

The contribution of literary festivals to mental health and cultural development: A case study of Italy and Spain

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Abstract

This article explores the role of literary festivals as multidimensional institutions that combine culture, tourism, entrepreneurship, and mental well-being. Through a comparative analysis of Italy and Spain, two different development strategies emerge: the Italian experience focuses on preserving cultural heritage, local networking, and community collaboration, while the Spanish experience emphasizes internationalization, innovation, and extroversion. Examples such as Festivaletteratura, the Letterature Festival, La Milanese, the Hay Festival Segovia, the Festival Eñe, and Barcelona Poesia demonstrate that festivals transcend the narrow boundaries of literature, creating platforms for dialogue with the arts, science, technology, and fashion. Overall, the study demonstrates the role of literary festivals as catalysts for cultural entrepreneurship, social cohesion, and mental health, highlighting their contribution to the creative development of Europe.

Keywords: Literary Festivals; Mental Health; Cultural Development Entrepreneurship; Culture

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, similar festivals have developed in many European countries, such as Italy (Festivaletteratura) and Spain (Festival Eñe), where they have flourished, as well as in France and Greece (Georgoula, Terkenli), bringing literature closer to local communities, cultural memory, and regional development (Weber, 2018). Since 2000, the study of literary festivals has focused mainly on the specific subject matter of each festival, the audience it attracts, and its relationship with the national and, above all, local economy, with particular reference to tourism and cultural entrepreneurship.

Festivals are not just entertainment events; they are living public spaces where cultural heritage—both tangible and intangible—is revived through artistic activities, ceremonies, and community participation. There, artists, organizations, and citizens share memories, identities, and common experiences, creating a field of collectivity that connects the past with the present. In this context, literary festivals emerge as places of cultural expression and creative encounter, promoting not only a love of reading but also social cohesion and mental health. Participation in them cultivates a sense of belonging, reduces isolation, and enhances emotional well-being, as literature has a therapeutic effect through dialogue, imagination, and collective experience.

Thus, literary festivals are not only vehicles of cultural heritage, but also catalysts for mental resilience and creative development in modern societies.

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Literary festivals are closely linked to cultural heritage and are important cultural events that promote the dissemination of literature and strengthen local communities. They originated mainly in the 1970s and 1980s in the Anglo-Saxon world, where they began as open events for public reading and dialogue about literature. One of the most recognizable examples is the Hay Festival in Wales (1988), which laid the foundations for the international spread of the institution.

1.1. Literary Festivals and Mental Health

Participation in literary festivals significantly enhances mental and psychological well-being, as it exposes participants to positive emotional experiences and supports their personal development (Rossetti, 2021). Studies have shown that involvement in such events promotes mental well-being and increases participant satisfaction. These experiences create a set of emotions and psychological states that can be considered indicators of overall well-being.

Attending literary festivals offers unique opportunities for social and emotional reinforcement, as participants interact with people who share common interests and values. Participating in group discussions, workshops, and collective book readings creates a strong sense of community and belonging, reducing feelings of loneliness and social isolation (Rossetti, 2021).

At the same time, festival activities provide a platform for self-expression and creativity, boosting participants' self-confidence. Active participation in discussions about literature and culture allows individuals to express their opinions, hear different perspectives, and feel that their voice matters.

Participation in regular reading and discussion meetings, such as those organized at Dialogic Literary Gatherings, has been shown to improve emotional resilience, reduce anxiety levels, and promote mental well-being. Through literature, individuals can explore emotional issues, enhancing self-awareness and empathy (Zubiri-Esnaola et al., 2023).

In addition, literary festivals serve as a platform for social networking, where participants develop new friendships and professional relationships, enhancing a sense of community and social support (Rossetti, 2021). The collective experience of literature helps individuals discover new aspects of themselves, boost self-confidence, and feel that their opinions are valued. The collective experience of literature helps individuals discover new aspects of themselves, boost self-confidence, and feel that their opinions are valued. Exposure to different stories and voices promotes empathy and reduces social stereotypes, enhancing both mental and social well-being (Zubiri-Esnaola et al., 2023).

Cultural entrepreneurship highlights the role of culture as a driving force for economic growth, social empowerment, and mental well-being. In this context, festivals and cultural events serve as platforms that connect local cultural heritage with innovative business initiatives, enhancing social participation and the mental health of communities ((Maniou et al., 2025a; 2025b)

Festivals are a prime example of cultural entrepreneurship in action, as they combine cultural production, tourism, and economic development. Research on international and local examples—such as historical events in Athens, festivals in Italy, and the exploitation of Spanish salt flats—shows that festivals boost the local economy, attract tourism, and create sustainable cultural products (Maniou et al., 2025c; 2025e; 2025g).

