

## Lights that Gather: Attendance Motivations and Emotions in Light Festivals as Night-time Practices\*

Luces que reúnen: motivaciones para y emociones en la asistencia a “festivales de luces” como prácticas nocturnas

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the motivations for attending the Lumina light festival in Cascais, Portugal, drawing on a mixed-methods approach that combines 440 questionnaire-based surveys in 2017 and 457 in 2018 with ethnographic observation conducted during both editions. It examines how participation in the festival is shaped by affective, social, and everyday dynamics, moving beyond functionalist accounts of cultural leisure. The findings reveal that the event's nocturnal setting plays a central role in reconfiguring the appropriation of urban space, modes of social interaction, and aesthetic engagement. As a temporally situated intervention, the festival introduces a momentary rupture in the rhythms of urban life, fostering alternative uses of time and space. This study contributes empirical evidence on how ephemeral cultural events shape collective experiences of the city at night, offering insights into the interplay between leisure, emotion, and urban temporality.

KEY WORDS: Night-time festivals, Urban sociability, Cultural participation, Light art, Mixed methods, Nocturnal experience.

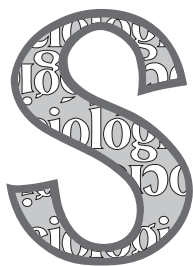
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## RESUMEN

Este artículo explora las motivaciones para asistir al festival de luces “Lumina” en Cascais, Portugal, a partir de una aproximación basada en una mezcla de diversas metodologías que incluyen la realización de 440 entrevistas a partir de un cuestionario en 2017 y 457 en 2018, así como la observación etnográfica que se realizó en las dos ediciones. El artículo examina cómo la participación en el festival fue determinada por dinámicas cotidianas, sociales y afectivas, que van más allá de la visión funcionalista del entretenimiento cultural. Los resultados revelan que la escenografía “de estilo nocturno” del evento juega un papel central en reconfigurar la apropiación del espacio urbano, las modalidades de la interacción social y el compromiso estético. Como una intervención situada temporalmente, el festival trae consigo una ruptura momentánea en los ritmos de la vida urbana, promoviendo usos alternativos del tiempo y el espacio. Este estudio aporta evidencia empírica sobre cómo los eventos culturales efímeros pueden resignificar las experiencias de la ciudad durante la noche, ofreciendo diversas perspectivas sobre las interacciones entre el entretenimiento, las emociones y la temporalidad urbana.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** festivales nocturnos, sociabilidad urbana, participación cultural, “arte de la luz”, mezcla de metodologías, experiencia de “lo nocturno”.



## INTRODUCTION

Light festivals have emerged over the past two decades as a distinctive form of cultural programming in contemporary cities, combining artistic spectacle, technological innovation, and large-scale public participation. These events are typically held at night and unfold in public spaces through ephemeral installations such as video mapping, light sculptures, or immersive environments. While their aesthetic appeal is often foregrounded, their social and spatial implications deserve closer analytical attention.

In this article, light festivals are understood as post-traditional nocturnal cultural events that intertwine light art, visual technologies, and ephemeral urban narratives, giving rise to carefully crafted sensory atmospheres designed for collective consumption. Their very existence ontologically depends on the night as a liminal device that enables the emergence of heightened aesthetic experiences, where the sensible becomes a vector of sociability, symbolic appropriation of space, and circulation of urban affect. These atmospheres, however, are not neutral: they operate within the logic of contemporary aesthetic capitalism, where the city is reframed as a stage for experiential consumption and luminous languages are instrumentalised as tools for territorial visibility, touristic activation, and cultural governance. In this way, light festivals configure urban regimes of experience that, far from reproducing traditional festive forms, function as dispositifs for the production of desire, ephemeral belonging, and symbolic distinction within a political economy of visibility.

Increasingly, such events have gained prominence among policymakers, cultural planners, and tourism stakeholders as tools for city branding, off-season tourism stimulation, and the revitalisation of urban space through affective and inclusive experiences. Despite this growing institutionalisation, the sociological dimensions of light festivals remain underexplored. Existing research tends to prioritise their economic impact, aesthetic innovation, or creative industries framing, often overlooking the everyday experiences and motivations of those who attend them. In particular, questions concerning who participates, in what configurations, and with what emotional and relational attachments remain insufficiently addressed within current scholarship on urban cultural events and night-time leisure.

Unlike functionalist approaches that emphasise economic or touristic impact, this article examines light festivals as socially embedded and emotionally textured dispositifs that mediate urban experience through the interplay of light, darkness, and public space. It foregrounds the subjective and relational dimensions of

participation, proposing a sociologically grounded reading attentive to motivations, social ties, and life-course dynamics.

