to parallel changes in the role of festival managers: if a participant is considered a prosumer (Hausmann, 2012b), then festival managers can be seen as experience designers and co-creators (Getz, 2012) together with the audience and other stakeholders (see Chaney, 2012; Todd, 2015). In these processes, design personality (programme and overall image), the traditions and meanings of festivals, and identification with the meanings and values of the event are emphasised (Morgan, 2008; see also Colbert, 2007; White et al., 2009) for the purpose of building a positive festival reputation and a convincing brand (Fillis, 2003). Hence, festival managers are in key positions to *orchestrate* the festival experience and the brand (e.g., Larson, 2009b; Morgan, 2008). An important part of marketing is reputation management—including WOMM—which provides “potential visitors with advance clues about the nature of the event experience” (Allen et al., 2005, p. 185). Building a favourable reputation aided by positive WOM is thus an important aspect of festival management.

### *Reputation Management and WOM*

Reputation and WOM are well-established concepts in the academic marketing literature (e.g., Allsop, Bassett, & Hoskins, 2007; Fombrun & van Riel, 1997; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Mazzarol, Sweeney, & Soutar, 2007). Rayner (2003, p. 1) defines reputation as “a collection of perceptions and beliefs, both past and present, which reside in the consciousness of an organisation’s stakeholders”. The definition offered by Gioia et al. (2000, p. 67) emphasises the enduring nature of reputation: “relatively stable, long term, collective judgments by outsiders of an organization’s actions and achievements”. In the context of creative productions, reputation has been considered at both the organisational and individual levels (see Delmestri, Montanari, & Usai, 2005; Scapolan & Montanari, 2013). A favourable reputation has numerous advantages for an organisation (see e.g., Järvinen & Suomi, 2011). For instance, as an immaterial asset, it is extremely difficult to copy (e.g., Roberts & Dowling, 2002), thereby generating differentiation from competitors (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990) and helping the organisation gain and maintain a competitive advantage (e.g., Barnett, Jermier,

& Lafferty, 2006; Fillis, 2003). It also helps attract customers and employees (e.g., Fombrun, 1996; Scapolan & Montanari, 2013), and in times of crisis, it may offer respite to an organisation (Rayner, 2003). In the context of creative productions, such as festivals, a favourable reputation refers to benefits such as attracting spectators, acquiring volunteers and investors and surviving economic downturns (see Fillis, 2003). Recent research on reputation management has suggested that although the reputation of an organisation cannot be fully managed, a substantial degree of control can be achieved by pursuing certain initiatives, such as working closely with stakeholders (Suomi, 2015).

Word of mouth constitutes an important element of reputation. According to Arndt's (1967, in Stoke & Lomax, 2002, p. 350) well-known definition, WOM is "oral person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the person perceives as non-commercial, regarding brand, product or a service"; however, as Stokes and Lomax (2002) aptly observed, this definition needs to be updated. First, Arndt's idea of WOM as oral communication does not fully apply in the contemporary world of electronic communication. Accordingly, Yang, Mai, and Ben-Ur (2012) noted the strong influence wielded by online opinion leaders due to the rapid dissemination of electronic word of mouth. Moreover, whereas Hausmann (2012a, p. 32) maintained that WOM is a way of "gaining effectiveness as a means of referral in applications such as Facebook and Twitter, making it possible to reach an unlimited number of people", Stokes and Lomax (2002, p. 350) argued that it incorporates "all interpersonal communication regarding products or services where the receiver regards the communicator as impartial". Following from the above, contemporary understandings of the concept of WOM are more dynamic than its original formulation.

Second, Stokes and Lomax (2002) referred to the fact that the communicator in Arndt's (1967) definition is understood as independent of the product or service under discussion. However, companies are now increasingly attempting to harness the power of WOM by intervening in the endorsement process. Customers are often given incentives to recommend products to friends and family, and membership schemes are commonplace. For instance, loyalty schemes and supporter groups are typical in arts marketing, particularly with respect to performing arts organisations and museums (e.g., Rentschler et al., 2002; Colbert, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2010). Consequently, one could argue that such recommendations are not fully independent. Moreover, apart from providing incentives, companies may intentionally create a stir regarding their products and services by using buzz marketing (Yang et al., 2012). Accordingly, Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki, and Wilner (2010, p. 71) refer to WOMM as a "firm's intentional influencing of consumer-to-consumer communications", as opposed to traditional WOM, which is understood as naturally occurring, informal and unsolicited. The Word-of-Mouth Marketing Association (2014) makes the following distinction between the



concepts of WOMM and WOM: WOMM is the input, whereas WOM is the output. In other words, WOMM is the conversation starter, whereas WOM is the conversation. Finally, reputation and WOM are reciprocal: a positive reputation normally generates positive WOM (Fombrun & Gardberg, 2000), and positive WOM tends to enhance favourable assessments of reputation (Suomi & Järvinen, 2013).

In the context of festivals, reputation and WOM have been addressed by Shanka and Taylor (2004), whose study of a wine festival found that the most common source of information was personal and generated through WOM across all visitor groups. Indeed, the fact that the festival experience is unique and simultaneously produced and consumed increases the significance of positive WOM and reputation (see, e.g., Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001; Chaney, 2012). How to manage reputations favourably by employing WOMM is therefore of interest. We suggest that cultural branding provides a useful approach with which to analyse reputation and WOM in the context of festivals, and we use this framework to extend current conceptualisations of WOM.

