

AN EXAMINATION OF PERCEIVED RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH SONG AND DANCE CELEBRATION 2023: PARTICIPANTS' AND ORGANIZERS' PERSPECTIVES

MBA Jeļena Budanceva

EKA University of Applied Sciences

Mg.sc.soc. Ludmila Briede

EKA University of Applied Sciences

Abstract

The management of mega-events requires careful consideration of various risks such as crowding, weather conditions, and terrorist threats, determined by continuous changes in the non-ergodic world. However, there is a lack of comprehensive research on risk management in the context of cultural mega-events. This study aims to address this gap by examining the perceived risks associated with the Latvian Song and Dance Celebration 2023 from the perspectives of both organizers and participants. The study identified challenges related to communication, fund utilization transparency, and time management. These challenges were investigated through interviews with organizers representing different management levels and through questionnaires distributed to participants. Participants expressed concerns about safety, weather, catering, and force majeure situations. The study found that the perceived risks vary between organizers and participants, as well as among organizers based on their management levels.

Keywords: *mega-events, risks, risk perception, Latvian Song and Dance Celebration.*

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Introduction

Despite the essential role of risk management in event planning, research on the adoption of risk management strategies in events remains sparse [Robson 2009; Khir 2014; Ashwin 2020]. Most existing studies focus on sports mega-events like the Olympic Games and FIFA World Championship, which, although significant, represent only a fraction of the broader events landscape [Boo, Gu 2010: 139–166; Toohey, Taylor 2008: 451–469]. Although the comprehensive study of mega-events has gained attention since the 2000s, the literature still lacks an examination of stakeholders' roles related to risks [Girgin, Edizel 2019: 254]. As Silvers noted, risk management is a core competency of event management [Silvers 2008], while, as highlighted by a fire safety representative at the London Olympics 2016, "*in such big events, however, absolute safety is not possible*" [Girgin, Edizel 2019: 257; Khir 2014: 55].

The Latvian Song and Dance Celebration 2023 (further in the text – The Celebration), originating from 19th-century a cappella traditions in Europe, is now held every 5 years during summer exclusively in the Baltic States, serving as a vital cultural expression and affirmation of Latvia's identity in the 21st century [UNESCO 2023]. Since its inception in Latvia in 1873, when it attracted 1,000 singers and over 20,000 visitors, the Celebration has evolved into a multidisciplinary mega-event, drawing about 500,000 attendees, over 40,000 participants, 600 dance groups, and 400 choirs [XXVII Nationwide Latvian Song and XVII Dance Celebration 2024]. For 5 years organizers and participants engage in systematic preparation, including rehearsals, repertoire preparation, competitions, planning and communication, culminating in a vibrant gathering in Riga that is legislated under the Song and Dance Celebration Law and coordinated by the Latvian National Culture Center (LNCC).

Risks inherent to the Celebration, involving 40,000 of participants and nearly half a million visitors, can stem from various sources such as severe weather, attendee misconduct, or technical failures. Mega-events such as Milan EXPO and London Olympic Games, have reported challenges like flooding, abandoned bags, and blockage of the railway systems [Girgin, Edizel 2019: 259], while the Celebration has faced its own issues, including children fainting during the Scholar Celebration in 2015, a ticketing system crash in 2018, and insufficient catering process for choirs in 2023 [LSM 2015, 2018; Vasiljeva 2023].

This research is prompted by the limited studies on risk management in cultural mega-events and the unpredictability of event risks in a non-ergodic world. As the Celebration is an event with numerous challenges and risks, it is crucial to analyze past occurrences from the perspective of different stakeholders. Therefore, the study has conducted an examination of risks associated with the Latvian Song and Dance Celebration 2023 from the perspectives of both organizers and participants and outlined the most significant challenges.

The tasks of this paper are to:

- 1) identify and examine perceived risks associated with the Celebration 2023 from the perspectives of both organizers and participants;
- 2) explore the role-specific challenges faced by organizers of the Celebration 2023;
- 3) conduct a comparative analysis of risk perceptions between organizers and participants, for a comprehensive understanding of risk management in mega-events.

