



Mapping Europe's Cultural Pulse: A Bibliometric Analysis of Cultural Mega Events, Music Festivals, and the European Capitals of Culture (2000-2025)

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Abstract: Cultural and music mega events have emerged as the leading cultural expression, tourism promotion, and urban regeneration sites in the European scenario. From traditional festivals such as Glastonbury and Sziget to newer, larger events such as Tomorrowland and Untold, these events transgress the boundaries of entertainment and become articulations of cultural identity, collective memory, and the creative economy. Gaining ever-increasing importance, however, research on European cultural mega events exhibits a patchy profile, with the majority of studies investigating the economic or touristic dimensions at the expense of the cultural and symbolic ones. Given the strategic role these events play in cultural policy, creative economy development, and territorial branding across Europe, understanding the evolution and structure of the scholarly field becomes increasingly important. However, despite the growing relevance of these events, there is no comprehensive, up-to-date mapping of how academic knowledge on cultural mega events has developed, which countries and institutions lead research production, and which thematic domains dominate the field. Existing studies remain dispersed, with no bibliometric synthesis capturing 25 years of scholarship. Therefore, this research presents a bibliometric examination of papers on cultural and music mega events in Europe from 2000 to 2025. Data were gathered from the Web of Science Core Collection via a systematic search query and analyzed with VOSviewer. This investigation recognises influential authors, nations, organisations, and thematic concentrations that organise this research field. The results confirm that the research has increased consistently since 2010, and prominent concentrations revolve around cultural identity and place marketing, festival experience and community involvement, and creative industries and urban regeneration. This research adds to knowledge of how European cultural mega events feature in scholarly discourse and reveals research gaps related to Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: cultural mega events; music festivals; Europe; cultural identity; place branding; bibliometric analysis; creative industry; European Capitals of Culture; legacy, sustainability.

Introduction

Whilst intellectual debate has traditionally focused on mega-sport events - such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, academic interest has increasingly shifted toward cultural and music events. These cultural mega events play an important role within the global creative economy by encouraging innovation, strengthening social cohesion, and enhancing territorial competitiveness (Mammadova & Abdullayev, 2025). The creative and cultural industries generate substantial employment, estimated at nearly 50 million jobs worldwide, and contribute around 3% to the global economy, with particularly strong impacts in Europe, where they account for more than 2.6% of GDP and provide millions of jobs (Dasgupta & Clini, 2023; Klein et al., 2021).

Over the past two decades, cultural mega events have also become central instruments in European cultural policy, urban development, and territorial branding. These large-scale cultural programmes, ranging from major festivals to landmark exhibitions and year-long cultural initiatives such as the European Capitals of Culture (ECOC), generate significant cultural, social, and economic visibility for host cities and regions. As the

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creative economy has expanded across Europe, cultural mega events have evolved from artistic gatherings into strategic policy tools that support innovation, attract tourism, stimulate local creative industries, and promote international cultural identity.

In this article, cultural mega events are defined as high-profile, high-impact cultural initiatives that mobilise substantial audiences, attract intense media attention, and produce long-term developmental effects. This definition includes recurring festivals (music, theatre, film, arts) as well as flagship cultural programmes such as the ECOC. Although music festivals receive substantial scholarly attention, Europe's cultural mega-event landscape is considerably broader. It includes large-scale art exhibitions (e.g., Documenta), major film festivals (e.g., Cannes), international theatre festivals (e.g., Sibiu), and national cultural showcases.

Across Europe, events such as Glastonbury (the UK), Sziget (Hungary), Tomorrowland (Belgium), and Untold (Romania) have emerged as influential cultural touchpoints that contribute to local identity formation and strengthen the global visibility of their host cities. Likewise, the European Capital of Culture programme has been widely acknowledged for its pioneering role in identity creation, place marketing, and cultural heritage development, acting as a catalyst that links cities to distinctive cultural narratives, iconic landmarks, and internationally recognisable cultural expressions (Ciuculescu & Luca, 2024; Ferrari & Guala, 2015; Nobili, 2005).

Cultural mega events create both tangible and intangible legacies, ranging from cultural infrastructure, urban reinvestment, and increased tourism attractiveness to reinforced cultural networks, heightened cultural participation, and enriched cultural vibrancy (Jones & Ponzini, 2021; Liu, 2019). Participation dynamics play an essential role in sustaining these effects, as elevated engagement during events often translates into greater long-term cultural involvement, contributing to stronger cultural sustainability and legacy. Additionally, the cultural heritage and experiential value generated by these events significantly influence destination image, country brand narratives, and regional identity (Ciuculescu & Luca, 2024; Nobre & Sousa, 2022).

Despite the importance of cultural mega events within European cultural policy and creative economy frameworks, there is limited systematic knowledge about how research in this field has evolved. Little is known about which countries and institutions lead scholarly production, how collaborative networks are structured, which thematic domains dominate the field, and how conceptual clusters have developed.

This study conducts a bibliometric analysis of research on European cultural and music mega events to identify publication trends, country-level collaborations, and thematic structures within the academic literature. The analysis is particularly relevant in the European context, where cultural policy and creative economy strategies have expanded considerably and where Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries increasingly rely on cultural mega events as tools for post-socialist repositioning and regional development. By mapping the intellectual landscape of cultural mega-event research through performance indicators and science-mapping techniques, this study provides evidence-based insights that can inform more inclusive cultural policies, enhance understanding of destination image dynamics, and support long-term strategies for cultural sustainability.

Literature review

Academic debate around cultural and musical mega events has grown considerably over the past two decades, becoming increasingly interdisciplinary. Scholars have gone beyond simple economy- and tourism-based discourses to highlight cultural identity, urban renewal, and symbolic heritage as important aspects of event studies (Chalip & Fairley, 2019; Preuss, 2018). In Europe, these events are viewed both as reflections of and additions to culture, influencing how cities and nations acquire and assert positions

in the global creative economy (Cerisola & Panzera, 2021; Colombo & Richards, 2017; Ferrari & Guala, 2015). Mega events, such as music festivals and European Capitals of Culture, act as catalysts for urban renewal, destination marketing, and enhancing local and national representations, and often create long-lasting intangible legacies that transform identity and global outlooks (Arnegger & Herz, 2016; Colombo & Richards, 2017; Ferrari & Guala, 2015).