#### *Situating Reputation and WOM within a Cultural Branding Framework*

Communicative acts such as WOM do not take place in a void; rather, they are shaped by surrounding cultural codes. An analytical framework for situating WOM, and subsequent reputation building, in a cultural, historical and political context is here provided by drawing on the concept of cultural branding (Holt, 2003a; 2003b; 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010). Rayner's (2003) previously mentioned definition of reputation as a collection of subjectively held perceptions and beliefs resonates with the view of brands as powerful "bearers of meaning" (Schroeder, 2009, p. 124). Following a cultural branding approach, *how* those perceptions, beliefs and memories are shaped depends on the culturally relevant narrative that a producer offers to stakeholders. Moreover, stakeholders assume an active, co-creative role in the making of the brand, an aspect that in this case is interesting in the light of the co-creative role of the prosumer in cultural production (Hausmann, 2012b). The longevity of a brand, according to this framework, is dependent on its staying culturally relevant by treading a balance between tradition and renewal. While Holt's (2003a; 2003b; 2004) cultural branding approach focuses on the creation of iconic brands, it is applicable to analysing any attempt at creating a market position. Essentially, the approach is based on the notion of narration and myth, that is, the creation of an authentic, meaningful presence through offering a compelling story. Specifically, stories that offer the audience or consumer a means to contribute to his or her identity creation are seen as valuable. As mentioned previously, festivals are important sites of identity construction and lifestyle (Bennett & Woodward, 2014). In this respect, an approach that pays attention to the power of cultural symbols that act as resources for identity-making (Holt &

Cameron, 2010) may contribute to the understanding of what kinds of messages are compelling and therefore carried forward. As such, we argue that a cultural branding framework is relevant for broadening the perspective on WOM, which can be understood as a culturally and historically situated communicative process instead of simply a marketing-management function.

What we have shown is that reputation management is important for the success of festivals given their experiential, temporary character. Reputation building is not solely in the hands of the cultural producer, but is contributed to by consumers (and other stakeholders) through WOM. The role of WOM must therefore be considered in an investigation in relation to festival production; however, it cannot be viewed merely as a de-contextualised marketing tool. Instead, it must be situated within the broader cultural, historical and political forces that shape its content and meaning.

## **Research Context, Design and Methodology**

### *Finland and the City of Pori as a Festival Venue*

There are a large number of festivals per capita in Finland (Kainulainen, 2005). In a country of 5.4 million inhabitants, hundreds of publicly driven, non-profit and for-profit festival productions produce almost 1.9 million festival visits annually (Finland Festivals, 2013). Although statistics provided by Finland Festivals (FF), the promotion association of Finnish festivals, show that in 2012, over three-quarters (approximately EUR 27.4 million) of the total net revenue (approximately EUR 38.5 million) was generated by music festivals, the market also includes multi-arts, theatre, literature and visual arts festivals (FF, 2012). Moreover, FF does not represent the entire festival field; numerous public, private and non-profit bodies that are not FF members organise a range of events (Artes, Björkqvist, Halonen, Iso-Aho, & Uotila, 2010). Clearly, the festival scene in Finland is extensive and thriving, which is remarkable considering the country's relatively small population and hence its potentially limited audiences (Pasanen, Taskinen, & Mikkonen, 2009). These circumstances provide a favourable context for this study.

With its 83,000 inhabitants, the city of Pori, located on the west coast of Finland, is of significant size by Finnish standards. Due to the region's firm roots in manufacturing, industry and manufacturing contribute substantially to the local business life, more so than in other cities in Finland (The City of Pori; Satakunta Region). Among the region's industrial characteristics, there are also strong features of a creative economy, particularly in relation to events and festivals (Luonila & Johansson, 2015). The city of Pori has branded itself one of the leading event cities in Finland (The

City of Pori; Lemmetyinen et al., 2013). A significant impetus behind the creative-city brand-building process is the Pori Jazz Festival, which has had a significant effect on the city’s brand equity (Lemmetyinen et al., 2013). Staged since 1966, it has gained a leading national position and a strong international reputation. Moreover, the city’s investment in event and cultural production has brought new festivals to the area in recent years.

Table 1 provides an overview of the festivals included in the study.