The central research questions are: How do risk perceptions differ between the various levels of organizers and participants at the Celebration 2023, and what specific challenges do these groups identify in management of this mega-event?

To address these questions, the authors employed both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys in their research methodology.

Study limitations include a restricted research period from October to mid-December 2023. A total of 311 participants were surveyed, with 252 valid responses, and interviews were conducted with 7 representatives from the organizational team. Due to confidentiality, emergency service representatives and external stakeholders were not interviewed.

Theoretical framework

This study is based on the theoretical framework of event management, addressing the planning and execution of mega-events. It aims to analyze risk management at a unique mega-event from a sociocultural perspective, revising risk assessments based on prior knowledge, personal based experience, and discussions [Ashwin 2020].

Mega-event characteristics

Organizing mega-events is a complex task in modern event management. Due to their wide range and scope, it is difficult to provide a single definition for a mega-event. The categorization and definition of a mega-event may vary depending on its rationale, frequency, and location [Edizel 2014; Mazzeo 2008; Smith et al. 2012]. According to Getz, mega-events are events with a global reputation that attract visitors to the host city to participate in sporting, cultural, religious, and political activities [Getz 1991]. Some scholars primarily consider sports events as mega-events [Horne, Manzenreiter 2006; Maennig, Zimbalist 2012], while others emphasize the number of tickets sold as the main criterion for mega-events [Smith et al. 2012]. The most commonly mentioned criteria to classify mega-events include duration, size, scale, volume of visitors, and prestige [Girgin, Edizel 2019: 251]. However, as argued by Muller, mega-events can vary in different aspects, and not all mega-events are “mega” to the same extent in all dimensions [Muller 2015: 627].

In this paper, the authors will adopt Martin Muller's definition of mega-events: "*Mega-events are ambulatory occasions of a fixed duration that (a) attract a large number of visitors, (b) have a wide media reach, (c) come with substantial costs, and (d) have significant impacts on the built environment and the population*" [Muller 2015: 638]. Following this concept, The Celebration qualifies as a mega-event, subject to all the associated risks.

Risk types and their specifics at mega-events

Mega-events, which involve a wide range of activities and resources, inherently carry significant potential for risks and crises [Elbe 2009: 227–239]. The scale and diversity of mega-events, along with the presence of attendees unfamiliar with local hazards, highlight the need for robust risk management planning.

Risk in the context of events refers to "*any condition or occurrence that might affect the outcome of an event or event activities and might expose an event organization to loss measured in terms of probability and consequences*" [Silvers 2008: 35]. Different events face different risk factors, varying in different contexts [Silvers 2008], internal – like crowding [Earl et al. 2005: 38], or external, which may range from the pandemics to the war in Ukraine.

The emergence of new risk factors, including terrorism, pandemics, military conflicts, and unpredictable weather, has added complexity to management decisions at all levels. Furthermore, effective risk management for mega-events requires a balance between raising awareness about security and avoiding causing alarm, as illustrated by a military officer involved in the London 2016 Olympic Games [Girgin, Edizel 2019: 258].

The analysis of various event management resources led to an overview of general event risks and specific risks associated with mega-events, as shown in Table 1.

The risks associated with mega-events and general events share common categories, such as project, business, strategic, operational, technological, reputational, climate, and communication risks. However, mega-events magnify these risks due to the larger scale and higher stakes. Mega-events also face specific risks that are less pronounced in regular events. Health and safety risks are more critical due to larger crowds; venue and transport management risks are more complex due to the size and logistics involved. Additionally, mega-events encounter significant risks related to alcohol and drugs, fire safety, crowd management, and catering, all of which require more robust protocols and planning.

Event organizers base their risk assessments on insights from actual experiences and collective industry knowledge, rather than just calculations and facts used in other industries [Ashwin 2020: 6], and the act of planning and organizing an event

itself is a risk-taking effort [Khair 2015: 54]. Understanding the different aspects of risk perception among participants and organizers at various levels is therefore crucial.