Participation in festivals and cultural events provides clear social and psychological benefits. Participants' interaction with culture strengthens their sense of community, reduces stress, and promotes mental well-being. The longitudinal study of the relationship between culture, art, and society—through examples such as historical medicine and literature—shows that cultural activities can serve as a means of preventing and supporting mental health (Maniou et al., 2025f; 2025h; 2025st).

Overall, participation in literary festivals creates a continuous wave of positive emotions and emotional states, which are tangible indicators of the well-being and satisfaction that participants derive from the events.

2. Case Studies: Italy - Spain

The main focus of this paper is on literary festivals in Italy and Spain, which constitute a vibrant and dynamic sector of culture. They attract writers, publishers, translators, teachers, and readers from various countries, combining a love of books with cultural tourism and promoting both local and international literature. These festivals have evolved into multidimensional events that go beyond simply reading and promoting books, contributing to the promotion of cultural heritage, the strengthening of local identity, and the development of new professional opportunities through culture.

The events are not only aimed at specialists and philologists, but also at a wide, international and multi-generational audience. They combine different art forms, such as music, theatre and cinema, creating a rich and interactive experience for visitors. In addition, they incorporate contemporary forms of literary expression, such as performance poetry, slams, and graphic novels, linking literature with everyday life, tourism, technology, and collective participation.

Beyond their cultural character, festivals have also gained significant economic and tourist importance for local communities, strengthening cultural entrepreneurship and regional development. Festivals such as the Hay Festival in Spain or the United Kingdom, as well as more specialized festivals for poetry, children's books, or crime fiction, offer opportunities for writers, publishers, translators, and other cultural professionals to showcase their work, collaborate, and innovate. Each festival operates in its own way, depending on its region and community, and links creativity with innovation, while contributing to culture and the economy.

Cultural entrepreneurship refers to actions and initiatives related to culture, art, and creativity, and how these can be organized to offer experiences and knowledge to the public, while also creating opportunities for professional and economic development. In practice, this includes the organization of cultural events and festivals, which serve as vibrant spaces for entrepreneurial activity and innovation.

Cultural festivals, such as those dedicated to music, theater, cinema, traditional arts, or literature, are examples of such activities. In addition to their cultural character, these festivals have gained economic and tourist significance for local communities, strengthening cultural entrepreneurship and contributing to local development (Maniou & Mitoula, 2025).

Large festivals contribute to the tourist promotion of cities and the strengthening of their cultural identity, attracting visitors from abroad. In contrast, smaller, regional festivals provide opportunities for local artists, associations, and businesses, supporting the local economy and enhancing cultural activity at the local level (Maniou et al., 2024).

The organization of festivals is linked to various forms of economic activity, such as ticket and product sales, sponsorships, tourism promotion, and the use of digital media, such as electronic tickets or cultural applications (Maniou et al., 2024).

However, literary festivals are often not considered profit-making activities, as they operate on a non-profit basis and rely heavily on the voluntary work of the organisers, as well as the unpaid or underpaid work of writers and artists (Giorgi, 2011).

Today, literary festivals have evolved into multidimensional events that go beyond the simple nature of books and reading. They bring together authors, publishers, translators, and readers from different countries, strengthen cultural entrepreneurship, create professional opportunities, and contribute to the economic development of the regions where they are held (Maniou et al., 2024c).

At the same time, linking festivals to cultural tourism, collective participation, and the use of new technologies enhances the promotion of local identity and sustainable development. Studies have highlighted their importance in cases such as Italian literary parks and festivals in Eleusis, which combine cultural activity with local and economic development (Maniou, et al., 2024d; Maniou & Mitoula, 2025).

Finally, literary festivals serve as platforms for networking and innovation, offering opportunities for writers, publishers, translators, and other cultural professionals to present their work, collaborate, and incorporate new technologies and promotional methods (Tsalbasoglou et al., 2025). In this way, cultural entrepreneurship at literary festivals contributes to both the cultural and economic life of the regions where they are held, making them important pillars of local development and sustainable growth.

3. Literary Festivals and Cultural Entrepreneurship

Contemporary cultural entrepreneurship finds significant opportunities for growth and networking in the context of literary festivals. In Italy, the Letterature Festival Internazionale di Roma highlights the connection between literature and historical memory, incorporating multimedia performances and intercultural dialogue (Letterature Festival Internazionale di Roma, n.d.). The festival supports the creation of digital applications, such as audiobook platforms and storytelling tools, and promotes collaboration between authors, creative agencies, and startups (Letterature Festival Internazionale di Roma, n.d.).

At the same time, Festivaletteratura in Mantua takes advantage of the city's Renaissance architecture, creating a lively "space for discourse" where literature meets the local economy and small businesses (Festivaletteratura, n.d.).

Pordenonelegge promotes democratic cultural expression, with events in schools, libraries, and public spaces, strengthening the education of young professionals and digital book distribution platforms (Pordenonelegge, n.d.).