The analysis focuses on visitors to the Lumina light festival in Cascais, Portugal, using a mixed-methods design that combines ethnographic observation with questionnaires collected in 2017 (n=440) and 2018 (n=457). It explores how motivations and companionship configurations vary across age cohorts, revealing how romantic, familial, peer-based, or solitary modes of participation structure the emotional experience of the event. Rather than treating festivals as static cultural products, the article situates them as affective and temporally situated practices within contemporary urban nightscapes.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature; Section 3 details the methodological approach; Section 4 presents the main findings; Section 5 discusses their implications; and Section 6 offers concluding reflections and directions for future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, light festivals have emerged as a distinctive cultural phenomenon where visual spectacle, urban policy, and affective participation converge. While initial academic interest focused on their contribution to city marketing and spatial rebranding (Zielinska-Dabkowska, 2016, Giordano and Ong, 2017, García-Ruiz, 2019a, Macías, 2020b), current research has increasingly shifted towards understanding how visitors experience and appropriate these events through a wide range of motivations and social configurations (García-Ruiz, 2023, Camprubí and Coromina, 2019, Li *et al.*, 2022). Moving beyond instrumentalist logics of tourism or urban regeneration, light festivals are now framed as complex cultural dispositifs—at once public, emotional, and aesthetic—whose reception depends deeply on the subjectivities and social worlds of their audiences.

Motivational frameworks provide a useful entry point into this complexity. Drawing on foundational work by Crompton and McKay (1997) several studies have classified visitor motivations into clusters including cultural enrichment, novelty, escapism, and social interaction (Maeng *et al.*, 2016, Cudny, 2016, Cudny and Ogórek, 2014). These models have evolved into more dynamic understandings that situate motivation within broader experiential landscapes. For instance, Huang (2021) argues that motivations are not fixed drivers but fluid processes, co-constructed by the nature of the event, the visitor's personal trajectory, and the sociocultural context. In cultural tourism specifically, the alignment between motivation, activity, and identity plays a critical role, as visitors tend to select experiences that not only fulfill leisure desires but also reflect and reinforce their personal values, lifestyle aspirations, and social positioning (Douglas *et al.*, 2023). This alignment suggests that motivations are not merely functional or momentary, but embedded in broader narratives of self-realization and cultural legitimacy, whereby the chosen activity—such as attending a light festival—serves as both an expression of taste and a mechanism for constructing or affirming one's identity in public space.

In the case of light festivals, the nocturnal, immersive, and atmospheric dimensions of the event profoundly shape motivation. Unlike other cultural formats, light festivals engage visitors through embodied aesthetic experience, multisensory stimulation, and spatial reorientation. Bille (2017) conceptualizes this as the production of “luminous atmospheres,” where light is not only seen but felt, producing a diffuse yet potent emotional charge. Similarly, Edensor (2015a, 2015b, 2015c) emphasizes the dramaturgical role of lighting in guiding movement and shaping public experience. These atmospheres are not neutral or purely aesthetic; they are socially charged, embedded in power relations and urban politics (Shaw, 2014). As spatial and affective arrangements, they can both invite and exclude, shaping who feels entitled to inhabit certain spaces and under what

conditions. In the context of light festivals, such atmospheres may appear inclusive and accessible, yet they often reproduce existing social hierarchies by privileging particular bodies, behaviors, and aesthetic sensibilities. The design and location of illuminated installations, crowd management strategies, and visual narratives projected onto urban surfaces all participate in a selective scripting of urban night life, wherein certain publics are made visible while others remain peripheral or unseen (García-Ruiz, 2023). For Gandy (2017) urban atmospheres must be understood as affective ecologies—assemblages of space, infrastructure, and human perception that emerge from the entanglement of material conditions and sensorial experience. These atmospheres are not *simply* by-products of urban design but dynamic fields where emotions circulate, social distinctions are felt, and meanings are co-produced through embodied interaction. In the case of light festivals, such affective ecologies are orchestrated through lighting technologies, urban scenography, acoustic textures, and the movement of crowds, generating spatial experiences that resonate differently depending on the subjectivities and positions of those present. As a result, the same illuminated environment may evoke joy, nostalgia, alienation, or indifference depending on the visitor's social location, past memories, or relational context within the city (García-Ruiz, 2024b).

Visitors are thus not simply attracted by content or programming but by the promise of affective intensity and urban enchantment. This is especially relevant in post-pandemic contexts, where light festivals offered a form of low-risk, outdoor cultural participation. Li *et al.* (2022) explore this in the case of the Macau Light Festival, showing how perceptions of health, safety, and crowding modified both motivations and behaviors. Their earlier work (Li *et al.*, 2021) further suggests that emotional engagement is tied to perceived self-congruity—visitors are more satisfied when the symbolic and emotional qualities of the event reflect their own identity and lifestyle. This congruence operates as a mechanism of affective

alignment: when visitors perceive the atmosphere, aesthetics, and values of the event as compatible with their own self-image, the experience becomes more meaningful, memorable, and emotionally rewarding. From a sociological standpoint, this process closely aligns with Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, understood as "a system of dispositions" that generates "perceptions, appreciations and actions" (Bourdieu, 2013). In this framework, visitor motivations are not solely individual preferences but structured expressions of class-based dispositions and embodied cultural capital. The symbolic language of the light festival—its aesthetics, atmosphere, and values—resonates more powerfully when it aligns with the visitor's *habitus*, reinforcing a sense of comfort, legitimacy, and belonging. This affective recognition enables the festival to function not just as a site of leisure, but as a field of distinction, where aesthetic pleasure and social affirmation are intertwined.