Table 1

Risk types in event planning. (Compiled by the authors based on: [Aswin 2020; Shone, Parry 2013; Pielichaty et al. 2016; Tarlow 2002; Earl et al. 2005; Girgin, Edizel 2019; Khair 2015; Wynn-Moylan 2018].)

General risks	Specific risks at mega-events
Project risks: a series of project tasks (e. g. covering time, quality, costs)	Health and safety risks: timely response to health emergencies, safety protocols; epi- and pandemics, VIPs safety; terrorism
Business risks: lack of financial risk management strategy and reserves	Electrical installations and pyrotechnics risks: electrical malfunctions, pyrotechnic misfires, etc.
Strategic risks: affect events in the long term (e. g. financial, political, environmental, etc.)	Venue and location: issues related to the venue, accessibility, emergency procedures, noise, missing children
Operational risks: all the risks, associated with running an event	Transport management risks: safe transportation logistics, addressing traffic congestion
Technological risks: technological failure; construction risks	Alcohol and drug risks: responsible handling with a focus on participant safety, safety protocols
Reputational risks: negative publicity, lack of transparency; corruption risks	Fire safety risks: measures, fire-resistant materials, emergency response procedures
Climate risks: extreme weather conditions such as strong rain, hurricanes, hotness	Crowding: safe crowd management, control, emergency evacuation plans; riots
Communication risks: miscommunication, missing crises communication, wrong communication channels	Catering risks: food safety, allergy management, logistics, speed of service
Personnel risks: employee errors, insufficient qualifications, excessive workload, irrational work organization.	

Stakeholders' and organizers' perspective on risk management

Stakeholders in event management encompass a diverse array of individuals and groups, each playing vital roles in planning and executing mega-events, including event owners, host governments, promoters, sponsors, the community, media, and participants [Yamakita et al. 2024: 135]. Different stakeholders perceive risks differently, influenced by their organizational roles and professional backgrounds, leading to varying risk perceptions within and across organizations. This can strain relationships and lead to unintended consequences, such as financial shortfalls and cost overruns [Børve, Thøring 2022].

By organizing events, individual perceptions of actual risks often differ, even when the organization as a whole operates safely: top and middle-level management tends to have a narrower view of present risks compared to operational management, whose broader perspective is informed by their hands-on experiences [Marynissen et al. 2024]. Disparities in risk perception within the event industry, particularly between top management and subordinate managers are shown in a survey targeting CEOs and executive directors in the events industry, which revealed notable gaps in the way how the CEOs see the preparedness of their teams for the implementation of mega events and a disconnect between perceived and actual risks [Blerter & ERMS 2019]. Organizers must possess comprehensive knowledge about the event, its management system, resources, organizational culture, and stakeholders, as well as its unique national significance and cultural attributes, to understand the potential risks associated with such events [Allen et al. 2008].

There is a scientific gap in examining the nuances of risk management in cultural mega-events of national importance and understanding the diverse risk perceptions across different organizational levels is crucial for mitigating these risks.

Research methodology

To collect data, the authors conducted interviews with the organizers, with the purpose of clarifying risk management issues from different management levels. The participants' survey made it possible to look at the identification of risks from the participants' side and to compare whether the risks important to the organizers coincide with those important to the participants.

The study employed **semi-structured interviews** with representatives of the Celebration organizers at different management levels, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Interviewed professionals by management level and functions. (Compiled by the authors, based on the management levels of [Poff, Skripak 2023: 194].)

Nr.	Level of the interviewed person	Professional experience in the context of the Celebration 2023
1.	Top-level	Politician, former Minister of Culture, chairman of the Celebration Council
2.	Top-level	The executive producer of the Celebrations
3.	Middle-level	Project manager of the Celebration, expert in jury commissions, coordinator
4.	Middle-level	Expert at LNCC for choirs and vocal ensembles, artistic planning and implementation of 2 biggest concerts
5.	Middle-level	Author of musical projects, regional organizer of the Celebrations
6.	First-line level	Actress and the moderator of the Celebration
7.	First-line level	Event organizer and producer, volunteering during the Celebration

The goal was to represent all management levels and to capture diverse perspectives on risk management. To ensure the efficacy of the interviews, the authors prepared a set of questions, addressing pivotal aspects of risk management, listed in Table 4. Transcriptions of the interviews were prepared to facilitate in-depth analyses.

