

THE SONG AND DANCE CELEBRATION IN LITHUANIA: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT, THE FESTIVAL'S CONCEPT AND EVALUATION

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Abstract

Even though the Song and Dance Celebration is one of the greatest and most remarkable culture events in Lithuania, the importance of which is recognised both at national and global level, it has to be admitted that it receives rather little attention of social and culture researchers. Therefore a preliminary small-scale Lithuanian representative public opinion survey was conducted shortly after the last Song and Dance Celebration's closing (2014) to examine the socio-cultural integration potential of the Celebration, the prevalence of its concept in public consciousness, the activity of participation in festival's events as well as their evaluation. The data allow me to assess the prospects of continuity of the Song and Dance Celebration tradition in terms of societal attitudes, and also the meaning and viability of the Celebration among various demographic groups.

Keywords: *culture research, Song and Dance Celebration, culture identity.*

The Song and Dance Celebration as a cultural phenomenon

The Song and Dance Celebration is one of the biggest and most massive culture events in Lithuania, which amalgamates the most diverse social groups of the population into the festival whirl every four years: both young and mature people, residents of the capital as well as regional population, etc. Hardly any other holiday in Lithuania can match it in the sense of performers' diversity and audience, massiveness and active participation in the week-long celebration. Its uniqueness and significance is recognized of not only at the national level but also internationally, and its organization is governed by a special Law on the Song Celebrations of the Republic of Lithuania enacted in 2007 to safeguard the tradition.

However, this important phenomenon in Lithuania has been poorly studied. There are some historical studies on the topic, the newest and most comprehensive of which is a book by Juozas Mikutavičius *Lietuvių dainų švenčių tradicija* (“The Tradition of the Lithuanian Song Festivals”) published in 2014. It reviews the history of Lithuanian Song Celebration from 1924 to 2014 and contains all the programmes and archival materials illustrated by hundreds of historical photographs [Mikutavičius 2014]. Despite the long history of the cultural tradition that is highly relevant to the persistence of Lithuanian national identity, there is a lack of its assessment from the sociological perspective. The present study is an attempt to fill this vacuum.

In 2014, the Song and Dance Celebration in Lithuania celebrated its 90th anniversary. Its popularity among the public, in terms of attracting visitors to events and ticket sales, shows that the Celebration retains its relevance and remains one of the liveliest contemporary events, cherishing Lithuanian national culture and traditions and the nation’s sense of togetherness. It is this aspect of nation-building, in particular, that is emphasised by the state leaders, cultural policy makers and the organisers of the Song and Dance Celebration. Its importance is highlighted by the Law on the Song Celebrations as well. However, repeated concerns are also expressed in the Lithuanian media about the trends of Celebration’s commercialisation or threats of losing its true essence because of too daring innovations inspired by the attempts to attract more spectators seeking for pure entertainment.

In order to find out which concept of the Celebration prevails among its performers and spectators in different age groups, how they evaluate the festival events, and to prepare for the launching a large-scale project aimed at comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon, a preliminary small-scale representative public opinion survey was conducted shortly after the closing of the latest Lithuanian Song and Dance Celebration¹ aimed at evaluating important aspects of public engagement in the Celebration. The aim of the current research is to find out the potential of Song and Dance Celebration for socio-cultural integration and the prevailing concept of the celebration in public consciousness. Traditionally, the dominant assumption of culture researchers and cultural policy makers is that the deepest concept of the Celebration is that of the nation’s identity consolidation. However, a question arises whether the Celebration which takes place in conditions of free market economy becomes or does not become just another product of

¹ The survey was conducted on July 16–26, 2014. The survey method – a standardised face-to-face questionnaire interview.

The sample consisted of 1005 respondents from the age of 18 to 75. The location of the survey – 65 sample points were distributed across the whole territory of the country to represent all the regions.

entertainment industry in the eyes of its performers and audience. Therefore the survey focused on two main aspects: a cognitive and normative aspect, and it covered the following issues:

- engagement of Lithuanian society into the events of the Song and Dance Celebration (participation, observation, interest);
- perception of its importance;
- evaluation of the quality of Celebration events.