Crucially, these motivations are not always individualized. Attendance at light festivals is often structured around companionship, peer groups, family ties, or intergenerational constellations. Edensor and Sumartojo (2015) note that projection festivals are typically experienced collectively, producing fleeting yet intense bonds among attendees. These ephemeral encounters resonate with Victor and Edith Turner's theorization of *communitas*—a form of unstructured sociality that emerges in liminal contexts, where normative roles and hierarchies are momentarily suspended, we must keep in mind that the light festival can be understood as a liminal time-space, as it happens in very precise hours before the night continues as usual. As Turner (1977) describes, *communitas* arises during periods of transition, allowing for affective proximity, spontaneous sociability, and a sense of collective belonging beyond formal structures. In the context of projection-based light festivals, the sensory and aesthetic immersion in illuminated urban space facilitates precisely this kind of experiential suspension, emphasized by the artistic atmosphere created around the event, and surrounded by the intermittent

light, darkness, and voices of other people present at a specific place along the festival path. Participants, temporarily detached from their everyday roles, may feel absorbed into a shared emotional field, producing what Edith Turner later conceptualized as “communitas as an experience,” where the emphasis lies on the visceral and embodied quality of social togetherness (Turner, 2012). Rather than forming stable communities, these moments generate affective intensities that, although transient, are deeply meaningful for those involved. Thus, light festivals function as contemporary ritual forms —urban rites of liminality— where symbolic boundaries are blurred and emotional solidarities can briefly flourish.

Becerra Pozos (2018) from an ethnographic perspective, stresses that night-time participation is relationally negotiated, especially in Latin American contexts where nocturnal sociality is shaped by class, gender, and urban insecurity, connecting with these premises of togetherness and companionship. In parallel, Macías (2023) provides a rich reading of night-time urban life in Mexico City by focusing on the *vinculaciones sensibles* —sensitive bonds— that emerge between individuals inhabiting both central and peripheral nightscapes. Her work demonstrates how nocturnal sociability often escapes rigid classifications, relying instead on subtle affective negotiations that take place in dimly lit streets, on the edge of domesticity, or amid spontaneous encounters (Macías, 2020a). These affective relations, while informal and fluid, are grounded in mutual recognition and care, and mirror the kind of emotional suspension and solidarity invoked in Turner’s communitas. Macías invites us to consider how the night enables alternate configurations of intimacy, where emotional alignments are less about visibility and more about shared temporalities, proximity, and the tacit codes of urban coexistence. In this sense, both institutionalized festivals and everyday nocturnal practices reveal how the night operates as a space of affective potentiality and temporary social reordering.



Remoaldo *et al.* (2020) examine how participation in creative tourism activities—including light festivals—varies by demographic and territorial factors. Their findings indicate that motivations are tied not only to aesthetic appreciation but to the desire for shared cultural practices that affirm a sense of local or regional identity. This perspective aligns with studies of proximity tourism, which understand festivals as devices for everyday leisure rather than destinations for long-haul travel (García-Ruiz, 2024a). Light festivals, in this light, become platforms for reinforcing territorial attachments and collective belonging.

At the same time, the urban and atmospheric reconfiguration produced by light festivals allows visitors to escape familiar routines. This “rupture of the ordinary” is part of what makes these events attractive across social groups. Paiva (2024) proposes the concept of *affective urbanism* to analyze how emotions and spatial experience intersect in urban life, especially during ephemeral cultural activations. This approach foregrounds the emotional dimension of how individuals and communities relate to urban space, emphasizing that cities are not only structured through physical infrastructures or institutional logics, but also through affective attachments, sensory atmospheres, and symbolic resonances. In the context of light festivals, affective urbanism allows for a reading of these events as moments of heightened emotional intensity that temporarily reconfigure the perception of place, triggering alternative modes of engagement, belonging, and memory. These activations, though transient, can leave enduring emotional traces that reshape how residents and visitors relate to specific urban sites, fostering what Paiva calls “emotional cartographies” that complicate purely functional or representational understandings of the city. As such, light festivals can be understood not merely as spectacles or entertainment, but as affective interventions in the urban fabric that reveal the city’s emotional infrastructure. His earlier work (Paiva, 2023) also highlights the paradox of atmospheres: while they foster emotional engagement, they can also serve exclusionary pur-

poses when designed without regard for lived social realities. For instance, aesthetic experiences aimed at tourists may alienate residents, or reinforce feelings of dispossession.