These events also generate innovation and creativity, connecting cities into linked nodes in global cultural networks and thereby facilitating the development of vibrant, creative urban landscapes (Cerisola & Panzera, 2021; Colombo & Richards, 2017; Hoeven & Hitters, 2019). The connection between local circumstances – such as human resources, openness, and governance – and cultural event vibrancy is similarly crucial to ensure the best possible effects on regional economies and social integration (Cerisola & Panzera, 2021; Hoeven & Hitters, 2019). Furthermore, the political dimension and logic of such events have also increasingly come under examination, with cities exploiting them to align with broader policy agendas and negotiate position in a global competitor environment (Bennett, 2020; Lauermann, 2019).

Cultural mega events and identity construction

Cultural mega events, such as the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme and festivals, have been identified as instruments for constructing collective identities and a sense of affiliation. Richards and Palmer (2010) highlight that cultural mega events function like "urban mirrors" that transform local narratives into artistic stories, performance, and interactive public engagement. They also indicate that cities utilise cultural mega events to transform and promote themselves as creative and cosmopolitan cities, while simultaneously addressing questions of inclusivity, diversification, and cultural protection.

The identity dimension is also linked with cultural diplomacy and soft power theory. Cases such as Liverpool 2008 and Matera 2019 feature culture being used to shift perceptions and gain wider global exposure (Liu, 2019; Pietrapertosa et al., 2019). They also argue that cultural events promote social sustainability by spreading universal principles and fostering civic life. This rationale is linked to broader acceptance of culture serving the "fourth pillar" in the context of sustainable development.

Festivals, experience, and destination image

Festivals and music events constitute a rich subfield of mega events, connecting tourism, experiential participation, and identity construction. Early research by Getz (2008) and Quinn (2005) highlighted the importance of festivals as champions of destination development. Recent research analyzes their role in developing emotional geographies and experiential economics. Scholars increasingly highlight that the experiences generated by cultural mega events are multidimensional and differ substantially between tourists and residents. Visitors often perceive festivals as immersive, transformative, and hedonic experiences shaped by novelty, atmosphere, and social interaction. In contrast, local communities experience them through the lens of everyday life, cultural familiarity, and disruptions to urban routines. These dual experiential layers create complex event meanings that combine celebration, identity expression, temporary escapism, and community-building (Finkel & Platt, 2020; Sterchele, 2020; Yen, 2022).

The relationship between cultural mega events and destination image extends beyond increased visibility to deeper symbolic and representational processes. Events contribute to destination branding by projecting specific cultural narratives, emotions, and identity cues that reshape external perceptions of a city or region (Süli et al., 2024; Xu, 2022). Research shows that destination image is constructed not only from promotional strategies but also from lived and mediated experiences, artistic

performances, and community participation, making cultural mega events powerful tools for long-term place branding and reputation building (Hajjaj et al., 2024)

In Europe, representative festivals such as Sziget in Hungary, Tomorrowland in Belgium, and EXIT in Serbia embody the role of musical events in creating cultural discourses and building national identity. Musical events also serve here as vehicles of soft power, bearing and extending collective cultural messages over national borders.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the Untold Festival in Romania has become a prominent example of a major musical event with the potential to restore a city's authority on the global radar. Moisescu et al. (2019) imply that Untold positions itself as both a cultural identity and a tourism product, with repercussions on outsider perceptions and native identity. Richards (2018) and Rotariu (2010) also illustrated that Sibiu 2007 – alongside its involvement in the ECoC programme – marked a considerable boost in the city's prestige among European publics.

Legacy, sustainability, and research gaps

Legacy remains a contested and evolving concept in event scholarship. While early research focused on tangible outcomes such as infrastructure and tourism revenue, recent studies emphasize long-term cultural and social legacies, including knowledge transfer, creative networks, entrepreneurship, and collective memory. Legacy is now widely recognized as encompassing both planned and unplanned, positive and negative, tangible and intangible outcomes that persist beyond the event itself (Liu, 2019). Recent frameworks categorize legacy into economic, social, environmental, and cultural aspects, with cultural legacy still under-researched compared to others (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2021; Liu, 2019). Notably, cultural legacy includes sustained cultural activities, strengthened networks, new organizations, and expanded audiences (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2021; Liu, 2019).

However, there are some research gaps in the study of legacy as well. First of all, the relationship between mega events and urban heritage preservation is underexplored, especially regarding long-term impacts (Ponzini, 2021). Moreover, the effects of technology and digital experiences on legacy are emerging but not well understood (Richards, 2018; Qiu et al., 2022). Last but not least, there is a lack of long-term, post-event analyses, with most research focusing on short-term impacts (Jones & Ponzini, 2021; Ong & Coetze, 2023).

In parallel, sustainability has become an increasingly important lens through which cultural mega events are examined. The sustainability of such events spans environmental considerations (waste, carbon footprint, resource management), socio-cultural sustainability (inclusion, accessibility, community benefit), and economic sustainability (long-term financial viability).

First of all, when it comes to environmental considerations, mega events can generate significant waste, carbon emissions, and resource consumption. Effective strategies include waste minimization, energy efficiency, green transportation, and resource management. The adoption of frameworks like the Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) model and green event management practices has been shown to enhance resource efficiency and minimize environmental impact (Astawa et al., 2019; Baroghi et al., 2024; Cavallin Toscani et al., 2024; El-Said et al., 2025; Suvittawat et al., 2025). However, challenges remain in measuring and mitigating negative impacts, especially at large-scale events (Astawa et al., 2019; Baroghi et al., 2024; Cavallin Toscani et al., 2024).

Secondly, socio-cultural sustainability focuses on inclusion, accessibility, community benefit, and cultural preservation. Community participation, cultural values, and stakeholder engagement are critical for maximizing positive social impacts and fostering a sense of belonging and identity (Astawa et al., 2019; Mair et al., 2021; Negrușa et al.,

2016; Sharma, 2025). Events that prioritize cultural integration and community engagement report higher participant satisfaction and stronger legacies (Sharma, 2025).