In the following part of the article I will present the survey results concerning these issues and assess the factors that determine the diversity of activity and opinions among the population.

Engagement into the events of the Song and Dance Celebration

Recognising the importance of participation in cultural events and using cultural production both for personal development and to foster public cultural identity, the opening research questions were intended to determine the population's involvement in the Song and Dance Celebration events both in terms of participation and observation. The respondents were asked:

- Have you ever participated in the Song and Dance Celebration as a performer?
- Do you personally observe the events of the Song and Dance Celebration?

The first question was answered positively by 15% of the respondents, of which 8% said they had performed in the festival once, and 7% – more than once. Evaluating these data from the Lithuanian perspective, it must be admitted that it is a very high rate of activity, especially if we take into account the data of the survey ordered by the Ministry of Culture (conducted in 2014) which demonstrate that among the Lithuanian public there are about 30% of the people who are likely to create or to participate in different cultural and artistic activities, and those who are actually involved in these activities amount to only 13% of the population. However, compared to the data of the studies of participation in the Song and Dance Celebrations conducted in Estonia (2013) and Latvia (2007, 2014), the involvement of the Lithuanian society in the celebration events appears to be rather passive. For instance, in the Estonian study, even half of the 15–74 year olds told they had attended the Celebration at least once [Lauristin, Vihalemm 2013]. It is evident that different histories of the tradition have their impact here: in the neighbouring countries the Song and Dance Celebrations originated from their community initiatives at the end of the 19th century, while in Lithuania it was only in the 20th century that this festival was introduced by the decision of the state institutions. Therefore, the public consciousness of neighbouring countries is dominated by a much stronger attitude towards the participation in the festivity as a continuity of cultural ritual and personal prestige.

Speaking about the demographic profile of the performers of Celebration, women declared their participation in the Song and Dance Celebration more often than men (19.2% of women compared to 10.4% of men), the same can be said about the respondents who have a higher level of education, those who have a higher family income, and city residents (see figures 1–3). It should be noted that these categories of the population are more susceptible to active cultural and artistic activities in general, therefore it is not surprising that they also participate more actively in various events of the Song and Dance Celebration.

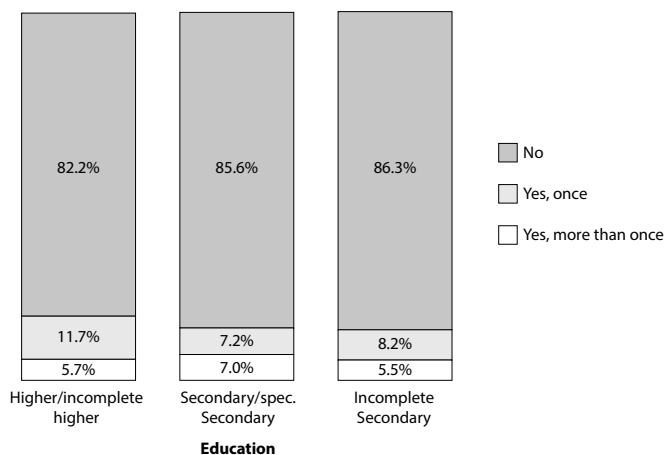


Figure 1. The impact of the level of education on the participation in the Song and Dance Celebration events. (Q.: *Have you ever participated in the Song and Dance Celebration as a performer?*)