To expand the perspective on the possibilities and risks of the mega-event, the author conducted a survey primarily focused on the risks encountered by participants. The decision to conduct an **online survey** was informed by the statistical data indicating that 91% of Latvian households have Internet access [OSP 2023]. To ensure representation from participants of the Celebration, the authors disseminated information about the survey on social media like Facebook and LinkedIn, publishing questionnaire on the official accounts of various choirs as well as on youth, culture managers, music and film people of interest groups; direct mailing to choir members, resulting in 311 responses. In light of the primary screening for participation in Celebration 2023, 252 respondents who actively engaged in the event were chosen for subsequent analysis from an estimated total of 40,000 Celebration participants.

Table 3**Respondents' profile.** (Source: results of survey conducted by the authors.)

Female	74%
Male	25%
Average age	32,5 years
Living in Riga or its neighborhood (Pierīga)	84%
Living in big cities (Jelgava, Valmiera, Ventspils etc.)	8%
Living in small cities	7%
Living on countryside	2%
Encountered any risks during the mega-events	24%
Not encountered any risks during the mega-events	76%

The survey structure included thematic sections for gathering data: Demographic Information (3Q), Experience with the Celebration (2Q), Participant Risks and Perception (3Q), and Risk Communication (2Q). The authors used closed and open-ended questions, as well as Likert scales in their questionnaire.

Research results

In the **interviews**, the organizers presented individual viewpoints on risks and their processes, as each of them was involved in organizational aspects at different levels of the mega-event. The analysis of answers to interview questions is shown in Table 4. The table compiles interview findings from mega-event organizers at different levels.

The answers highlight communication and safety challenges, catering quality, transportation complexities, and external factors such as COVID-19, war in Ukraine and weather conditions, also covering emergency management, highlighting emergency presence at venues, as well as protocols for addressing adverse weather. Communication strategies for managing risks and program changes involve diverse tools, channels, and a crisis communication plan, with instructions provided to volunteers.

Table 4

Challenges, risks and emergency management – findings from interviews with organizers. (Source: compiled by the authors.)

Questions	Answers
Challenges and risks encountered by interviewed persons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – communication issues (insufficient communication (organizers to volunteers and stakeholders), crisis communication) – low quality of catering versus costs – complex transportation coordination – external factors (planning during the Covid 19, economic crisis from the war in Ukraine) – too tight scheduling of rehearsals and concerts – ticket procurement and sales – security issues (lack of qualified personnel)
Risks associated with organizing events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – safety risks (including children getting lost) – need for clear instructions and responsible individuals for safety – various communication tools and channels used
Experiences with emergencies during the project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – publicly discussed safety issues in a special press conference before the event – providing volunteers with raincoats, but no decision for strong wind conditions
Climatic risks, adverse weather conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – program changes and communication facilitated by the LNCC – various communication tools and channels used – publicly discussed safety issues in a special press conference before the event – providing volunteers with raincoats, but no decision for strong wind conditions
Communication regarding risks and program changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – program changes and communication facilitated by the LNCC – various communication tools and channels used – crisis communication plan distributed among all groups and teams – instructions for volunteers before each event

The interviewees shared their recommendations for improving risk management at the next Celebration, which varied based on their roles in the organizational system. The top management representatives underscored the significance of stakeholders' surveys and comprehensive risks assessment. Additionally, they proposed enhancing the regulations governing participants' competitions to mitigate reputation, as well as reduce the number of events and develop a specialized module for participant catering tailored to mega-events. Middle-level coordinators highlighted the imperative of transparency, advocating for the public release of budgetary information and outcomes of procurement competitions, specifically related to technical equipment, catering, and security services. Finally, first-line coordinators emphasized the need for enhanced communication coherence and expediency, augmented provision of on-site event information, and improved organization of catering services.