	<b>Porispere festival</b>	<b>Pori Jazz Festival</b>	<b>The Lainšuojujattomat Theatre Festival</b>
<b>Event type</b>	Music-related festival	Music-related festival	Theatre-related festival
<b>Event characteristics and size</b>	<i>Start-up festival</i>  (approx. 9,000-16,500 sold tickets/year*)	<i>Hallmark event</i>  (approx. 140,000-150,000 visitors/year*; including free concerts, 48000-57000 sold tickets)	<i>Niche</i>  (approx. 2200-4600 visitors/year*; including free performances and sold tickets)
<b>Professional status</b>	<i>For profit</i> , professionals from different producing areas	<i>Not-for-profit</i> , professional organization+ volunteer workers	<i>Not-for-profit</i> , arranged by the professionals of Rakastajat Theatre + volunteer workers
<b>Event history</b>	<i>est. 2011</i>  Arose as a form of ‘counteraction’ among local event-related entrepreneurs after the leaving of Live Nation’s Sonisphere -festival from Pori	<i>est. 1966</i>  Originated from the hobbyism and enthusiasm of the jazz music in the region and from the demand for summer events in the city and in Finland	<i>est. 2000</i>  Initiated as a professionals’ common attempt to improve the unlicensed theatre field in Finland. First aimed to be produced as touring festival but stabilized in the city of Pori since its founding
<b>Event Venues</b>	Open-air arena in concert park (2-3 stages*)	Open-air arena in concert park, various indoor /outdoor stages (11-14 event spaces*)	Variety of venues in the city centre, theatres, museums, galleries, cafés, bars, in the street*
<b>Promotional scope</b>	<i>Medium-scale</i> : Internet, social media, print, promotions	<i>Large-scale</i> TV, radio, Internet, social media, print, promotions	<i>Small-scale</i> Internet, print, social media

<b>Mission</b>	To fill a rock and pop festival gap in the city of Pori in a ‘do it yourself’ spirit	To produce unique and memorable experiences for wide range of audience. The core of experience is on jazz and rhythm music	To bring interesting and high quality performances from the unlicensed theatre field, and to create a platform for developmental artistic processes
<b>Code of citations</b>	<i>B (2013)</i>	<i>A (2013) / PA (2009)</i>	<i>C (2013) / PC (2009)</i>

\*Statistics covering the observation period 2011-2013

**Table 1.** Key information about the case festivals

*Data Collection and Analysis*

The primary data consists of thirteen semi-structured and thematic interviews conducted with the managers of three festivals: the Lainŕuojattomat Theatre Festival, the Pori Jazz Festival and the Porispere Festival. Thematic interviews were considered suitable for the study because a complex and context-specific phenomenon was under investigation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Patton, 2002; Gummesson, 2005). The interviews were carried out in two stages, the first in 2009 (*N* = 3) and the second in 2013 (*N* = 10), with one interviewee interviewed for the first stage only and two of the interviewees interviewed in both stages (i.e., total *N* = 11).

The first stage of the semi-structured interviews approached the phenomenon strictly from the perspective of festival marketing practices and the role of WOM in the process. To ensure the validity of the study, prior theoretical frameworks were consulted in the planning of interview protocols (Yin, 2003). Questions at this stage sought to elicit descriptions and examples, for example: How would you describe word-of-mouth around your festival? Would you say that you intentionally make use of word-of-mouth in marketing the festival? If so, how? Do you have experiences of negative word-of-mouth around your festival? If so, describe them. In the thematic interviews that followed, a more open approach was taken when asking about the management of each case festival with questions such as ‘What is XXX festival’ and ‘How is the XXX festival managed?’ to amplify the sense making (Weick, 1995) of phenomena by providing a “highly individualized, contextualized, and relevant scope for the interviewee – not just the researcher” (Erikson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 83; see also Silverman, 2001). All interviews were recorded and transcribed carefully to ensure systematic record keeping, thus enhancing the reliability of the study (Silverman, 2001). The interviewees included staff in charge of administrative, managerial and artistic tasks.

A multiple-case study design was preferred as many scholars (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003) consider it more compelling and robust than a single-case study, which makes it suitable for this study given the observed notable differences among the selected festivals. Each case festival was carefully selected to represent different sizes, life cycles, production structures and content. In line with the case-study method (Yin, 2003), the interviews were complemented with secondary data gathered between 2011 and 2014, including Web-based information, social media and print advertising. The lead author's research diaries were used to further complement the data in order not to omit "the flavor of the entire blend of multiple sources" (Yin, 2003, p. 84) in pursuit of "a holistic view" (Gummesson, 2002, p. 86) of the cases. The in-depth examination that took place over an extended period of time facilitated the understanding of a complex phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994), in this case the role of WOM in the festival-management process of reputation building.

The analytical approach followed abductive reasoning in rearticulating the research problem of the first stage of the study and thereby producing an emergent rather than a linear structure (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The first step of the analysis was to apply the tentative findings from the data analysis of the first stage and the pre-analysis of the interviews conducted in 2013. This process of researcher triangulation facilitated the preconception of the framework for the present article (Ibid.) and improved the validity of the findings (Patton, 2002). Second, the research questions were formulated accordingly, the theoretical framework was pre-outlined, and the tentative case record was constructed. The purpose at this stage was not to point the analysis in a certain direction but rather to create a platform to move from one "research activity to another and between empirical observation and theory" (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 555; see also Dubois & Araujo, 2004). Third, the data gathered in 2013 was organised on the basis of the research questions and the results of the first stage of the study. Following discussions between the researchers, emerging key themes were outlined. The fourth step involved categorising the research data within each case and conducting cross-case analyses in order to enhance validity (Yin, 2003; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

The next section presents the findings organised by the identified themes and the set of research questions. As is common in qualitative studies, which rest on the assumption that reality is subjective, the role of interpretation in this study was substantial. However, the practice of research triangulation in this study ensured the relevance of the interpretations made. Authentic extracts from the data are presented to enhance validity (Silverman, 2001).