Lastly, from an economic perspective, long-term financial viability is essential. While mega events can attract investment and stimulate local economies, they also risk financial overreach and underutilized infrastructure after the event. Strategic planning, legacy use of facilities, and stakeholder collaboration are necessary to ensure economic benefits persist beyond the event period (Baroghi et al., 2024; Kersulić et al., 2020; Sun, 2024).

In conclusion, emerging research emphasises that successful cultural mega events embed sustainability principles into their planning, governance, and legacy strategies to ensure that their impacts extend beyond the event period and create lasting public value (Jones & Ponzini, 2021; Mair et al., 2021).

Most bibliometric output is centred in Western Europe, with a modest profile of case studies in Central and Eastern Europe (Hudec & Džupka, 2014). Furthermore, single-disciplinary strategies – tourism, urban planning, or policy-dominate the majority of analyses, and cultural sociology and communication approaches have yet to become integrated. Recent research debates (Alshikhy et al., 2025; Richards, 2017) have highlighted the importance of more integrated and comparative approaches to understanding the role of cultural mega events in shaping European identity in the context of globalisation and digitalisation. In this sense, events such as Untold or EXIT become no longer cultural commodities but rather testbeds for youth culture, technological innovation, and transnational creativity.

Methodology

Research objectives

This bibliometric study is structured around a set of interconnected research objectives that reflect the multidimensional nature of cultural mega-event scholarship in Europe. First, the analysis aims to map the evolution of academic research on cultural and music mega events between 2000 and 2025, tracing how scientific production has grown and diversified across disciplines. Second, it seeks to identify the main contributors, institutional affiliations, and international collaboration networks that shape this research landscape, with particular attention to country-level patterns, authorship structures, and publication outlets. Third, the study aims to uncover the dominant thematic clusters and emerging conceptual directions within the field, especially those related to cultural identity, social cohesion, destination image, and long-term cultural legacy. Together, these objectives capture the complexity of cultural mega-event research, spanning cultural policy, creative industries, experience studies, and cultural sustainability, and provide the analytical foundation for the performance and mapping analyses conducted in the subsequent stages.

Data collection

Data for this study were extracted from the Web of Science Core Collection, a comprehensive, multidisciplinary academic database recognised for its rigorous indexing standards and inclusion of high-impact, peer-reviewed publications. The database was selected to ensure the reliability and academic quality of the analysed records, as it includes leading journals in cultural studies, tourism, and event management.

The following search query was applied to retrieve relevant publications: TS = ("cultural mega-event*" OR "music festival*" OR "cultural festival*" OR "art festival*" OR "European Capital of Culture" OR "Eurovision" OR "international festival*") AND ("Europe" OR "European Union" OR "United Kingdom" OR "Romania" OR "Hungary" OR

"Belgium" OR "Germany" OR "France" OR "Spain" OR "Italy") AND ("culture" OR "cultural identity" OR "community engagement" OR "creative industries" OR "destination image" OR "place branding" OR "cultural impact" OR "legacy"))

This search strategy was designed to capture studies addressing cultural and music mega events within the European context, including both recurring and one-off events such as the European Capital of Culture, Eurovision Song Contest, and large-scale music festivals (e.g., Sziget, Tomorrowland, Untold).

The query returned 433 records, including journal articles, conference papers, and book chapters, published between 2000 and 2025. The dataset offers broad disciplinary coverage and provides a reliable foundation for bibliometric mapping and trend identification in the field of European cultural mega events.

Screening process and PRISMA framework

To ensure transparency and methodological consistency, the research design followed the general structure of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Page et al., 2021). Although primarily developed for systematic reviews, the PRISMA logic of identification, organisation, and reporting was applied to structure the bibliometric process. This approach allowed for a clear and replicable workflow – from the initial search and data extraction to the processing and visualisation stages performed in VOSviewer. A PRISMA-inspired flow diagram was developed to illustrate the sequence of stages, including the number of records identified in the Web of Science, exported for analysis, and included in the final bibliometric mapping. This structured process improved the reliability, traceability, and reproducibility of the dataset (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021).

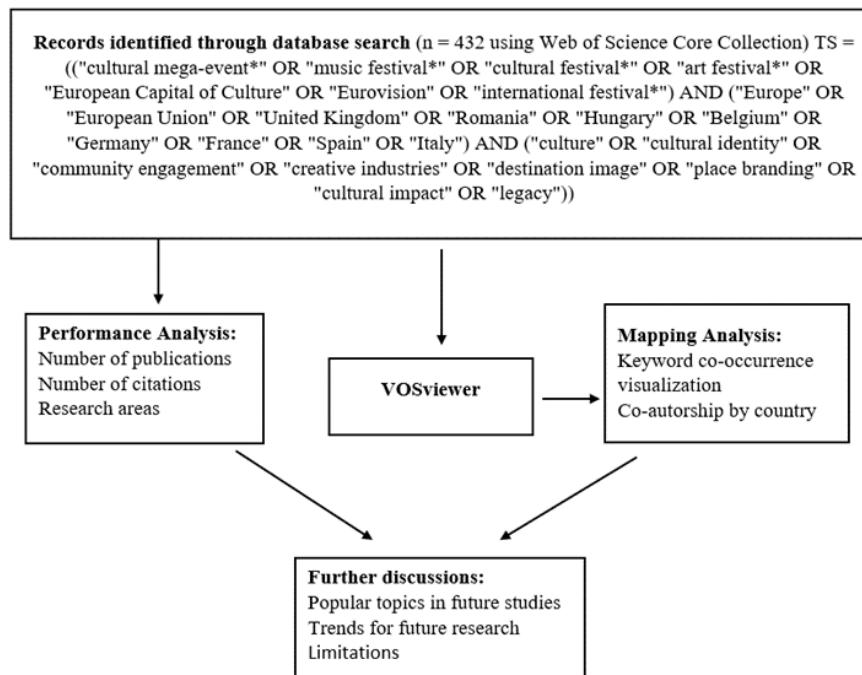


Figure 1. Methodological framework

Source: authors' creation, adapted from the PRISMA statement (Moher et al., 2009) and readapted based on Niculescu and Barbu (2024).