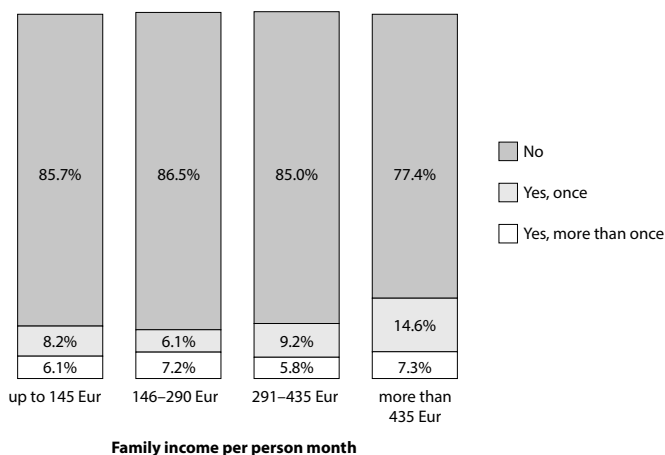


Figure 2. The impact of family income on the participation in the Song and Dance Celebration events. (Q.: *Have you ever participated in the Song and Dance Celebration as a performer?*)

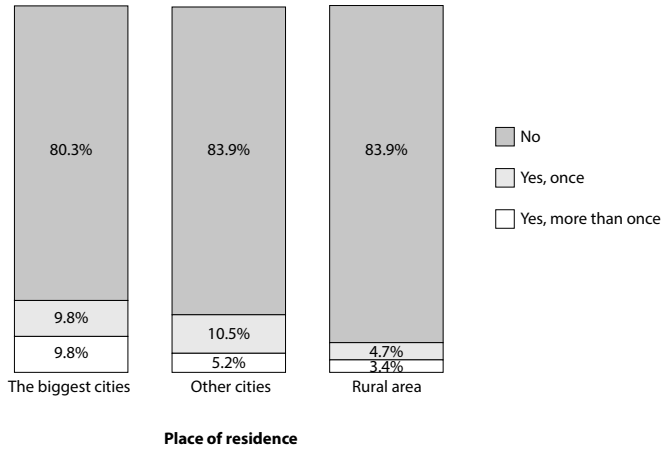


Figure 3. The impact of the place of residence on the participation in the Song and Dance Celebration events. (Q.: *Have you ever participated in the Song and Dance Celebration as a performer?*)

Considering other demographic differences, age is one of the most significant factors which affects participation in the Celebration events as the youngest generation less often than the elderly state that they have participated in the festival as performers (see figure 4). Lower participation rates (as a cumulative indicator) of young people may be partly explained by the life-cycle effect caused by a shorter span of their active conscious life. However, it is likely that these data reflect actual attitudinal differences between generations, as contemporary youth has become

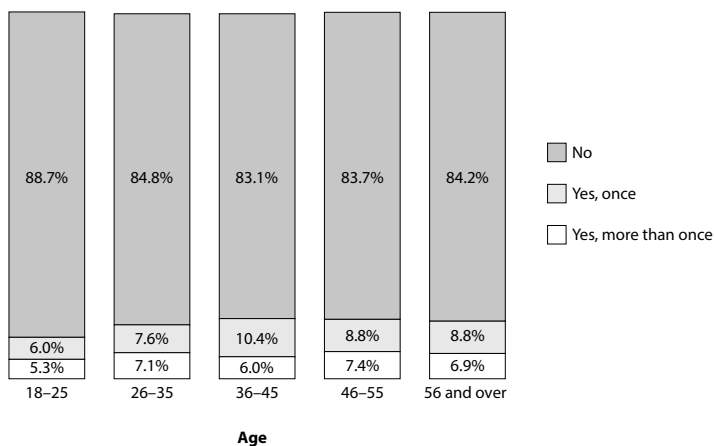


Figure 4. The impact of the age on the participation in the Song and Dance Celebration events. (Q.: *Have you ever participated in the Song and Dance Celebration as a performer?*)

less involved in the traditional cultural activities during the last few decades, and the actual situation can only be disclosed by a longitudinal study.

It is not only the activity and engagement of the participants but also the audience’s involvement in the events that matters in assessing the potential of the festival to mobilise society and to strengthen its cultural identity. When asked *Do you personally observe the events of the Song and Dance Celebration?* even 62% of the respondents gave a positive answer. The majority of them – even 76% stated they watched the Celebration events on TV, 10% declared their live participation in the events as spectators, others said they followed the media coverage of the Celebration¹.