## Findings

The findings are organised according to two main themes. First, the impressions of the role of WOM in reputation building are discussed, and the diversity of the meanings attributed to WOM within the different cases is described. Second, the different forms of WOM which emerged are outlined in order to deepen the understanding of the ways in which WOMM was used to position a certain festival within the field and convey the purpose it appeared to serve.

### *Perceptions of the Role of WOM in Reputation Building*

Although having a long history provides a festival with some stability, the interviewees of this study shared the opinion that it is crucial for the future success of the festivals to maintain the interest of their audiences. As one interviewee from the Pori Jazz Festival, a ‘hall-mark event’, described it, “*Yes, one horror scenario is that the interest of the audience fizzles out*” (Pori Jazz, A4). Therefore, the festival organisations and their partners seek service innovations in addition to ensuring high-quality content in order to foster the ‘holistic festival experience’, “*where it is pleasant to be and nice to come again*” (Pori Jazz, A4). Pori Jazz has a pioneering heritage that can be mobilised for the continued narration of the festival story, while the festival remains relevant through its sensitivity to changes in cultural-consumption patterns and preferences. One such issue relates to expectations regarding the quality and scope of the experience that the festival offers its audience. For instance, one interviewee from Pori Jazz stressed the all-encompassing presence of the festival as an important part of establishing its position. The interviewee described the product as a 24-hour event, the success of which is dependent on consistently positive experiences across services:

*The visitor decides whether to go to Pori by bus or car and prepares a picnic basket. The visitor goes to the Jazz Street and then to a concert at Kirjurinluoto Arena [the main festival venue] and after that may have dinner or go to the clubs. Everything that happens in Pori has an effect on the visitor’s festival experience. It is not just about how the visitor is served at the festival venues; it is also how he or she is served in the shops, at the bus station and elsewhere.*  
(Pori Jazz, PA5)

The director of the Lainšuojattomat Theatre Festival extended the festival’s positive reputation with fulfilling not only the expectations of visitors as in the quote above, but also of the city’s residents. The interviewee saw the festival as assisting in the creation of a positive reputation for Pori both locally and nationally because it tends to attract wide coverage in the national media. The theatre festival’s broad programme, a combination of stage theatre, music and street theatre, which is offered

free of charge, has further enhanced its reputation as a community event. Further, Lainšuojattomat, according to its managers, is a relatively small festival and consequently is experienced as warm, personal and intimate by performers and visitors in comparison with other theatre festivals. One interviewee from the theatre festival described the atmosphere as being full of energy and as having a sense of community, which was attributable to the combination of performances, experiences and surprises that constituted the festival product. Lainšuojattomat focuses on performances that aim to change the established theatre field and encourage people to reflect on their own lives. This relates to a key aspect of cultural branding, namely how a brand provides the means for people to narrate a meaningful social identity. In this case, the ‘story’ Lainšuojattomat offers is one of staying true to one’s values and shunning mainstream practices—a position that may be compelling for contemporary consumers seeking to affirm their unique individualism. According to the Lainšuojattomat interviewee, this is achieved by taking risks and being dynamic, easy to approach, broad-minded and novel. As stated by the manager, what differentiates it from other theatre festivals, is the personal aspiration of the actors to speak to and to engage the audience. The interviewee acknowledged that although formal communication was needed, it was also important to create a ‘buzz’. Lainšuojattomat is advertised in newspapers, on the Internet and in printed marketing materials, but the interviewee understood that festival visitors usually receive information from outside the official marketing channels, for example through friends. Thus, the festival visitor’s role in the process was seen as crucial both as an informant and as co-producer. According to the interviewee most people come to the festival with an open, receptive mind, which inspires the actors to try their best when the festival permits a platform of a shared value of experience between audience and artists.

Hence, the role as conversation starter contributes to building a reputation and a unique identity for the festival, which are dynamic and open to renewal (Larson, 2009a); the festival needs to remain culturally relevant (Holt, 2003a). Creating a certain amount of *momentum* (Porispere, B1) is crucial in terms of communicating with the media, audiences, business partners and public authorities, following a narrative that represents the style and spirit of the offered product. According to the interviewee from the Porispere Festival, it is “*earning the justification for one’s existence*” (Porispere, B2). As the interviewee from Lainšuojattomat said,

*I argue that one of the secrets of our longevity is that we have done everything our own way. . . Of course, we have travelled a lot and sniffed around [in the field of performances]. But, if we accepted all the proposals that businessmen and consultants, for example, suggested, I*

*argue that there wouldn't be anything left. We need to preserve our obstinacy.*  
(Lainšuojattomat, C1)

The content of communication and information sharing, and the multifaceted ways of marketing have a crucial impact, especially from a resource perspective. As the interviewee from Porispere explained, “... *at the start, if you don't have a budget, you have to have a rough idea . . . we need to make maximum efforts to do things that generate topics that people want to share...*” (Porispere, B2). In the case of Porispere, the marketing is described as containing a wide range of actions and generated topics. Activities are produced all year round and “*the results are delivered at the festival*” (Porispere, B2). However, creating a stir around the festival is not limited to pre-event actions. The manager of the Lainšuojattomat Festival also emphasised the importance of WOM during the festival:

*The spirit of the festival is created where there are hundreds of people at street events or in clubs . . . in these places, people need to discover that ‘this is our kind of stuff’ and become interested in going to other performances that are not free of charge.* (Lainsuojattomat, C1)

The interviewees representing Pori Jazz also intertwined the strong brand and favourable reputation with positive hype around the festival and viewed it as a crucial means for securing the festival's longevity. For example, one interviewee described a good brand and reputation as a ‘lifebelt’ in bad times as well as a ‘duckboard’ to secure co-operation with partners based on trust towards the festival:

*Favourable buoyancy carried us over one or two inauspicious years . . . we lived through those times with our brand. . . . I mean, our economic situation was totally lousy, but others [i.e. audience and other stakeholders] thought we maintained a high level of artistic content. It generated a kind of forgiveness for us.* (Pori Jazz, A1)

The world-class headliners the festival has offered for decades were seen as providing a strong foundation for communication with audiences and stakeholders, which enabled the festival to garner support during periods of financial difficulty. As one Pori Jazz interviewee said, “[*On the programme*] *there needs to be a couple of compelling names which are familiar to nine out of ten average Joes*” (Pori Jazz, A5). Furthermore, another interviewee from Pori Jazz attributed the strength of the brand and reputation to succeeding in partner negotiations. The festivals' collaboration negotiations start several months before headliners are confirmed, and a positive reputation and strong brand coupled with the high quality of the artistic content form the main sources of credibility and bargaining power in these situations. Hence, “*the value of the brand is immense for [our] festival*”



(Pori Jazz, A3). Nevertheless, it is challenging to maintain a competitive advantage and a position among top festivals and to meet expectations year after year. As another interviewee from Pori Jazz stated, if a festival enters a downward spiral because of breaking its promise of quality, it soon becomes “*contracted and impoverished*” (Pori Jazz, A2).

In sum, festival organisers saw the brand, reputation and WOM as intertwined, central elements of maintaining a strong position and continued interest in the festival. A second key theme to emerge in the data was the variety of means and channels employed in the WOM marketing process.

### *The Variety of Processes in employing WOMM*

The importance of having a large variety of communication channels for building and sustaining a strong reputation was emphasised among the interviewees. This was particularly true for the marketing of the ‘hall-mark’ Pori Jazz Festival, which spans TV, radio, print and the Internet (including Web pages, banners and social media). The aim is to improve pre-festival publicity by developing digital solutions that offer potential participants a wide range of information about the event and enhance a festival feeling in advance. The idea is to achieve a position in which one can say, “*We have such a great brand and event that the artists are no longer that significant; instead, the audiences come here just because of Pori Jazz*” (Pori Jazz, A3). Interestingly, the decoupling of the brand from the programming contradicts the strong connection between the two discussed in the previous section. It assumes that the festival brand itself, regardless of its specific content, is able to create a strong enough expectation for the consumer to decide to attend the festival. This can be understood as an aspect of festivalization, whereby the festival format *sui generis* – the delivery of the experience – is, rather than the festival’s content, seen as the key source of the value of the cultural good. In order to achieve this position, the active participation of the audience in boosting the festival’s reputation is crucial. Another Pori Jazz interviewee considered visitors’ WOM among the most important factors affecting the decision of newcomers and repeat audiences to attend the festival.

In addition to commonly used marketing channels, the contribution of volunteers and artists as co-producers of festival marketing is significant, particularly in the case of the small-scale Lainšuojuottomat Festival. Networks and information sharing among those involved in the festival are notable features of the programming and production processes: “*We have our ‘confidants’ in the field who go to performances with our festival in mind [and suggest artists]. But, we make the final decisions ourselves, of course*” (Lainšuojuottomat, C2). This form of WOM, which directly shapes the artistic content of the festival, is based on a sense of trust between actors in the field: “*People*

*within the artistic field have a common rhythm of breathing . . . they all contribute to a common understanding of what the festival's annual profile should be*" (Lain§uojattomat, C1).

The significance of volunteers for WOMM was similarly strongly emphasised by interviewees connected with the Pori Jazz Festival, particularly with respect to its beginnings as a small-scale festival when volunteers strongly influenced its growth. Additionally, according to one interviewee, the credibility of Pori Jazz partly stemmed from its taking an active role in the local public debate by presenting ideas and plans that positively affected the wider community. Placing the festival in a broader context and giving it a prominent public voice supported its transformation from a temporary, annually recurring event into a permanent and significant element of the cultural fabric of the city. The prevalent surrounding discourse regarding the importance of festivals in establishing a competitive advantage for cities further provided Pori Jazz with economic and political credibility. The interviewee exemplified the relevance of WOMM in these situations and stated: "*The festival is something of which everyone can be a part, as a customer, a member, a bystander or a commentator*" (Pori Jazz, PA1).