Bibliometric tools and analysis

Bibliometric analysis was also performed using VOSviewer, in conjunction with the descriptive and analytical capabilities of the Web of Science Core Collection. This programme supports several analyses, such as co-authorship, co-citation, and keyword co-occurrence, and is distinctive for its ease of use and advanced visualisation capabilities (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). VOSviewer can handle very data-intensive datasets and is usually employed in conjunction with databases such as Web of Science or Scopus to produce both summative, quantitative output and advanced research network visualisation (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). The built-in workflow enabled the examination of the research context in considerable detail, with cultural and music mega-events in Europe in mind.

Within this framework, two complementary stages were conducted:

Performance analysis

This phase was used to determine the total structure and development of the research output. Using the built-in statistical functions in Web of Science, trends in publications were explored year by year, by document type, and by discipline. Citation numbers and the most influential works were also perused to quantify important intellectual contributions and highly cited studies on the subject.

Mapping analysis

At level two, the bibliographic data was uploaded into VOSviewer to create a knowledge network and connections between countries, concepts, and keywords.

A keyword co-occurrence analysis was applied to identify emerging research themes and visualise conceptual links among subfields such as cultural identity, festival experience, creative industries, and urban heritage (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

A co-authorship-by-country analysis investigated country collaboration behaviours and how scholarly networks in Europe have evolved, drawing on cultural mega-event research.

Findings

The results of these analyses were shown in overlay diagrams and bibliometric maps that give a combined visualisation of the intellectual, thematic, and social structures of the research field. Such visualisation tools provide an overview of research dynamics, collaborative networks, and new conceptual frameworks in modern scholarship on European cultural and music mega events.

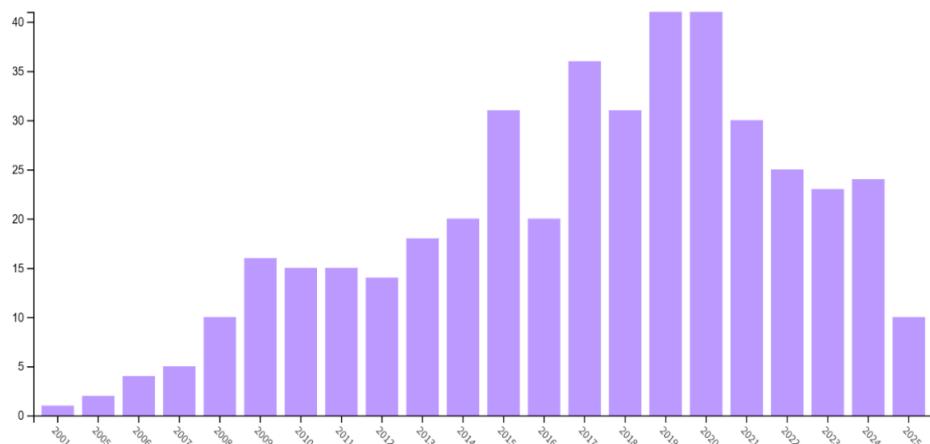


Figure 2. Annual distribution of publications on cultural and music mega events in Europe (2001–2025)

Source: WoS Core Collection. Visualisation created by the author using WoS analytics.

Figure 2 shows the chronological development of research articles on mega cultural and music events in Europe from 2001 to 2025. The profile depicts a continuous increase in research output since 2005 and a rapid rise since 2010. This rise reflects a growing scholarly and institutional concern with the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme and high research growth rates on cultural festivals in tourism and urbanism.

There is a first peak around 2015 that corresponds to the spreading of case studies on Marseille 2013, Košice 2013, and Riga 2014. The period with the highest productivity, however, falls between 2017 and 2020, with numbers exceeding 35 per year and peaking in 2019–2020. This high level of research activity corresponds to both the maturity of the research field and the high profile of Matera 2019, Plovdiv 2019, and Rijeka 2020, which were major European cultural events that triggered cross-national comparative work.

After 2020, the dataset records a gradual decline, which can be attributed to the temporary disruption of cultural events caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent research reorientation toward digital participation and cultural resilience. However, publication levels remain consistently higher than in the pre-2010 period, indicating that the topic has become institutionalised within European event and cultural studies.

The overall pattern presents that from individual research works in the early 2000s to a collaborative research aggregate marked by communication across disciplines, utility in informing policy, and diversification at the regional level – with Central and Eastern Europe becoming an ever more significant contributor in the post-2015 era.

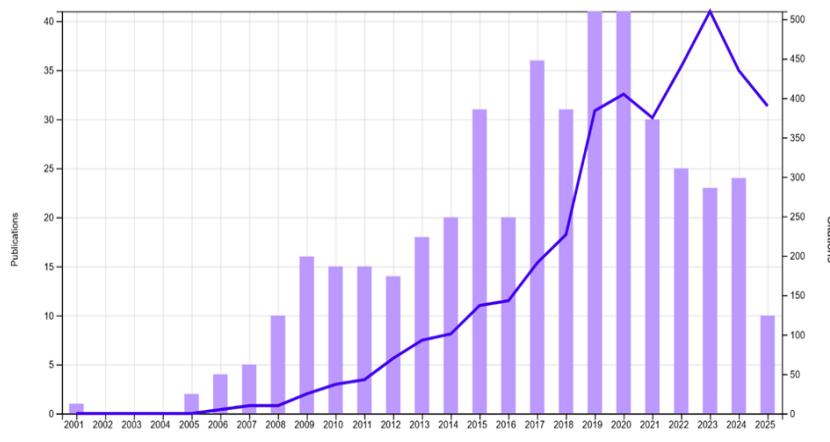


Figure 3. Annual evolution of publications and citations on cultural and music mega events in Europe (2001–2025)

Source: Web of Science Core Collection. Visualisation created by the author using WoS analytics

Figure 3 presents annual publication and citation patterns for cultural and music mega events in Europe between 2001 and 2025. It projects a slow, steady rise in research output since the mid-2000s, followed by a sharp jump in 2010. This shift indicates a heightened academic focus on cultural policy, event-related tourism, and city brand promotion, driven by the global breakthrough of mega European cultural events such as the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme and international music festivals such as Sziget and Tomorrowland.