In terms of demographic differences, the Song and Dance Celebration events are watched on TV more often by women, older respondents (46 years and over) and the residents of smaller cities. The media coverage of the Celebration is followed more frequently by the residents of the biggest cities, and the most frequent spectators of live events are the respondents with the highest level of education as well as the residents of the biggest cities (see figures 5–9). Thus, it can be concluded that the involvement into the Song and Dance Celebration events is influenced both by personal lifestyle factor and opportunity factor since, for instance, women and older people generally spend more time than men or younger people watching the events on television, meanwhile the residents of cities, and especially of the capital, have more opportunities to directly observe the festival events than people who do not live in the capital.

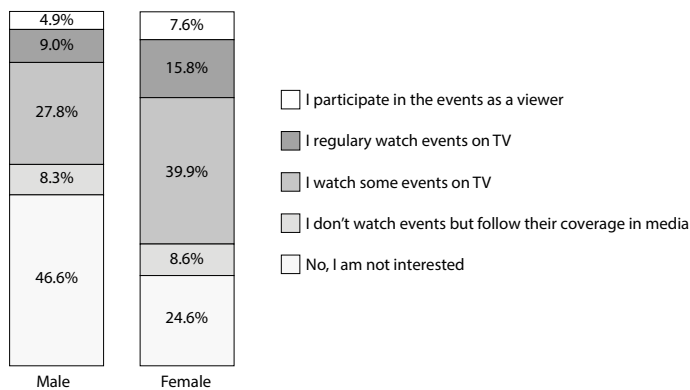


Figure 5. The impact of gender on the engagement in the Song and Dance Celebration events. (Q.: *Do you personally observe the events of the Song and Dance Celebration?*)

¹ According to the data of the beforementioned Estonian survey, as many as two-thirds of the respondents indicated their participation in the events as spectators and 90% stated that they followed TV and radio broadcasts of the events.

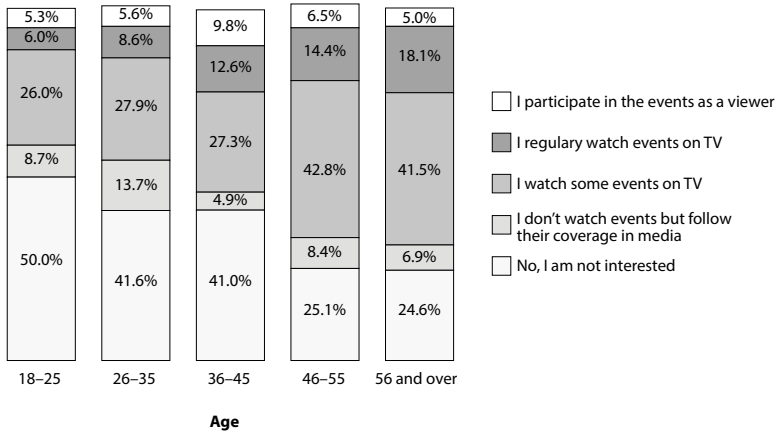


Figure 6. The impact of the age on the engagement in the Song and Dance Celebration events. (Q.: Do you personally observe the events of the Song and Dance Celebration?)

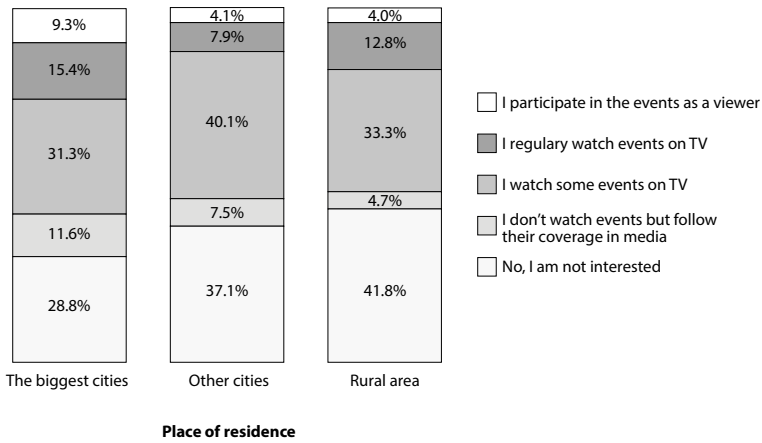


Figure 7. The impact of the place of residence on the engagement in the Song and Dance Celebration events. (Q.: Do you personally observe the events of the Song and Dance Celebration?)