For Porispere, a 'start-up' festival, the cornerstone of marketing is to generate buzz, as one interviewee stated: "*Our aim is to create [discussion] topics*" (Porispere, B2). In this case, buzz generation was seen as important immediately before and during the festival, but also as a continuous activity beyond the event. The interviewee justified this marketing strategy on the basis of the festival's limited duration. He considered it a high-level risk if audiences and stakeholders only connected with the festival for a few days during the year; therefore, the aim was to engage in current debates on both regional and national levels through various marketing channels in line with the style the festival intends to communicate. Examples of this strategy included using the festival's Facebook group to link the new marketing layout introduced in 2014 to a much-publicised plagiarism scandal that caused a controversy around Marimekko (an internationally renowned Finnish textile brand), and a marketing campaign in the regional newspaper with a message in support of the local ice hockey team when the whole city of Pori was celebrating the team's qualification for the Finnish play-offs. The choice of this marketing strategy for creating a positive, unique hype around the festival was attributed to the atmosphere of the host city and the attitudes of its inhabitants: "*It is unique in Finland . . . they have their own way of thinking and structuring thoughts . . . 'Poriness' as a platform for marketing communication is an almost never-ending [source]*" (Porispere, B2). This strategy (on the local level) is about establishing a connection through placing the brand in an existing recognisable social and symbolic context, which draws on and strengthens the idea of 'Poriness'. The brand narrative alludes to a particular ethos and way of being, which is proudly considered to be distinctive

of the local population. As a result, stakeholders are able to use the festival as a resource for creating a shared identity and sense of community. Thus, for the ‘start-up’ Porispere Festival, the brand message is a combination of generating information sharing both among stakeholders and audiences (external) and in creating messages among festival producers (internal). As the interviewee representing Porispere explained, “*The content and brand guide the development of the festival . . . they have the greatest importance [for managing these processes]*” (Porispere, B2). In this case, the key to success is to create circumstances in which the festival may be seen as a communal product and the starter of unexpected conversations.

Word of mouth is seen as contributing to reputation building and to the creation of a unique festival identity, or brand. With regard to the process, interestingly, the interviewees connected brand building to the managers’ personal profile. For instance, they stressed the importance of a recognisable and credible spokesperson for the festival:

*I believe it is the strength of many festivals that they have an outward face . . . the festival is a product that looks like the profile person who keeps up the spirit . . . we have XXX [the manager of Lain§uojattomat] and Porispere has XXX [their manager], but Pori Jazz doesn’t have a clear face anymore, which is quite harmful . . . then again, [Pori Jazz is] so huge nowadays that maybe it doesn’t matter anymore.* (Lain§uojattomat, C1)

The importance of the personal profile of the manager is also acknowledged in relation to co-operation with the city, other stakeholders and audiences: “XXX [The manager of the Porispere festival] *has the credibility and the reliability and also respectability among the crowds on a regional level. It is extremely valuable capital for us*” (Porispere, B2). Similarly, the directors of the independent Rakastajat Theatre Group, who manage the Lain§uojattomat Festival, are well-known among local residents and are often approached and asked for information. The interviewee thus saw festival management as personal rather than as an anonymous entity. The manager described her own relationship with the festival as follows:

*The festival is on my mind, or at least at the back of it, all year round, especially in the spring and very much so from August onwards when I think about it all the time; when I go to the shops, when I’m at the hairdresser’s, when I’m jogging or visiting friends, even while I’m sleeping, it’s in my dreams. My friends and relatives have naturally been won over from the beginning, and they discuss the festival among themselves and have their own favourites among the performers and companies. They are all excited about it, and I feel the buzz around*

*the whole city when festival time approaches. It's absolutely thrilling to see.*  
(Lainšuojattomat, PC2)

Hence, in this light, the meaning and value of a manager's personal profile as a vehicle for WOMM are remarkable. The value of the manager is not seen simply as a conversation starter for festival-related issues. Rather, managers in this context may be seen as representatives of the culturally relevant narrative that a festival offers stakeholders not only as an individual production but as an active participant in a wider community.

## **Discussion**

First, the findings clearly show that WOM is perceived as an important aspect of establishing and sustaining a festival. It enables the maintaining of a network of professionals or artists who act as valuable referees in programming the festival and building relationships with audiences and other stakeholders. Accordingly, WOM is recognised as a resource for brand building and as leverage for positioning the festival within the field. Second, the findings indicate that brand-building processes vary depending on the constitutive differences (see Table 1) that shape the festival's reputation and position in the field. Following a cultural branding perspective, the attraction and relevance of a brand depends on its relevance within the broader cultural context (Holt, 2004).