The work of Yin *et al.* (2023) on the Guangzhou International Light Festival shows that digital sharing is not merely ancillary but central to visitor engagement. Social media influences not only how visitors document their experience, but how they plan, interpret, and remember it. In this way, the festival becomes a multi-platform event, both lived and performed. Participation is expanded through posts, stories, and hashtags, producing affective economies where visibility, connection, and identity are negotiated in real time. These dynamics resonate with García-Ruiz (2024b) study of the *Mi-e Dor de Tine* installation in Cluj, where emotional expressions mediated through digital platforms amplified the affective charge of the work across diasporic and transnational spaces. The neon message became a symbolic artefact of longing (*dor*), reinterpreted and shared by members of the Romanian diaspora to perform acts of cultural belonging and emotional return. In a complementary way, Rodríguez Becerril and Fortuna (2020) emphasize, on their work about Mexico City, the centrality of *instagramability* and visual performance in urban interventions. They suggest that rather than passive documentation, the act of photographing is an embodied negotiation between the subject, the illuminated environment, and an imagined digital audience.

The symbolic power of light is also fundamental to understanding how visitors relate to these events. Lovell and Griffin (2018) examine the fantasy-laden aesthetic of projection mapping, noting how it appeals to deep desires for wonder and escape. In contrast, Wenying and Hengtong (2022) investigate how the Macau Light and Shadow Festival contributes to the production of city image and symbolic capital. Their analysis shows that visitors are not only consuming light as spectacle but participating in narratives about modernity, innovation, and urban pride, while in a certain way connecting to their own traditions and culture. This semiotic

dimension of festival participation has been underlined by Popescu (2022) who reflects on the reframing of light art from the enclosed and contemplative space of the museum to the dynamic and often commodified realm of the urban public sphere. His critique suggests that while this spatial democratization may enhance accessibility and diversify audiences, it simultaneously risks diluting the conceptual density and subversive potential of the artworks themselves. In moving into the street, light art becomes more susceptible to processes of spectacularization and entertainment-driven consumption, where critical engagement may be displaced by photogenic appeal and immediate sensory gratification. In this sense, the festival format, with its emphasis on visibility, foot traffic, and atmosphere, can unintentionally reorient artistic meaning toward populist legibility and affective consensus, overshadowing interpretive ambiguity or political critique and progressively commodifying the arts in a non-stop festivalization of the culture.

This symbolic repositioning of light art in public space also invites reflection on the legitimacy and interpretability of the artworks themselves. Ferronato (2021) In her study of the Lago Maggiore Light Festival, she analyzes how contemporary light installations function not only as aesthetic interventions but also as tourism devices. She emphasizes that visitor motivations are frequently influenced by the framing of the event within local heritage, and by its ability to offer a temporary visual re-enchantment of known landscapes. The festival is not a neutral arena but a curated environment where visitors' expectations are shaped by past cultural experiences and their positioning within local or regional tourism circuits (García-Ruiz, 2019b).

The relationship between visitors and urban nightscapes is also mediated by public policies and planning logics. Alves (2007) in an early reflection on light and landscape in urban development, observed how illumination strategies were being used to reimagine and beautify city centers. However, this aes-

theticization often privileged specific populations and spatial zones, reproducing existing exclusions under a seemingly inclusive visual language. This is particularly evident in light festivals that are marketed as open and democratic, yet are staged in gentrified districts or aligned with luxury consumption. Camprubí and Coromina (2019) draw attention to this disjunction in their study of Barcelona, where residents and tourists perceived the same event in radically different ways—residents tending to view it as intrusive, while tourists associated it with novelty and fun.

While the affective and symbolic dimensions of light festivals are increasingly acknowledged, their performative nature is also crucial in understanding visitor motivations. Dell’Aria (2021) in her analysis of the moving image in public art, identifies how projection and illumination technologies reframe public space as a stage for aesthetic consumption and civic engagement. However, she cautions that such reconfigurations are not neutral: the spectator’s role is often pre-scripted within urban narratives of innovation and creativity. For visitors, participation becomes both a spatial practice and a form of semiotic alignment with dominant city imaginaries. This tension between spectacle and agency has also been addressed by Miśkowiec (2017) who argues that urban light festivals can temporarily reshape public space, creating atmospheres of conviviality and aesthetic intensity. Nevertheless, their long-term impact on urban life and community dynamics remains ambiguous, especially when visitor motivations are shaped by fleeting novelty rather than sustained engagement.

Motivations to attend light festivals are not isolated or fixed, but emerge from a dynamic interplay of emotional, social, spatial, and symbolic elements. These insights invite an empirical investigation attentive to both articulated motivations and situated practices. The following section outlines the methodological approach adopted to examine these dynamics in the context of the Lumina Festival in Cascais, drawing on survey data and ethnographic observation collected during the 2017 and 2018 editions.

## METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a mixed-methods strategy integrating ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and quantitative questionnaire administration to examine the motivations and social configurations of visitors to Portuguese light festivals, focusing on Lumina in Cascais during the 2017 and 2018 editions. The combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches responded to the lack of prior systematic studies on these phenomena and to the need to capture both experiential narratives and more generalisable trends in attendance.

The sampling followed a non-probabilistic convenience approach adapted to maximise diversity of respondent profiles. During each evening of the festival, enumerators were positioned along the main pedestrian routes of the installations and approached visitors at random intervals, inviting them to participate voluntarily. Enumerators were instructed to alternate respondents by age group and gender presentation (e.g., if the previous respondent was young, the next would be older; if the previous respondent presented as male, the next as female) and to engage with different group configurations (families, couples, groups of friends).

In total, 440 valid questionnaires were collected in 2017 and 457 in 2018. This volume reflected a substantial proportion of attendees in each edition, ensuring robust descriptive coverage. Eligible participants were required to be at least 15 years old. While the convenience sampling limits statistical representativeness, the strategy achieved broad coverage of the diverse publics circulating through the festival.

The structured questionnaire was developed after an initial exploratory fieldwork phase in 2016. It consisted of closed-ended items measuring sociodemographic variables (age, gender, occupation), motivations for attending (based on adapted categories from (Crompton and McKay, 1997), patterns of on-site consumption (food, drinks, other leisure or cul-

tural activities), and prior participation in festivals. The estimated completion time was ten minutes. Still here, I present results only on motivation for visitation.

In 2017, questionnaires were administered digitally using iPads connected to the internet, provided by the festival organisation. In 2018, the same instrument was deployed with minor updates to account for programme variations. Enumerators wore branded uniforms (white shirts with logos from the festival, the research institution, and the production company) that enhanced legitimacy and recognisability. All enumerators were trained in street-intercept survey techniques, management of refusals, and the ethical protocols guiding the study. Participants were informed of the objectives of the research and offered professional contact cards in case of questions or future requests for information.

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted during different phases of the Lumina Festival in Cascais, beginning in 2016, in close collaboration with the organizing team. The approach combined participant and non-participant observation within a critical ethnography framework (Thomas, 1993, Madison, 2005, Carspecken, 1996), enabling both immersion in and reflexive distance from the event's spatial, aesthetic, and social dynamics. Observations were systematically recorded in a structured field diary, including detailed notes on the atmospheres of specific installations, the temporal rhythms of visitor attendance, interviews with visitors, interactional patterns, and the performative dimensions of participation. This qualitative corpus not only grounded the interpretative lens of the study but also informed the design and wording of the survey instrument distributed on site. Following Gros (2017), the use of statistics in this research was conceived not as a claim to generalizability, but as a set of descriptive tendencies contextualized within critical ethnographic insight, privileging meaning over measurement.

The researcher adopted an intentionally horizontal and conversational approach to reduce the perceived distance be-

tween interviewer and informant, encourage disclosure, and avoid the impression of extracting information in a transactional way. Informants were fully briefed on the study's purpose and consented explicitly to participation.

Integration of quantitative and qualitative data was conducted iteratively. Descriptive statistics were produced to identify dominant patterns in motivations, consumption, and demographics. These results were then triangulated against fieldnotes and interview data to detect convergence and divergence in interpretations. The purpose was to develop a detailed case profile of festival attendance and experience rather than to generate inferential claims, in other words, doing an "ethnography based on statistics." (Weber, 1995)

The following section presents the main analytical insights derived from the combined dataset. It is structured in two parts: first, a descriptive overview of the primary motivations reported by visitors; second, a brief analysis of the social configurations of attendance, focusing on company, interaction, and collective dynamics during the visit.

## **COMPARATIVE AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS: 2017–2018**

### *DESCRIPTIVE PATTERNS OF MOTIVATIONS*

The quantitative examination of motivations to attend the Lumina festival over the two consecutive editions reveals a constellation of drivers, whose distribution is strongly stratified across age cohorts. The six most recurrent motivational domains —cultural exploration, curiosity and novelty seeking, escaping routine, socializing with friends, meeting new people, and family-oriented enjoyment— emerged as the primary coordinates within which respondents positioned their participation. This descriptive mapping offers not only an empirical baseline but also a necessary point of departure for any theorisation of festival attendance as a social practice.

Table 1.  
MOTIVATION OF VISITATION BY AGE - LUMINA, 2017-2018

	Cultural Exploration (%)		Novelty / Curiosity (%)		Escape from Routine(%)		Socializing with Friends (%)		Socialising / Meeting New People (%)		Family-oriented enjoyment (%)	
	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018
15-24	26	26	34	24	35	28	50	31	46	29	21	20
25-34	16	22	17	22	18	23	21	23	14	19	12	18
35-44	21	22	17	20	17	18	10	17	19	19	28	24
45-54	18	15	16	18	15	17	11	16	10	18	22	21
55-64	12	9	10	11	10	12	5	10	5	11	9	12
65+	7	5	7	5	7	4	3	3	7	4	8	5
	n=269	n=281	n=272	n=343	n=199	n=243	n=187	n=253	n=116	n=150	n=201	n=254

**Note:** Percentages indicate the proportion of respondents in each age group who reported the specified motivation as one of their main reasons for attending. Multiple responses were possible.