The number of publications shows a steep upward trend from 2013 to 2020, with the highest number in 2019–2020, during which more than 35 papers were published per year. This spike corresponds to two important European cultural events, Matera 2019 and Rijeka 2020, which have invited related in-depth comparative and case-study works.

Citations follow a similar, albeit slightly later, pattern, expanding exponentially since 2015 and peaking around 2021, with nearly 500 citations. This lateness reveals the typical diffusion process in academic research, where, in the years after publication, a new study begins to accrue recognition. This persistent high level of citations since 2020 attests to the maturation of research on cultural and music mega events, which has emerged as a very influential field in cultural studies, tourism, and regional development scholarship.

A slight dip in both papers and citations in the years after 2021 likely reflects the combined influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted mass events and shifted research agendas, and the solidification of core theoretical foundations laid earlier. However, stability in the years since 2022 suggests ongoing scholarly interest in cultural resilience, digitalisation, and event recovery from pandemic disruption.

In short, the diagram depicts a consistently incremental institutionalisation of the subject, from episodic research in the early 2000s to an established, transdisciplinary research field grounded in the European research agenda.

Types and research areas of publication

Table 1. Distribution of document types on cultural and music mega events in Europe (2001–2025)

Document Type	Record Count	% of Total (n = 432)
Article	332	76.85%
Book	1	0.23%
Book Chapter	16	3.70%
Book Review	1	0.23%
Early Access	4	0.93%
Editorial Material	9	2.08%
Letter	1	0.23%
Proceedings Paper	90	20.83%
Review Article	2	0.46%
Total	432	100%

Source: Web of Science Core Collection (author's own processing)

Table 1 presents an overview of the distribution of document types covered by the dataset of 432 records extracted from the Web of Science Core Collection for the years 2001–2025. The findings suggest that research on cultural and music mega events in Europe is dominated mainly by peer-reviewed journal articles, which account for around 77% of all publications. This high percentage illustrates the topic's academic consolidation and its good representation in research-based scholarly journals on cultural studies, tourism, and urban development.

It boasts a high percentage, around 21%, that is made up of conference proceedings papers, which accurately reflect the vibrant and dynamic nature of this research sector. Most new areas, especially those focused on innovation in festivals, creative industries, and cultural policy assessments, often first germinate at the conference level before maturing into full journal papers. Book chapters (3.7%) and editorial sections (2.1%) comprise a smaller but significant cluster, with interdisciplinary spreading between edited volumes and professional commentaries. The low representation in review

articles (0.46%) indicates a research void in this area, with comparatively few systematic literature reviews to date on cultural mega events.

Overall, the publication profile confirms that this research field is established and expanding, with a substantial foundation in journal scholarship, supported by a maturing conference and edited-book profile, qualities typical of a field in transition to full academic institutionalisation.

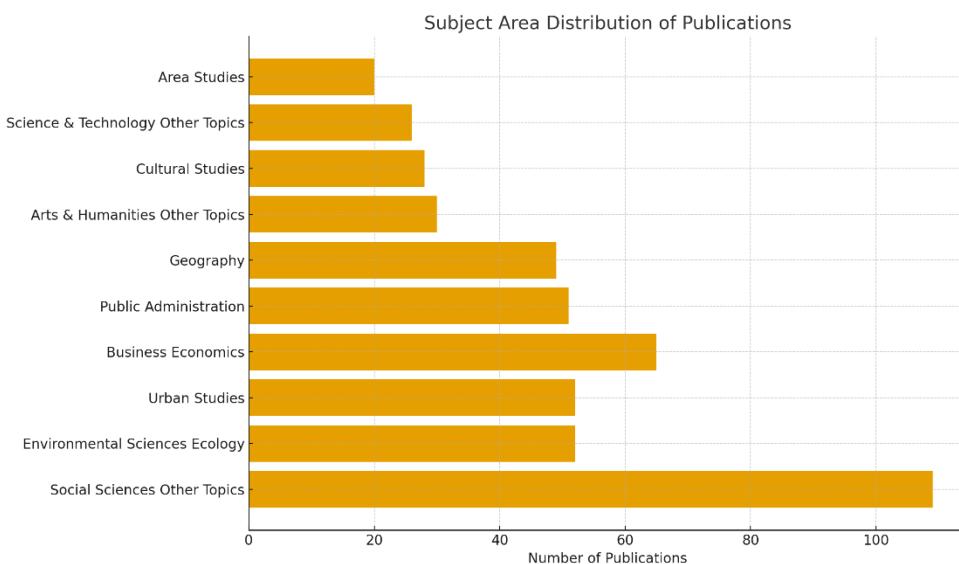


Figure 4. Distribution of research areas for publications on cultural and music mega events in Europe (2001–2025)

Source: Web of Science Core Collection (author's own processing)

Figure 4 shows the structure of research areas in the Web of Science database on cultural and music mega events in Europe, revealing the multidisciplinary nature of this research. The treemap reveals that the research area draws on the social sciences, though it spans a variety of overlapping disciplines. The largest number of sources belongs to "Social Sciences – Other Topics" (109), supporting the idea that mega-event research draws on concepts from sociology, communication, and public policy. A second top contributor is "Business and Economics" (65 sources), which supports a high managerial and tourism-oriented dimension, including event marketing, brand destinations, and the creative economy.

Also noteworthy are the high numbers from "Urban Studies" (52), "Public Administration" (51), and "Environmental Sciences & Ecology" (52), which illustrate the connection between cultural events, urban renewal, and sustainable development. These groups also reflect how cultural and music mega events increasingly serve as tools for urban transformation, sources of policy innovation, and catalysts for ecological enlightenment. Other small but significant clusters are "Geography" (49) and "Cultural Studies" (28), which investigate space and symbolic movements such as place identity, territorial branding, and cultural representation. Areas like "Arts and Humanities – Other Topics" (30) and "Area Studies" (20) point to the participation of humanistic and comparative regional methods, in particular in the context of European integrations. Lastly, "Science and Technology – Other Topics" (26) advocates stronger interests in digitalisation, data analysis, and intelligent event handling – very much relevant to post-pandemic cultural innovation.