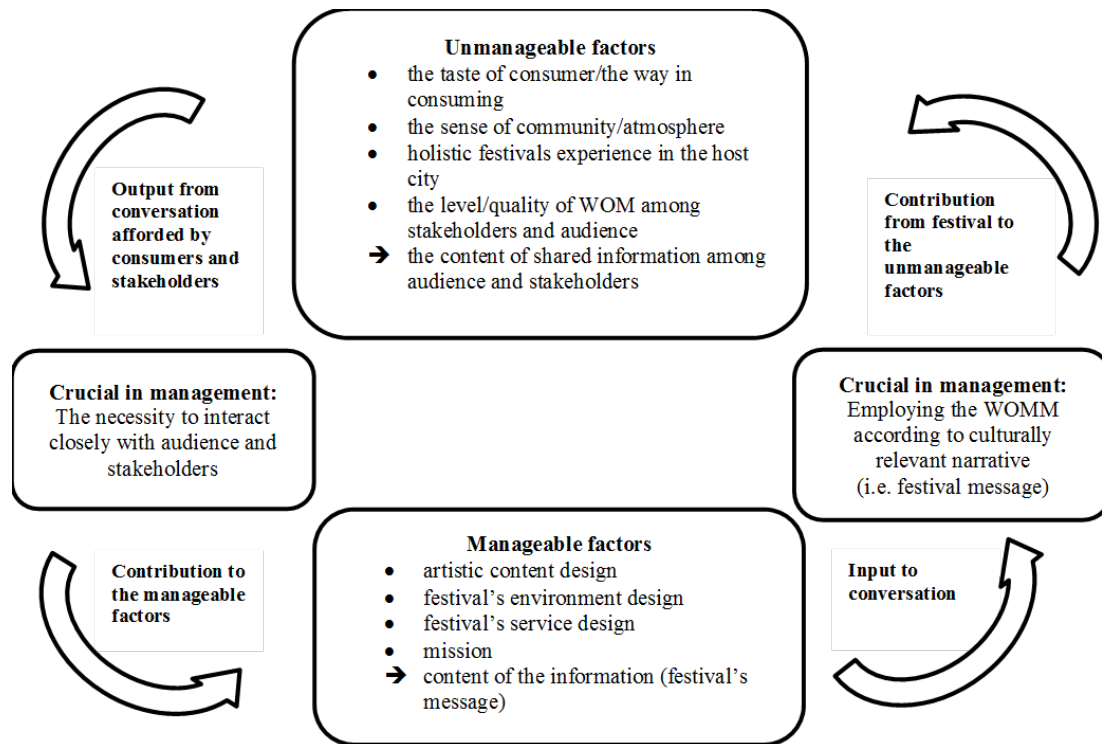
Even though the aim of producing a festival appears to be intertwined with the community and the festival experience in general, various factors of the formation of a good *reputation* were emphasised by interviewees of all the case festivals. It seems that brand building in the festival context is triggered by increased conspicuousness through WOMM. It appears that the content of information is generated based on the mission of a festival as well as on its professional status and history, that is, according to the festival's particular dramaturgy, choreography and architecture (Björner & Berg, 2012) (see Table 1). These characteristics act as input in starting the conversation in accordance with the 'festival message'. For example, the positive reputation of the relatively small Lainšuojattomat Theatre Festival was understood to have formed based on experiential factors, such as intimacy, warmth, communality and the potential for face-to-face meetings with the performers. This ethos appears to be generated through interaction among theatre professionals in the field as well as between audiences and artists. The festival's niche profile and proclaimed 'obstinacy' form the foundation for a particular type of 'artistic' narrative (Holt, 2003a), which creates an identity through countercultural positioning (Desmond, McDonagh, & O'Donohoe, 2000), in this case construed as 'sincerity' (Aaker, 1997).

The Porispere Festival, in turn, focuses strongly on generating discussion topics and creating a ‘buzz’ around the festival, drawing on surprise. The element of surprise is seen as a key means of engaging the contemporary consumer (Hutter, 2011). In this case, this means that the festival relates to current cultural consumption expectations by appropriating everyday phenomena and by linking them to their marketing. Therefore, a thorough understanding of information sources “helps marketers effectively deliver the needed message to the appropriate information sources for attracting their target audiences” (Chen, 2000, p. 240). The aim of the Porispere marketing strategy is to produce actions and events employing ‘Poriness’ as an idea generator and as brand-building leverage. Here, an important point can be made regarding the characteristics of contemporary networked festival production. The drawing on a perceived unified local identity of the inhabitants of Pori can be linked to the notion previously expressed by Pori Jazz interviewees regarding the all-encompassing experience that a festival should offer. The root of this argument lies in the goal of creating a ‘festival atmosphere’ in the city as a whole, meaning that people share their experiences of events not only with other festival attendees but also with their larger community, thereby extending the festival spirit to non-attendees. This notion refers to the importance of communal advocacy among local residents, as well as among wider groups of stakeholders and audiences. It is in the interest of a festival that the local services and service providers contribute positively to the festival experience and therefore enhance its reputation. The branding of Pori as a ‘festival city’ provides the wider frame within which Pori Jazz and other festivals are positioned, and it contributes to each festival’s becoming part of a larger cultural brand narrative. However, it means that the brand promise needs to be delivered in a consistent manner, which demands a mutual understanding of the role of the city and the festivals among stakeholders. Importantly, the ‘festival city’ cannot exist without its inhabitants, who therefore come to play a key role in its maintenance.

A second important point to be made concerns the value of the manager’s personal credibility, reliability and respectability among stakeholders. Indeed, managers’ personas can notably enhance brand building as creators and mobilisers of these processes (see Mouzas & Naudé, 2007), as shown in the findings. In these cases, the festival brand personality may become equated with the manager, who becomes the embodied representation of the spirit of the festival. Charismatic figures can prove extremely valuable in securing resources, attracting partners and building a strong brand. However, if the festival becomes closely associated with a single individual, there is a risk of demise when that person is succeeded by someone else. Of interest, then, is how a festival attains a brand personality in its own right and to what degree a festival can ever be understood independent of its management and artistic content, as alluded to by a Pori Jazz interviewee. In this case, reputation was attributed in

part to the festival's longevity, credibility and visibility in the media, as well as its pioneer status in the Finnish festival industry. Its contribution to WOM relies on the promise of a high-quality festival experience in which world-class headliners and the design of the experience environment play notable roles. As a 'hallmark' event with a long history, Pori Jazz is widely recognised and frequently discussed in the festival and leisure field, demonstrating its core position (see Luonila & Johansson, forthcoming). As demonstrated, its brand and reputation rest on different factors than those of the smaller festivals. Nevertheless, it seems that 'buzz' is utilised rather consciously in pre-festival public discussions in organising festivals such as Pori Jazz and Porispere, whereas 'buzz' is created during the festival in the case of Lainšuojuottomat.