Among the youngest cohort (15-24), motivations were clearly shaped by peer-oriented sociability and affective exploration. In 2017, 50% of participants in this age group reported attending Lumina with friends, 46% highlighted the desire to meet new people, and 35% cited escaping routine as a primary motive. These percentages were markedly higher than in any other age group, underscoring the centrality of collective leisure and experiential novelty in youth participation.

Such findings align with recent scholarship characterizing Generation Z as particularly attuned to affective, social, and digitally mediated experiences in public space Dunne *et al.* (2023) light festivals like Lumina are not merely cultural offerings but opportunities to reframe the night as a safe and aesthetically rich space for identity experimentation, emotional connection, and the consolidation of peer bonds. As such, they operate in line with what Matthews *et al.* (2004) describe as the temporal transformation of public space into a ‘third space’ of youth engagement. This perspective was vividly expressed by one participant:

“It’s been going on for years, but until now we never came all together. I always came with my parents, but now I’m here with my friends. It’s a totally different vibe. I’m enjoying it a lot—and the photos are amazing!”  
— Informant #23, Male, 18, Student. Cascais Bay. 2017.

Another participant echoed this affective shift in meaning:

“The festival is free, and a good alternative to partying in Lisbon. It really changes the night—today it’s not about drinking, it’s about chilling with friends, laughing, being silly, and meeting people. With all this darkness, Cascais feels more intimate. It makes you want to stay close to your people and discover the festival together.”  
— Informant #10, Non-Binary, 19, Student. Cidadela of Cascais. 2018.

These accounts illustrate how the festival enables a form of nocturnal belonging that deviates from conventional nightlife scripts, replacing alcohol-based sociability with shared wonder and play. Night studies scholars have increasingly pointed

to the night as a crucial yet under-researched temporal space for the formation of contemporary youth subjectivities (Talbot, 2007, Nofre, 2020, Nofre *et al.*, 2020). Light festivals, in this regard, become not only cultural experiences but social infrastructures for peer connection, urban appropriation, and emotionally resonant leisure.

While the proportions of social motivations declined in 2018 (to 31% and 29%, respectively), they remained dominant, suggesting an enduring perception of light festivals as liminal contexts for relational experimentation (Turner, 1974). Simultaneously, cultural exploration and curiosity—each cited by 26% and 24% in 2018—highlight that younger attendees are also receptive to the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of the event, albeit in combination with social motives. This supports Sobitan and Vlachos (2020) assertion that immersive sensory and participatory elements enhance motivation among younger demographics through both hedonic and expressive drivers.

Among the 25–34 age group, motivations appear more balanced. Cultural exploration rose from 16% in 2017 to 22% in 2018, as did curiosity (from 17% to 22%) and escape (from 18% to 23%). Social motivations remained relatively stable (21–23% for friends; 14–19% for meeting new people). This cohort exemplifies hybrid motivational patterns, as described by Richards and King (2022), where symbolic consumption, lifestyle affirmation, and shared experience converge. The rise in cultural and curiosity-related motivations may reflect greater cultural capital and identity-based engagement (Bourdieu, 1984) while the stable presence of social motives points to a continuing emphasis on group-based leisure participation. The overlap between exploratory and sociable motivations aligns with Jiang *et al.* (2024) who argue that participatory cultural environments allow for both experiential consumption and self-positioning within public cultural scenes.

For the 35–44 segment, family-oriented motivations clearly dominated: 28% in 2017 and 24% in 2018 cited family enjoyment as their main reason for attending. Simultaneously, cultural and curiosity-driven motivations remained moderately stable (21–22% and 17–20%, respectively), while social motives like going with friends or meeting new people remained low (below 20%). These results suggest a transitional phase in leisure orientation—from youth-oriented sociability toward family-based cultural engagement. Kitterlin and Yoo (2024) highlight that motivations in this demographic often balance personal interest with the practicalities of family life, and Ghenta *et al.* (2022) emphasize that middle-aged participation in cultural events is frequently shaped by familial roles and scheduling constraints. The data thus supports Stebbins (2007) theory of “serious leisure,” in which cultural events become embedded in routinized yet meaningful forms of family life.

“Practically, we don’t go out much. We usually meet at a friend’s house and let the kids play. [...] Lumina is not just a night out—it’s a chance for the children to enjoy art and culture. They learn, they marvel at the festival. We enjoy it with them. But we also enjoy it together. It has become a family activity.”