In total, the distribution by discipline affirms that cultural and music mega-event research in Europe takes a highly interdisciplinary approach, interweaving cultural theory, policy research, environmental science, and economic geography. This

multiplicity punctuates the field's dual identity, spanning social, cultural, and technology aspects in comprehending Europe's event-based cultural evolution.

Table 2. Top publishing sources on cultural and music mega-events in Europe (2001–2025)

Rank	Source title	Number of publications
1	European Planning Studies	18
2	International Journal of Cultural Policy	14
3	Sustainability	12
4	Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events	10
5	Cities	6
6	Journal of Place Management and Development	6
7	Almatourism – Journal of Tourism, Culture and Territorial Development	5
8	European Urban and Regional Studies	5
9	International Journal of Event and Festival Management	5
10	IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering	5
11	Place Branding and Public Diplomacy	5

Source: Web of Science Core Collection (author's processing)

Table 2 presents the seminal publications and journals that comprise the research literature on cultural and music mega events in Europe. The findings illustrate a very interdisciplinary publication pattern, including urban studies, cultural policy, sustainability, and tourism management.

The most prolific outlet, European Planning Studies (18 articles), shows how the subject sits firmly within the urban regeneration and regional planning discourse, framing cultural events as catalysts of transformation in the socio-spatial context. Second, the International Journal of Cultural Policy (14 articles) supports the policy focus that associates mega events with governance, participation, and cultural diplomacy.

Sustainability (12 articles) has become a growing field, reflecting the increasing incorporation of event research into environmental and socio-cultural sustainability since 2015. Likewise, the Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events (10 articles) reflects a growing concern with policy design and assessment frameworks in mega events. Other titles, such as European Urban and Regional Studies and Cities, highlight the significance of place-making, creative urbanism, and space identity in understanding cultural mega events. The articles on the theme of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy (5 articles) highlight the communicative dimension of event research, i.e., how festivals nourish the city image and build the country's reputation.

Lastly, specialised channels such as Almatourism and the International Journal of Event and Festival Management attest to the fact that the field indeed resides at the intersection of tourism, culture, and event research. A representation of the IOP Conference Series also attests to the vigorous dissemination of early-stage research in the format of scholarly conference proceedings, a sign of research-method diversification and innovation in the field.

In total, the table presents an advanced, interdisciplinary research process that brings together inputs from planning, cultural policy, sustainability, and branding, all at the core of comprehending the multifaceted influence of cultural and music mega events in Europe.

Bibliometric analysis

As mentioned in the Methodology section, this part of the article will use the bibliometric tool VOSviewer for a mapping analysis. First, the keyword co-occurrence will be analysed, followed by co-authorship by country.

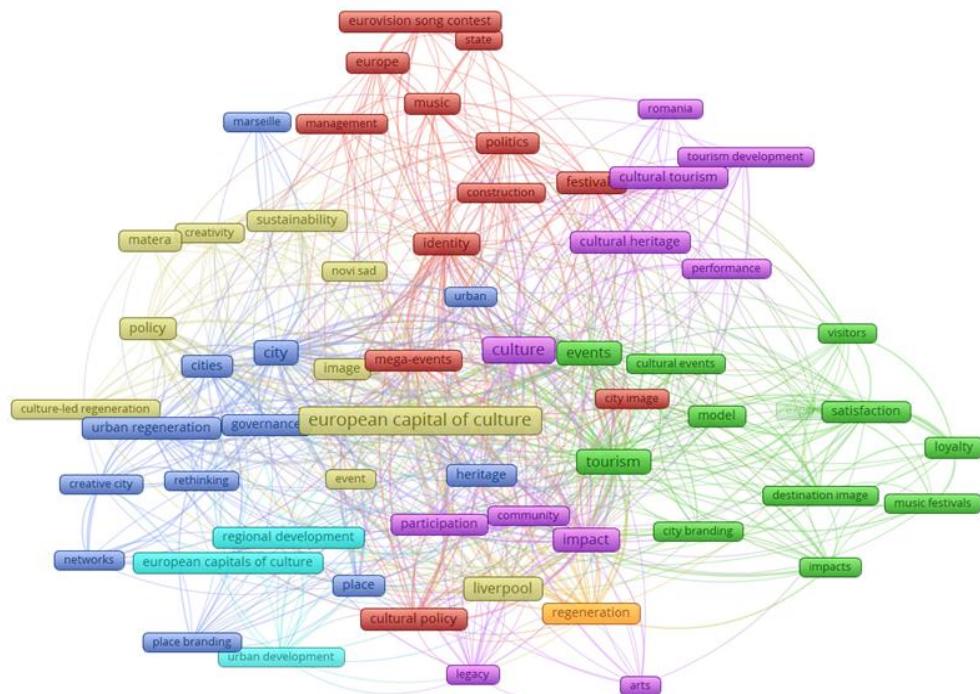


Figure 5. Keyword co-occurrence map illustrating major research themes in studies on European cultural and mega events (2000–2025)

Source: Author's elaboration using data from WoS (analysed with VOSviewer)

Keyword co-occurrence analysis, with 62 terms across seven clusters (691 links, total link strength 1326), reveals a dense, diversified thematic structure in the literature on European cultural and music mega events. The red cluster, with the keywords identity, politics, music, Europe, and the Eurovision Song Contest, examines the symbolic and political dimensions of cultural events, exploring how Eurovision negotiates national identity, cultural diplomacy, and the idea of "Europeaness."

The blue cluster, where the city, governance, creative city, urban regeneration, and networks dominate, corresponds to the urban and creative city agenda, where culture becomes an agent of regeneration, innovation, and local development. The yellow cluster, with the keywords policy, sustainability, creativity, Matera, and Novi Sad, highlights the dimension of policy and sustainability, and how European Capitals of Culture achieve long-term creative strategies and sustainable approaches to governance.