A third point is that in these multifaceted and networked production processes managers employ WOMM as a strategic tool in marketing based on the festival's 'nature', content and mission, as illustrated in Figure 1. This provides a foundation for the brand identity and personality of each festival and thereby contributes to a broader sociocultural context within which the festival is situated. Interestingly, however, even if the managerial attempts appear to steer the brand-building process in a certain direction according to the festival's brand identity, the findings show the power of unmanageable factors—the importance of the entire festival experience and the content of shared information among audiences and other stakeholders. Characterising the festival as an extended network connecting a multitude of stakeholders, with each playing a role in ensuring its viability and attractiveness (e.g. Larson, 2009a), the findings exemplify Kozinets et al.'s (2010) understanding of WOMM as the coproduction of networked narratives. Indeed, in this study, the definition of brand identity as "the essence of the brand, which is built with stakeholders" (see Suomi, 2015, p. 40) is emphasised.



**Figure 1.** The role of word of mouth in festival management.

## Conclusion

This article contributes to research on WOM in reputation management in the context of networked festival production. Given the lack of research on WOM and reputation in festival management, this study enhances the understanding of the complex role of reputation in festival management and thereby contributes to the festival management literature concerned with reputation and brand management.

The research data indicate the importance of stakeholders, both internal and external. The close interaction between festival producers and stakeholders affect the degree of manageability in festival experience design and the creation of a meaningful festival message. This mobilises input for conversation starters to create WOM. This is consistent with the argument of Mossberg and Getz (2006, p. 324), according to whom “festivals and events can be managed as brands, but only through multi-stakeholder involvement in the process”. Therefore, we argue that as WOM is crucial in building festival brand and reputation, festival managers should aim to differentiate between manageable and unmanageable factors in these networked processes, as exemplified in Figure 1. Thus, the key issue for managers is, on one hand, to analyse the information received from audiences and stakeholders—that is, WOM—as a contribution to manageable factors. On the other hand, a

manager's ability to employ innovative marketing activities in a variety of forums may be viewed as a key to success. In this respect, the message communicated by a festival—that is, WOMM—contributes to the audience's and stakeholders' vision of consuming 'the experience'. Nevertheless, in addition to managerial attributes, there is also the question of prominent individuals in festival management and their impact on WOM and reputation. The main conclusion of the study is in showing that great value is attributed to the festival manager's ability to generate WOM and to employ WOMM by virtue of a strong profile. At the same time, however, building a reputation is also dependent on the 'holistic festival experience', which lies beyond the control of a single person. Understanding the dynamics of a festival being dependent on a manager and a festival becoming a valuable 'persona' independent of management presents an interesting aspect worthy of further investigation.

In summary, the study shows the power and advantages of networks (e.g. Larson, 2002; 2009a; 2009b) and WOM. In terms of practical managerial implications, this study emphasises that festival organisers should use attendees' references and WOM as means of promoting their event in addition to traditional advertising (Getz, 2012; Hausmann, 2012b), especially with reference to regulating the rise and fall of the festival's appeal. Nevertheless, even though managers attempt to generate meaningful messages based on the manageable factors of the festival experience, the content of shared information among the audience ultimately remains unmanageable (see Figure 1). Therefore, in these processes, audiences may be viewed as co-producers or 'prosumers' (Hausmann, 2012b) in co-creating a *valuable* message for a festival. We argue that a cultural branding approach can assist in further understanding the implications of such conditions. Implicit in cultural branding is the notion that a degree of control will inevitably be ceded to consumers of the brand who engage with and shape the brand through their actions and communication. However, understanding the broader sociocultural, economic and political context of a brand and how that context shapes consumer engagement and preferences enables the maintenance of a relevant brand narrative by affording consumers a considerable degree of participation in its telling.

Despite the fact that the research data in this study is limited to three festivals in one city in Finland, the originality of the findings indicates an additional need for the exploration of reputation and WOM following a cultural branding approach. First, research charting the evolvement of festival brand narratives over time would provide insight into how and to what extent such narratives are shaped by concomitant cultural shifts. It would also provide a foundation for comparative studies of festivals representing different genres and target audiences to analyse if and how the narratives differ in the ways they attempt to sustain the appeal and relevance of the festival. Second, research focusing



on festival visitors' perceptions of festival reputation, for example what its constituent aspects are and how it affects repeat visits and informal promotion of the festival, would yield further insight into festival marketing and management as co-productive activities. Finally, tying in with recent research on the co-creation of collective service experiences (Carù & Cova, 2015), we advocate further investigation into audiences as mediators of WOM in the collective experience that is the festival, to enhance scholarly and practical understanding of the practices and implications of WOM.

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