La Milanesiana in Milan promotes hybrid literature, combining arts, science, and technology, and creates an ecosystem of cultural entrepreneurship through collaborations with design studios, branding agencies, and startups (La Milanesiana, n.d.). The Women's Fiction Festival in Matera emphasizes the female voice, incorporating workshops, mentoring, and networking with publishers to create new business opportunities in the field of literature (Women's Fiction Festival, n.d.).

In Spain, Festival Eñe serves as an international networking platform, connecting authors, publishers, and investors, while promoting cultural startups and micro- entrepreneurship (Festival Eñe, n.d.). Barcelona Poesia showcases poetic production and public interventions, offering employment opportunities and collaboration with independent publishers and studios (Barcelona Poesia, n.d.). The Hay Festival Segovia has a significant economic impact, attracting an international audience and boosting tourism and business partnerships (Hay Festival Segovia, n.d.). The FLIC Festival focuses on literature and arts for children and young people, promoting cross- thematic innovation and educational entrepreneurship (FLIC Festival, n.d.).

Overall, literary festivals in Italy and Spain highlight different but complementary approaches to cultural entrepreneurship. The Italian experience emphasizes endogenous entrepreneurship and connection to cultural heritage, while the Spanish approach reinforces internationalization, innovation, and network development, creating a dynamic ecosystem of cultural and creative economy.

4. Literary Festivals and Their Contribution to Mental Health

Participation in literary festivals has been recognized as a form of cultural engagement that promotes mental health and social well-being. Through interactive readings, creative writing workshops, and multimedia events, festivals enhance psychological well-being, reduce stress, and promote community connection (Maniou et al., 2025a; Maniou et al., 2025c).

In Italy, the Letterature Festival Internazionale di Roma integrates literature, historical memory, and multimedia, offering participatory experiences that enhance mental

well-being and intercultural dialogue (Letterature Festival Internazionale di Roma, n.d.). The Festivaletteratura in Mantua connects literature with the local community, creating a sense of participation and social cohesion, which helps reduce feelings of isolation (Festivaletteratura, n.d.). Pordenonelegge promotes mental well-being through educational workshops and open discussions, offering opportunities for personal development and social integration (Pordenonelegge, n.d.).

La Milanesiana in Milan promotes psychological stimulation by connecting literature, music, theater, and technology, offering multisensory experiences that enhance emotional well-being (La Milanesiana, n.d.). The Women's Fiction Festival in Matera focuses on female creativity, supporting self-expression workshops, mentoring, and networking, which enhances mental resilience and social support (Women's Fiction Festival, n.d.).

In Spain, the Festival Eñe enhances mental well-being through the creation of international networks, interaction with other writers, and participation in collective activities, thus promoting emotional connection and social inclusion (Festival Eñe, n.d.). Barcelona Poesia encourages personal expression through poetic and artistic activities, helping to reduce anxiety and boost psychological well-being (Barcelona Poesia, n.d.). The Hay Festival Segovia and the FLIC Festival for children and young people support mental development through participation in creative processes, enhancing self-expression, collaboration, and mental well-being skills (Hay Festival Segovia, n.d.; FLIC Festival, n.d.).

Finally we underline the importance of all digital technologies in mental health cultural development and education domain that is very productive and successful, facilitates and improves the assessment, the intervention and the educational procedures via Mobiles which brings educational activities everywhere [63-65], various ICTs applications which are the core supporters of education [66-70], AI, STEM & ROBOTICS which raise educational procedures into new levers of performance [71-72], and games which transforms the education in a very friendly and enjoyable interaction [73-74]. Additionally, the enhancement and combination of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition,

mindfulness, meditation and emotional intelligence cultivation [75-88] accelerates and improves more the mental health and educational practices and results.

5. Conclusions

A comparative analysis of literary festivals in Italy and Spain highlights their importance as platforms for cultural entrepreneurship with multiple dimensions. In Italy, the emphasis is on local participation, connection with cultural heritage, and the creation of sustainable community networks, while in Spain the approach focuses on internationalization, networking, and enhancing the social and psychological well-being of participants.

Cultural entrepreneurship through literary festivals is not limited to economic development or the promotion of tourism resources. On the contrary, it proves to be a powerful tool for social empowerment and mental health, as it promotes active participation, a sense of community, and social cohesion. Engagement in festivals and cultural activities creates opportunities for self-expression, emotional support, and skill development, enhancing the psychological well-being of participants.

Furthermore, festivals act as hubs connecting culture, tourism, entrepreneurship, and mental well-being, highlighting the value of integrated cultural strategies for sustainable development. Experience from Italy and Spain confirms that investing in cultural events not only boosts the economy but also makes an important contribution to mental health, social cohesion, and the cultivation of positive collective experiences.

Compliance with ethical standards

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The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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