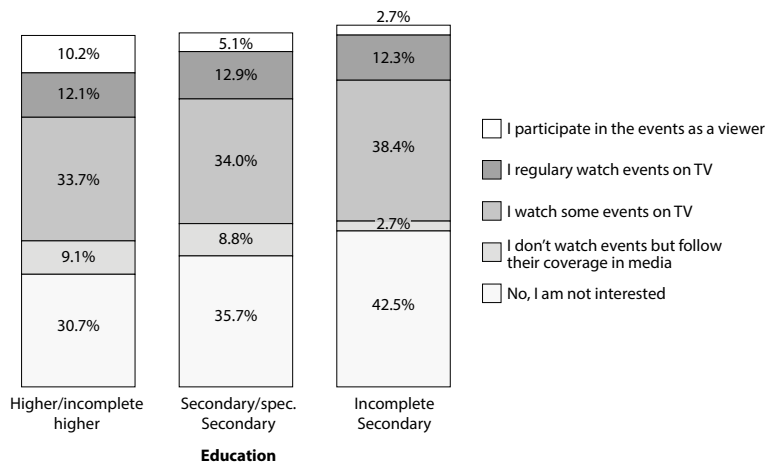


Figure 8. The impact of the level of education on the engagement in the Song and Dance Celebration events. (Q.: *Do you personally observe the events of the Song and Dance Celebration?*)

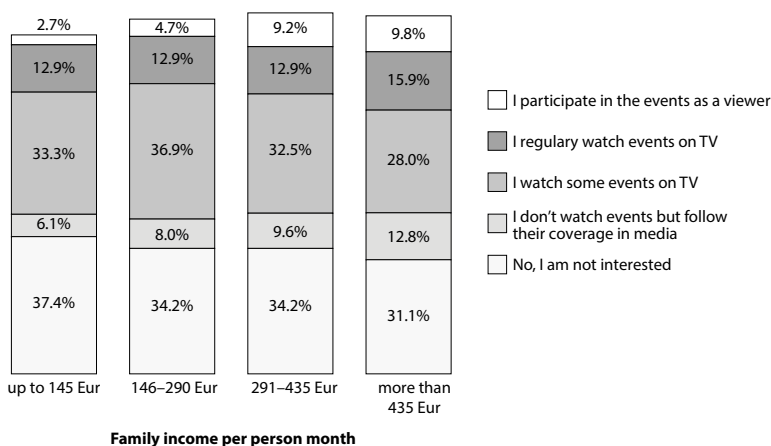


Figure 9. The impact of family income on the engagement in the Song and Dance Celebration events. (Q.: *Do you personally observe the events of the Song and Dance Celebration?*)

The respondents who claimed they were not interested in the Song and Dance Celebration events (there were 350 of them in the sample or almost 35% of all the respondents¹) were asked about the causes of their disinterest by an open question: *If you are not interested in the Song and Dance Celebration, could you tell us why?* The absolute majority of those who answered indicated a lack of interest (the most

¹ Just to compare, there were only 9% of such respondents in Estonia.

popular answers were *I don't like it, I am not fond of folk culture, It is boring, It is dedicated to an older audience* and other similar answers) and only one fifth of them identified a lack of opportunity (lack of time, long distance, poor health, etc.).