To expand the perspective on the risks of the mega-event, the authors conducted a **survey** primarily on the risks faced by participants. In total, the responses of 252 participants of the Celebration 2023 were analyzed.

First, the authors aimed to discern the participants' experiences at the Celebration. Responding to this inquiry, 56% of the participants indicated a positive experience, while 28% provided a rating of a highly positive experience and 16% mentioned that their experience in participating in the mega-event was neutral.

In subsequent questions, the authors sought to ascertain respondents' perceived opinions on prioritizing and informing about safety and risks from organizational party.

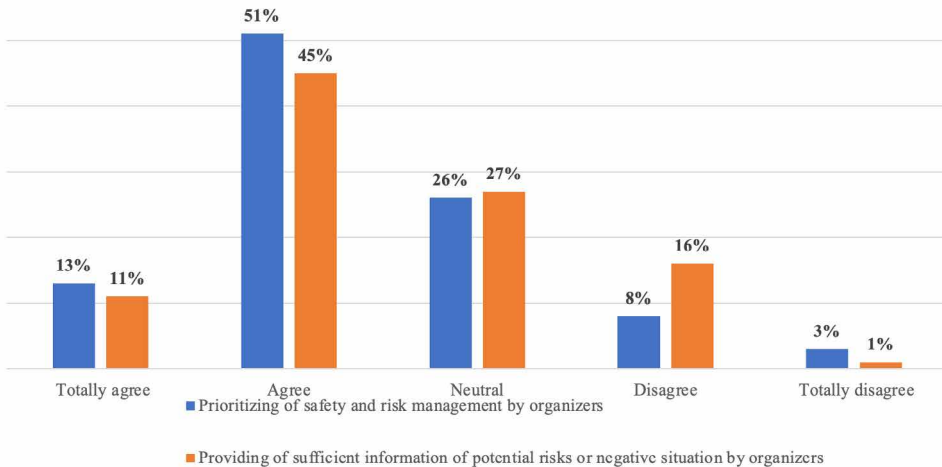


Figure 1. Prioritizing and providing information about safety by organizers, n=252.
(Source: compiled by the authors.)

The results show, that while in common participants do agree, that organizers are prioritizing and providing sufficient information about risks and safety, comparing

both aspects of prioritizing and providing information, the last one has a smaller number of agree.

Answering the question regarding participants' thoughts about the most common risks at mega-events, 23% mentioned health problems, while 21% – inappropriate weather conditions.

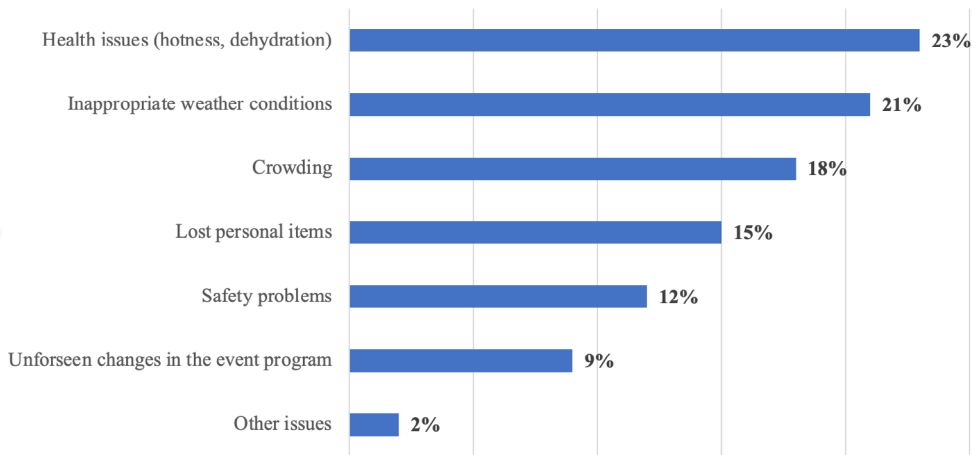


Figure 2. Risks faced by participants during the Celebration, n=252. (Source: compiled by the authors.)