— Informant #17, Woman, 44, Bahia de Cascais, 2017.

The 45–54 group showed even stronger convergence toward family motivations (22–21%) and a general de-emphasis of curiosity, exploration, or social motives (all below 18%). Cultural exploration, for example, declined from 18% in 2017 to 15% in 2018. This reduced motivational diversity suggests a more pragmatic approach to festival attendance.

Finally, among respondents aged 55 and over, all motivational categories registered the lowest percentages, particularly cultural exploration (falling to 5% in 2018 among those 65+), socializing (3–5%), and curiosity (4–11%). These results align with Ghenta *et al.* (2022), who note that older

adults tend to participate in cultural activities less for stimulation or exploration and more as a form of occasional, familiar leisure.

“My children asked me to look after the kids. They went out in Lisbon, and I stayed with the little ones. We came for the lights—they love it. And they get tired, so they sleep well when we get home.”

— Informant #66, Woman, 71, retired. Casa das Histórias, Cascais. 2018.

“I came alone. I think it’s fantastic to see my city with a new skin. [...] I feel overwhelmed walking with all these people, and I suppose many don’t come because of the crowd—they don’t think about older folks. We walk more slowly, we stop to look. [...] Often it’s not even about seeing, it’s about remembering. I visited places I once went to with girlfriends in my youth. And the lights... they made me feel young again.”

— Informant #56, Man, 82, retired. Near the train station, Cascais. 2017.

The relative consistency of family-related motivations (9–12%) indicates that intergenerational dynamics may still frame participation. However, the overall decline across all categories reveals a progressive disengagement from the immersive and symbolic possibilities of festival culture, pointing instead toward a more passive or habitual attendance mode.

### *COMPANY AND SOCIAL CONFIGURATION OF VISITS*

The breakdown of visitation companionship by age across the 2017 and 2018 editions of Lumina reveals clear generational distinctions in how the festival is socially experienced. These distinctions correspond to life-cycle stages, familial structures, and evolving leisure preferences, echoing recent research on age-related cultural consumption and festival attendance.

Table 2.  
VISITATION COMPANIONSHIP BY AGE — LUMINA, 2017–2018

	15-24 (%)		25-34 (%)		35-44 (%)		45-54 (%)		55-64 (%)		65+ (%)	
	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018
Alone	6	4	6	2	4	3	6	5	9	11	12	0
With friends	62	53	51	44	21	31	19	30	17	23	23	29
Boyfriend / Girlfriend	13	18	19	25	7	8	6	3	0	6	0	4
Husband / Wife (without children)	0	0	16	6	12	11	15	13	37	23	19	25
Family (husband, wife, and children)	15	14	15	16	62	42	56	45	35	36	54	29
Grandchildren	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	12	11
Elderly parents	5	5	3	4	2	1	1	1	2	0	4	0
Relatives	4	2	2	2	8	1	3	2	7	2	4	4
Work colleagues	5	2	3	1	1	2	0	1	0	0	0	0
Classmates	2	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	n=150	n=139	n=78	n=117	n=101	n=121	n=85	n=98	n=50	n=53	n=33	n=28

**Note:** Respondents could select more than one type of companionship. Percentages may not sum to 100%.

Young people aged 15–24 overwhelmingly attended Lumina with friends, with 62% doing so in 2017 and 53% in 2018. This was the highest percentage of friend-group attendance across all age cohorts. Similarly, the 25–34 age group followed closely behind, with 51% attending with friends in 2017 and 44% in 2018. This trend confirms longstanding findings in leisure studies that peer companionship is a defining element of youth festival participation (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003, Gallan, 2013). Adolescents and young adults are more likely to treat festivals as social arenas for fun, identity construction, and peer bonding, as supported by Jjang *et al.* (2024).

The presence of romantic partners as companions also rises during these life stages. Among participants aged 15–24, 13% reported attending with a boyfriend or girlfriend in 2017, rising to 18% in 2018. For the 25–34 age group, these figures were even higher: 19% in 2017 and 25% in 2018. These data suggest that light festivals like Lumina function as “urban dating spaces,” offering young couples a safe, culturally rich environment to share emotionally charged experiences (Arai and Pedlar, 2003, Edensor, 2015c). Some younger couples, particularly those without children, appear to use the event to build memories together and escape the routines of daily life, reflecting broader lifestyle patterns centred on experience consumption and emotional bonding.

“We haven’t been together for long—we were friends for a long time, but this summer we took the first step. We’ve been getting to know each other for a few weeks. I think it’s a romantic outing, fun, and there are lots of places where you can steal a kiss.”

— Informant #70, Man, 23, student. Museum Triangle, Cascais. 2018.

“It’s intimate and magical. It’s an event to enjoy together. Honestly, it’s very romantic—and after a nice dinner looking out over the bay,

it feels good to walk hand in hand and play with the installations. It's about making memories together—it's about falling in love.”