Perception of the importance of the Song and Dance Celebration

Even though the Song and Dance Celebration is one of the greatest and major culture events in Lithuania, it receives scant attention of social and culture researchers. The organisers of the Celebration particularly highlight its functions such as fostering national Lithuanian culture and traditions and strengthening the nation's sense of community. The Law on the Song Celebrations of the Republic of Lithuania also emphasises the links of the festivity tradition with the ethnic upbringing of the society. However, a question arises whether this concept of the Celebration prevails among the general public as well, or rather this festival is just another product of the entertainment industry in the eyes of the viewers. To answer this question, the survey has assessed two aspects of the perception of the Song and Dance Celebration:

- spontaneous associations with the name the *Song and Dance Celebration*;
- the assessment of the Song and Dance Celebration importance for Lithuania.

When asked to spontaneously describe what the first idea is which comes to their minds when thinking of the Song and Dance Celebration (*Q.: What is the first thought, idea or association which comes to your mind when you hear the name of the Song and Dance Celebration?*), the respondents mainly emphasised the aspects of feast (25%) and massiveness (12%). Meanwhile, the aspect of nation-building and fostering Lithuanian cultural heritage and traditions was mentioned spontaneously just by every tenth respondent (see figure 10).

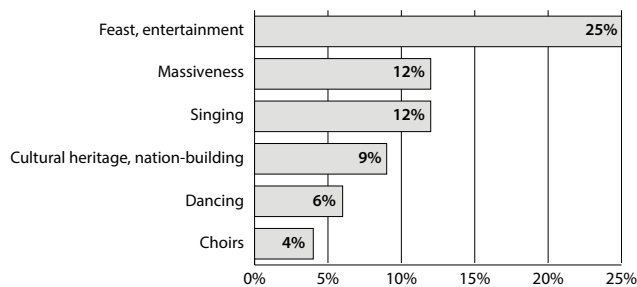


Figure 10. Spontaneous associations with the Song and Dance Celebration (%).

It is noteworthy that when asked about the importance of the Song and Dance Celebration by a closed ended question with different pre-defined answers (*Q.: Why do you think the Song and Dance Celebration is important for Lithuania?*), the

respondents mostly indicated the functions of fostering cultural heritage (65%), encouraging patriotism (42%), and unifying the nation (41%), meanwhile the function of entertainment received secondary attention (see figure 11).

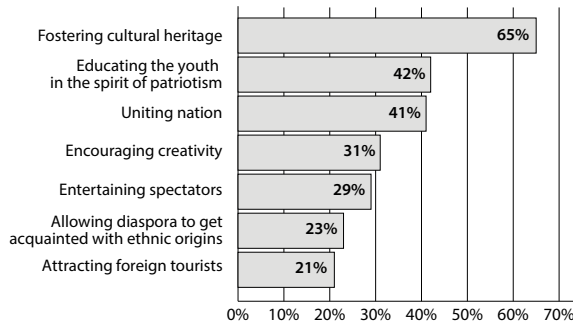


Figure 11. The importance of the Song and Dance Celebration for Lithuania (%) (*multiple answers possible; sum exceeds 100%*).

These results indicate that although the Song and Dance Celebration is perceived mostly as an entertainment and amusement, the society is well aware of its deeper sense and tradition, and they perceive its importance for consolidating the nation and enhancing ethnic identity.

Evaluation of the quality of the Song and Dance Celebration

Continuous and systematic preparation for the Song and Dance Celebrations is safeguarded by a special Law on the Song Celebrations of the Republic of Lithuania (enacted in 2007) regulating their organisation, ensuring state protection of the tradition and its continuity, and defining a variety of institutional responsibilities. To ensure a high artistic level of the events, pre-festival screenings of art groups are organised to combine amateur and professional artistic performers, and every festival's repertoire is formed by an authoritative commission. In order to find out the public opinion whether this goal is achieved, the respondents were asked two questions:

- Evaluate the professionalism of the Song and Dance Celebration's events in the ten-point scale;
- Do you think that Lithuania can be proud of the Song and Dance Celebration in the world?