The results demonstrate that the participants expressed a low perception of risks, aligning with the accident statistics cited by the executive producer of Celebration in the interview.

Answering the question, which safety measures respondents would like to see at further Celebrations, 32% mentioned more information stands with risks/negative

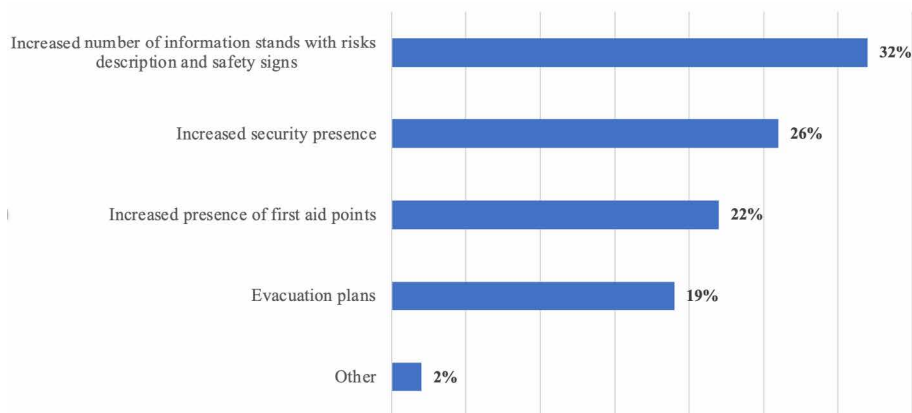


Figure 3. Information regarding the safety issues, participants would like to see in the future, n=252. (Source: compiled by the authors.)

situations descriptions and safety signs, which was rated as most important followed by increased security presence (26%), and the presence of first aid points (22%). More evacuation plans were important for 19% of participants.

The overarching participants' perceptions of risks and safety measures were positive, with notable apprehensions arising around health-related issues and weather conditions. While prioritizing safety from organizers was acknowledged by participants, the dissemination of information concerning potential risks should be more comprehensive. Furthermore, the survey underscored the necessity for additional information stands and safety signage, alongside heightened security and first aid provisions.

To facilitate a better understanding of risks and their perceptions from the participants and organizers, the authors have compiled them in the next table.

Table 5

Risks of the culture mega-event, identified by organizers and participants.

(Source: The results of interviews and survey conducted by the authors.)

Risks	Organizer's perspective	Participant's perspective
Communication risk	Insufficient communication between organizers and volunteers; more critical perspective as by participant's	Information inaccessibility, unclear communication between participants and organizers
Reputation risks	Information getting stuck or a problem of misinterpretation; connected to communication risks	Negative experience in disrespect from participants or attendees.
Financial risks	Inflation, problems in realizing the artistic idea within a given budget; connected to the budgeting process	Expensive tickets and food
Operative risks	Schedule not fitting the plan, volunteers or employers falling ill or can't continue their duties	Queues by entrance, difficulties for disabled attendees, unclear concert program
Product or service quality risks	Lack of information, missed language in the signs, Braille language	Transportation problems, small venue, low-quality cover
Catering risks	Low catering quality compared to the published costs	Poor-quality food, inadequate prices for food
Regulatory risks	Analysis and updating of security-related restrictions, reduction of bureaucracy	Theft and loss of property occur at the mega-event
Sales and ticket risks	Improvement of the participant ticket reservation algorithm	Some attendees use unofficial ticket purchase options
Personal risks	Staff gap for security service	Overloaded participants

The table outlines the common and differing risks perceived by organizers and participants of a cultural mega-event. Both groups are concerned about communication issues, financial constraints, low-quality catering, and operational challenges. Organizers specifically emphasize insufficient communication, budgeting problems, and the need for updated security measures. Participants focused on unclear information, high ticket and food prices, entrance queues, and theft. While both groups are worried about the quality and catering, their specific concerns differ – organizers are identifying tactical risks, while participants struggle with operative hazards.

Discussion and conclusions

This study examines the challenges and risks employed by organizers and participants of Celebration 2023.