The purple cluster, focusing on cultural tourism, tourism development, cultural heritage, performance, and Romania, emphasizes the role of tourism and cultural performance, highlighting the origins of Eastern European case studies in the discourse. The green cluster, around tourism, destination image, city branding, satisfaction, and music festivals, aligns with a marketing-oriented line of thought, in which visitor experience, destination image, and loyalty are shaped by events such as Sziget, Tomorrowland, or Untold. The orange cluster, with regeneration, legacy, cultural policy, and impact, corresponds to discussions on long-term legacy, cultural regeneration, and community participation, and cyan, with place branding, regional development, European Capitals of Culture, and urban development, stresses regional and territorial dimensions,

connecting ECoC projects with more general approaches to place branding and regional competitiveness.

Overall, these clusters depict the evolution of research from cultural policy and construction of identity to interrelated culture, brand construction, and sustainable development, and also exhibit a unique geographical imbalance: Western European cases continue to dominate, while Eastern European contexts, like in Romania, continue to appear but become more evident in later years.

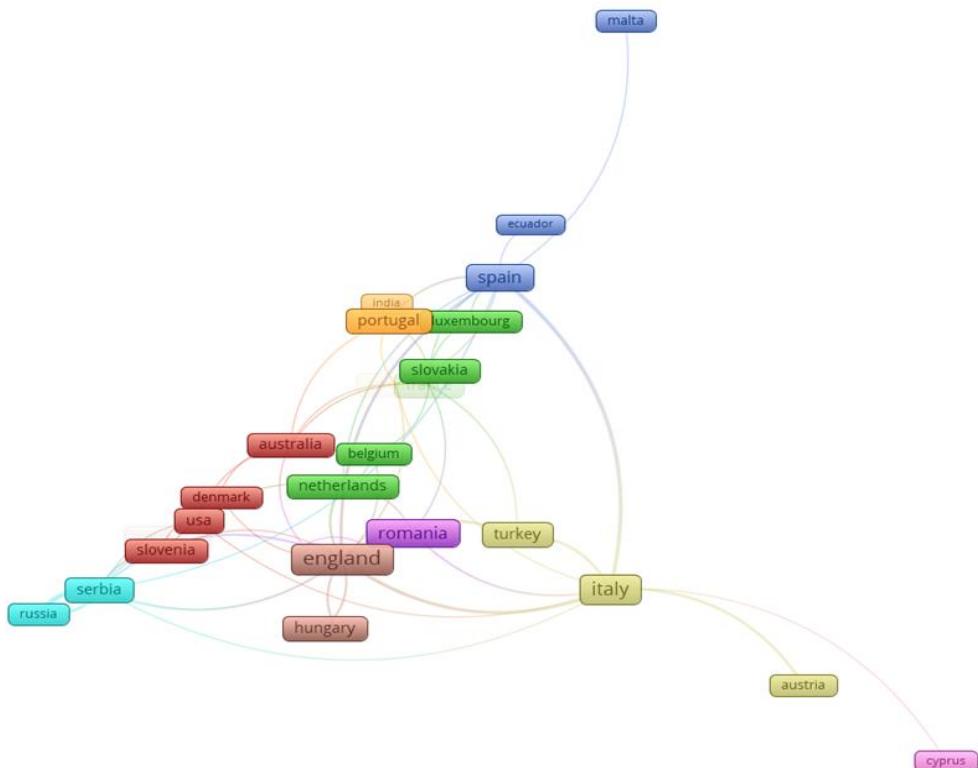


Figure 6. Co-authorship network by country in studies on European cultural and mega events (2000–2025)

Source: Author's elaboration using data from WoS (analysed with VOSviewer)

The co-authorship map presents a fairly dense yet regionally bipolar pattern of collaboration, with multiple interconnected clusters that resemble Europe's research landscape in cultural and music mega-event research. This network encompasses both European and non-European partners, with England, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, and Romania appearing as the most central nodes, reflecting their comparatively high publication output or co-authorship frequency.

The red cluster connecting England, Slovenia, Denmark, Australia, and the USA encompasses an Anglo-Saxon collaboration network that has typically been affiliated with comparative mega-event research, tourism, and cultural policy. In comparison, the blue cluster with Spain, Malta, and Ecuador depicts Iberian-led collaborations that characteristically engage in case analyses of the European Capitals of Culture and cultural tourism. Conversely, the green cluster comprising Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Slovakia depicts a Western-Central European axis with extensive institutional connections and interdisciplinary orientations toward urban regeneration and cultural governance.

Based in Italy and Turkey, with outreach to Austria and Cyprus, the yellow cluster depicts Mediterranean collaborations with a strong policy and heritage focus. Lastly, the

cyan cluster comprising Serbia and Russia, with the purple node of Romania, describes the emergence of an Eastern European research network that engages with regional development, event tourism, and identity construction.

The map, in general, depicts England and Spain as leading research centers with an array of interregional connections. Conversely, Serbia and Romania feature as bridging center nodes, connecting Western and Eastern European scholarly interests. This aside, the apparent disconnection of the Eastern subnetwork indicates that Central and Eastern European cultural mega-event research remains highly fragmented. This reminds us significantly of the imperative to extend international collaboration and to incorporate underrepresented settings, including Romania.

Results and discussions

Bibliometric results highlight how research on European cultural and music mega events has transformed from an atomised, locally specific body of work into a mature, interdisciplinary field that connects cultural studies, urban planning, tourism management, and sustainability science. Temporal analysis also verifies the finding that this growth is linked to wider European cultural policy strategies and the institutionalisation of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme as an object of research and political instrument for urban renewal and identity construction. In particular, the bibliometric performance indicators show a marked increase in publications after 2010, confirming that cultural policy frameworks and the institutionalisation of the ECoC programme have significantly shaped the trajectory and density of research output in Europe. This is similar to the line of argument advanced by Richards and Wilson (2004), who argue that ECoC cities are cultural laboratories where culture is transformed into social renewal and international exposure.

The first notable remark is the transition from economic to symbolic paradigms in the research on mega events. Previous studies, increasingly drawing on urban economics and tourism marketing, mostly gauged success through the lens of visitor inflows or short-term returns (Gratton & Preuss, 2008). By contrast, the keyword clusters detected here – specifically the one around identity, cultural diplomacy, and participation – signal a paradigmatic shift towards culture as an impetus for shared meaning-production and soft power (Grix & Lee, 2013; Liu, 2019). This thematic concentration is consistent with the structure of the co-occurrence network, where identity-related terms form a dense, central cluster, indicating increasing scholarly convergence around the symbolic, socio-cultural, and diplomatic dimensions of cultural mega events.