The evaluation of the professionalism of the Celebration from the perspective of the society (i.e. spectators) is very high: as much as 39% of the respondents gave it ten points, 30% – nine points and only two respondents gave it less than 5 points (an average score – 8.81 points). Although the evaluation of professionalism

is very high in all demographic groups, its direct dependence on the age can be observed: the older the people are, the higher score they give to the level of the Celebration's professionalism (see figure 12).

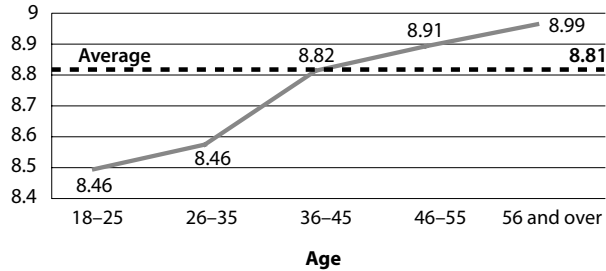


Figure 12. Age influence for the assessment of the professionalism of Song and Dance Celebration. (Q.: *Evaluate the professionalism of the Song and Dance Celebration's events in the ten-point scale*)

The answers to the question whether Lithuania can be proud of the Song and Dance Celebration in the world are explicit: 47% of the respondents gave a definitely positive answer, and another 35% responded rather positively (see figure 13).

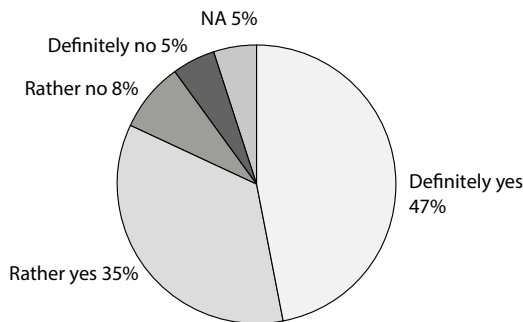


Figure 13. The importance of Song and Dance Celebration for Lithuania. (Q.: *Do you think that Lithuania can be proud of the Song and Dance Celebration in the world?*)

The results are similar for all the demographic groups of the population, also between generations (see figure 14). These data show the potential of sustainability and continuity of the feast since various groups of the population are well aware of its importance and international significance.

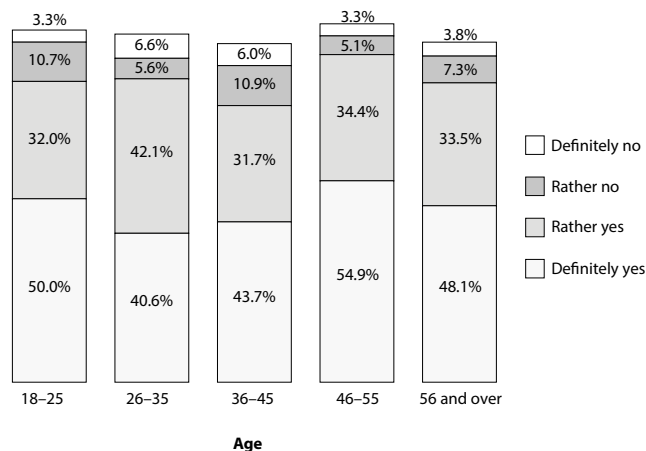


Figure 14. The age influence on the assessment of international significance of the Song and Dance Celebration. (Q.: *Do you think that Lithuania can be proud of the Song and Dance Celebration in the world?*)

Ethnic differences of participation and evaluation of the Song and Dance Celebration events

It is foreseeable that the very nature of the Song and Dance Celebration, its mission to foster the Lithuanian identity and strengthen ethnic consolidation determines that one of the key demographic factors affecting the involvement into the festivity events, knowledge about them, their understanding and evaluation is the respondents' nationality. However, the impact is far from being as significant as one could expect – it turned out that not only Lithuanians, but also people of other nationalities¹ are involved in the festivity as performers (see figure 15), they observe both live and broadcasted events (see figure 16) and consider it to be the phenomenon Lithuania can be proud of on a global scale (see figure 17). It should be noted that the respondents of ethnic minorities said that Lithuania can be proud of the Song and Dance Celebration even more often than Lithuanians. Moreover, they rated the level of its professionalism as very high: an average score for Poles was 8.89, for Russians – 8.31, for the respondents of other nationalities – 8.88 (to compare, an average score for Lithuanians was 8.83).