The findings reveal significant concerns regarding communication and transparency of fund usage among organizers, emphasizing the pivotal role of effective communication in risk management [Robson 2009; Ashwin 2020] and the importance of financial transparency [Silvers 2008]. The risk management of mega-events is further complicated by media attention, which tends to spotlight negative aspects without acknowledging efforts to alleviate severe scenarios [Zrnic, Susnjar 2010]. Therefore, the public communication of risk scenarios through press conferences at Celebration 2023 is cited as a good practice.

Conversely, participants highlighted safety concerns related to weather conditions, catering issues, and insufficient information about force majeure situations, consistent with findings on the heightened safety risks at mega-events [Toohey, Taylor 2008; Girgin, Edizel 2019; Khir 2014; Elbe 2009]. Specific incidents, such as the ticketing system crash in 2018 and catering problems in 2023, underscore the need for improved risk management practices that correspond to the specifics of mega-events.

The comparative analysis reveals differences in risk perception between organizers and participants, enabling the conclusion that certain risks perceived as serious by organizers (such as communication issues) may not be viewed the same way by participants – and vice versa. Moreover, risks that may seem statistically insignificant (administrative violations, calling for medical assistance) are perceived as highly significant by participants. Organizers predominantly focus on tactical risks, such as communication and financial transparency, whilst participants are more concerned with operative risks such as safety issues, weather conditions, and catering. This discrepancy aligns with surveys showing gaps between perceived and actual risks in the event industry and differences in risk perception between executive and operational managers [Blerter & ERMS 2019; Marynissen et al. 2013]. Neither organizers nor participants have articulated crowd factors as a significant risk,

supporting findings that crowding risk depends on the music style [Earl et al. 2005].

Top managers illuminate the importance of high-level collaboration and structured risk management for successful event implementation and reputation maintenance – both, of organizers and the hosting state [Girgin, Edizel 2019; Ashwin 2020; Wynn-Moylan 2018] and the bureaucratic burdens [Khir 2014], leading to the recommendation to evaluate the policy for exceptional cases for the management of mega-events to reduce organizational burdens and participants' workload.

The contribution of this study is a comprehensive analysis of risk perception by mega-event organizers of different management levels, aiding in minimizing self-consciousness and subjective evaluations that can lead to erroneous decisions, particularly among experienced organizers [Zrnic, Susnjar 2010; Khir 2014]. The study confirms that risk assessment is based on managerial roles and responsibilities: while top managers highlight planning challenges within the external contexts, which distinctly manifested in financial and security planning, first-line managers focused more on operational risks and issues, ranging from weather conditions and catering to communication inaccuracies.

As Khir outlined, a significant portion of risks remains invisible and unreported, necessitating a thorough understanding of the risks "iceberg" from different perspectives [Khir 2014], as exemplified in this study, and can be used for improving risk management at mega-events.

Future research should focus on conducting comparative analyses of mega-events regarded as examples of best practices, and on examining risk management approaches that are well-suited to the context of mega-events [Tarlow 2002]. Subsequent studies should seek to elicit the perspectives of various stakeholders to facilitate effective risk management planning, including the influence of prior experiences and institutional memory [Ashwin 2020; Earl et al. 2005].

The findings reveal an interesting contradiction: participants generally perceive a high level of risk associated with mega-events, expressing a desire for enhanced security measures. However, when questioned about the risks they personally encountered during the Celebration, they reported encountering relatively few. This phenomenon may be attributable to well-known incidents during mega-events, including some sport events, which influence prevailing perceptions of potential hazards. However, these perceptions may not necessarily align with the reality, at least at this Celebration, as indicated by interviews with event organizers and participant survey findings.

The findings of this study align with existing literature on risk management in mega-events, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of risks and their specifics in cultural mega-events. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the specific risks faced by mega-event organizers and participants, revealing differing

risk perceptions based on their organizational roles. A key contribution of this study is the comparison of risk perceptions and their significance between organizers and participants of mega-events, underscoring the importance of a comprehensive and inclusive approach to risk management.

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