Secondly, the co-authorship network unveils long-lasting geographical imbalances within European research collaboration. West and North Europe – by far the UK, Spain, and Italy – continue to be the leading contributors to the research discussion, and Central and Eastern European nations like Romania, Serbia, or Slovakia are still building specific research profiles. This observation is consistent with Hudec and Dzupka's (2014) remarks on the imbalance in research attention to post-socialist settings where the cultural policy infrastructure is still being consolidated. Romanian-initiated research on the Untold Festival and Sibiu 2007 signals an increased attempt to expand the cultural geography of Europe and to relocate the region within the active sphere of the creative economy.

The third insight regarding interpretation concerns theoretical pluralism and interdisciplinarity. Research areas spanning the social sciences, business management, public administration, and environmental studies represent the field's development beyond disciplinary boundaries. While diversity of this kind enriches and broadens the field, it also results in fragmentation: whereas some research uses policy or managerial paradigms, others follow socio-cultural or communicative perspectives. Such conceptual diffusion necessitates more effective theoretical integration, particularly through

comparative frameworks that connect micro-level festival experience and macro-level queries about European identity and sustainable development.

Additionally, the keyword network also verifies the enhanced integration of digitalisation and sustainability into the research agenda on cultural mega events. The emergence of concepts of sustainability, creativity, and digital culture from 2020 provides evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has further encouraged academic research on resilient cultural practices, hybrid events, and technological leadership in cultural participation. This trend mirrors an expanded reshaping within the European creative system, where digital technologies facilitate the intermingling of the public and redefine the production and distribution of cultural value. In the overlay visualisation, these concepts appear more recently, confirming their emergence as new research frontiers rather than established themes within the field. Finally, the results underscore the long-standing research gap in longitudinal, impact-focused assessments. Scarce research goes beyond post-event bilateral evaluations to gauge the long-term cultural capacity-building and regional competitiveness that result from mega events. This gap is also evident in the bibliometric results: legacy-related keywords appear infrequently and occupy peripheral positions in the co-occurrence map, suggesting that long-term cultural and social impacts remain underrepresented in scholarly discourse. This finding is similar to that of Preuss (2018), who advocates longitudinal models that study the legacy as an intradynamic process rather than an end-state. Combinations of such strategies could improve the analytical accuracy of future research and yield more credible evidence on the transformative potential of cultural and music mega events.

Conclusions

The findings of this bibliometric analysis demonstrate that European cultural and music mega events have evolved from isolated cultural episodes into structural catalysts of identity formation, creative development, and urban transformation. Over the past twenty-five years, research in this field has expanded significantly, moving beyond economic and tourism-driven assessments toward more complex, symbolic, and socially embedded understandings of cultural events. The thematic clusters identified in this study – ranging from cultural identity and destination branding to community participation, creative industries, and sustainability – highlight the field's increasingly interdisciplinary character and its strategic relevance within contemporary European cultural policy.

A central contribution of this study lies in its systematic mapping of a fragmented research domain. By integrating performance indicators with science-mapping techniques, the analysis reveals the intellectual structure, dominant themes, and geographic distribution of scholarship on cultural mega events in Europe. This approach underscores two important research dynamics: the persistence of geographical imbalances, with Western European countries occupying central positions in collaborative networks, and the growing (yet still underrepresented) contributions of Central and Eastern European countries. By documenting these disparities and identifying emerging conceptual trends – particularly those related to identity, digitalisation, and cultural sustainability – the study offers a clearer understanding of how research on cultural mega events is developing and where future scholarly attention is needed.

The originality of this study stems from its exclusive focus on the European research landscape and its ability to illuminate the field's conceptual evolution. Unlike previous analyses that examine single events or isolated case studies, this bibliometric investigation provides an overarching perspective that reveals how European cultural and music mega events function both as research objects and as policy instruments embedded in broader cultural, social, and economic transformations. By situating events such as the European Capital of Culture, Untold, EXIT, and Sziget within

coherent thematic clusters, the study demonstrates how these initiatives collectively shape European identity-making processes and the continent's symbolic geography.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the analysis yields several practical implications for key stakeholders. Policy-makers can draw on the identified clusters to develop evidence-based cultural strategies that balance economic performance with identity-building, cultural participation, and long-term legacy. City managers and cultural planners may use the revealed collaboration patterns to strengthen international partnerships and integrate cultural events into urban regeneration frameworks, while also diversifying cultural programming beyond the dominant music festival model. Event organisers can benefit from the emerging emphasis on sustainability, digital innovation, and community engagement by designing more inclusive, resilient, and future-oriented event models. Finally, academic institutions and researchers can address the identified geographic and thematic gaps by pursuing comparative research between Western and Eastern Europe, employing longitudinal methodologies, and expanding studies on cultural legacies and social cohesion.

Ultimately, this study affirms that European cultural and music mega events function not merely as entertainment platforms but as dynamic laboratories of cultural expression, civic participation, and identity negotiation. Their capacity to merge creativity, community, and place-making underscores their significance within both scholarly and policy arenas. By mapping the intellectual evolution of this field, this study's findings provide a foundation for more integrated, inclusive, and sustainability-oriented approaches to understanding the role of cultural mega events in shaping Europe's cultural future.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged and considered when interpreting its patterns and thematic clusters.

The Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection was selected as the primary data source because of its rigorous indexing standards, citation consistency, and compatibility with bibliometric tools such as VOSviewer. However, the exclusive use of the Web of Science database may exclude relevant publications indexed only in Scopus or regional databases, especially from cultural studies, humanities, and Central and Eastern European scholars. Second, the selected keywords, while designed to capture cultural and music mega events, may unintentionally favour music festivals over other types of cultural mega events and may privilege countries with stronger international publication output. Third, bibliometric analyses are dependent on authors' keyword choices, which may result in the underrepresentation of certain cultural dimensions (e.g., community engagement, social sustainability) even when they are present in the full text.

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