¹ Since a significant part of Lithuanian population is of mixed ethnic origin, the practice in sociological research prevails to treat the language in which the respondents speak at home as an indicator of their ethnic origin. In our research Lithuanian as the language spoken at home was indicated by 84.1% of the respondents, Polish – by 6.9% of the respondents, Russian – by 5.9% of the respondents, and other languages – by 3.1% of the respondents, which precisely corresponds to the statistical data on ethnic composition of the Lithuanian population.

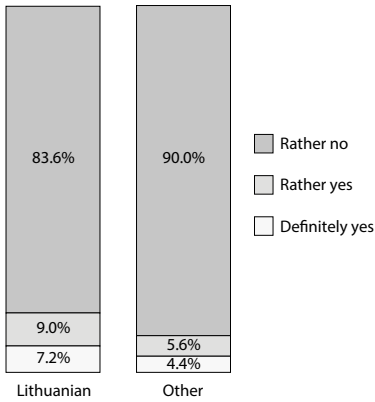


Figure 15. Ethnicity influence on the participation in the Song and Dance Celebration events. (Q.: *Have you ever participated in the Song and Dance Celebration as a performer?*)

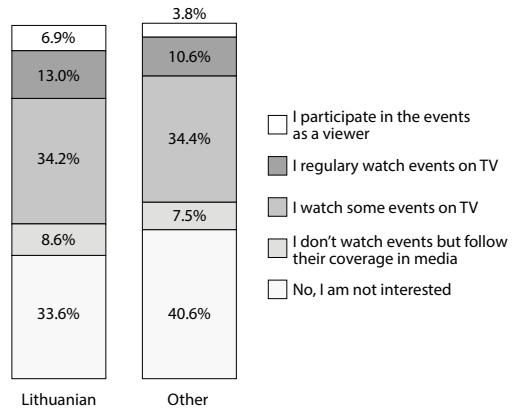


Figure 16. Ethnicity influence on the watching of the Song and Dance Celebration events. (Q.: *Do you personally observe the events of the Song and Dance Celebration?*)

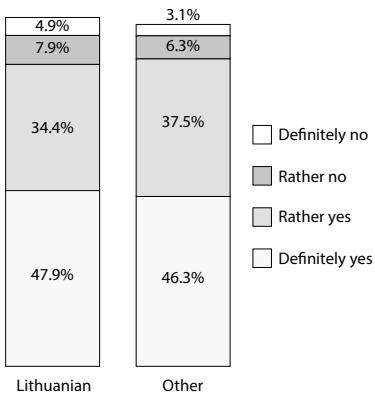


Figure 17. Ethnicity influence on the Song and Dance Celebration evaluation. (Q.: *Do you think that Lithuania can be proud of the Song and Dance Celebration in the world?*)

Conclusion

Despite the recognition of the Song and Dance Celebration as a culturally significant phenomenon both nationally and internationally, no fundamental research has been conducted in Lithuania so far that could lead to a grounded discussion about the public importance of the feast, the assumptions for its sustainability, the direction of tradition shaping and its policies, etc. The data of the present study have evidence of positive prospects for the continuity of the Celebration tradition in terms of societal attitudes. They prove the vitality of the Lithuanian Song and Dance Celebration among various demographic groups, including the population of non-Lithuanian origin. For instance, the data indicate that our residents of non-Lithuanian origin have a very favourable disposition towards the Song and Dance Celebration. They also show a great potential of incorporating all ethnic groups of the population in the Celebration events, if not in terms of active participation, then at least in terms of observing and live interest. At the same time, they signal that attention should be paid to better integration of the youngest generation into the feast because at the moment they are the least active participants and spectators of the Song and Dance Celebration.

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