— Informant #31, Woman, 26, veterinarian. Cidadelas de Cascais. 2018.

Importantly, family attendance was rare among this group. Only 15% of 15–24-year-olds attended with their full family (parents and children) in both years, and a similar low incidence was found in the 25–34 age group (15% in 2017 and 16% in 2018). Attending with classmates also appeared almost exclusively among the youngest group (2% in 2017 and 1% in 2018), indicating school-based companionships fade as people age. The trend is clear: youth companionship at Lumina was dominantly peer- and partner-based, indicating motivations of sociability, romance, and escapism through shared experience (Packer and Ballantyne, 2016). The low presence of older relatives or work colleagues (both around or below 5% in this cohort) emphasizes that youth night-time leisure was relatively independent from intergenerational or professional sociality.

Visitors aged 35–44 and 45–54 showed a clear pattern of attending Lumina with their families, a trend consistent with key life-course transitions such as parenting and family formation. In 2017, 62% of the 35–44 cohort reported attending with their partner and children, though this declined to 42% in 2018. Similarly, among those aged 45–54, 56% attended with family in 2017 and 45% in 2018. These were the highest rates of family-based attendance across all age groups and years. Such patterns reflect the centrality of family togetherness in leisure motivations during this life stage. Adults in their 30s and 40s often seek cultural events that allow them to fulfill parental roles, offer educational exposure to children, and experience enjoyable time together (Hodge and Wikle, 2021, Kitching, 2024, Martinez Mendiola and Cortina, 2024).



Figure 1.  
LIGHT FESTIVAL AS A FAMILY LEISURE AND CULTURAL ACTIVITY,  
WITH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SNAPSHOTS.



Upper: Father interacting with his young daughter at an interactive installation in Cascais. Lower: Mother navigating the challenges of moving through the city with a stroller. Both photos taken in Cascais, 2018, by the author.



These data reveal a notable segment of mid-life attendees who navigate leisure at the intersection of familial responsibilities and the pursuit of intimacy. In the 35-44 age group, 12% (2017) and 11% (2018) reported attending the festival with a spouse but without children. This trend increases in the 45-54 bracket, with 15% in 2017 and 13% in 2018 reporting the same. These figures suggest that even among adults embedded in domestic routines, nighttime festivals like Lumina can operate as symbolic interludes for romantic reconnection. Following (Stebbins, 2007) theory of serious leisure and Dumazedier (1962) classic framing of leisure as a realm of liberation from routine, such moments acquire affective and relational significance beyond recreational consumption. They allow couples to suspend the temporal weight of work–family pressures and re-enact pre-parental intimacy. The depth of this experience emerges clearly in the voice of one participant:

“It’s hard to keep the flame of love alive when you have to work long hours for a laughable salary like the ones we have in Portugal. We both work and come home exhausted. We still have to take care of the kids, the chores, and keep the house in order. This is the first time we’ve been out in a long while, and I’m glad to have this moment with my husband because it’s been ages since we’ve been alone. The children are with my parents—they’re not going out tonight—so we can be like we were when we were dating, right in the middle of this magic.”

— Informant #44, Woman, 37, Marechal Carmona Park. 2018.

This statement underscores how nighttime cultural events are not merely artistic spectacles but emotionally charged opportunities for temporary role relief. The sociological importance of such moments lies in their capacity to produce what Rosa (2019) calls “*resonance*”—a meaningful interruption in the accelerated temporality of everyday life. Night festivals like Lumina, in this reading, function as relational infrastructures that enable emotional repair, reaffirm couple identities, and inscribe new affective memories within urban nightscapes.

Indeed, intergenerational family ties also appear modestly: 2% of the 35-44-year-olds attended with grandchildren in 2017 (none in 2018), and 2% of the 45-54-year-olds did so in 2017 (again, none in 2018). Meanwhile, attendance with elderly parents was minimal in this age bracket, remaining at 1% or 0% across both years. This suggests that while the event was primarily geared toward young families, it had limited uptake among extended or older family members in this cohort, probably connected to the independence or autonomy of young adolescents and the construction of their own peer system.

Romantic couples without children also made an appearance, particularly in the 25-34 group (16% in 2017, 6% in 2018), showing some overlap with emerging family structures. Yet their presence was overshadowed by the dominant motivation of spending time with children. As Getz and Page (2016) observed, family-oriented leisure during this life stage often emphasizes safety, educational potential, and shared memory-making—values that light festivals like Lumina are designed to fulfill.

Moreover, very low attendance with friends (21% in 2017 and 31% in 2018 for the 35-44 group; 19% and 30% for the 45-54 group) contrasts sharply with the high peer-group participation among younger adults. This drop reflects the shift in lifestyle priorities once individuals enter family-building phases. Friend-based leisure becomes rarer, replaced by child-centered sociality and couple/family activities (Kitching, 2024, Martínez Mendiola and Cortina, 2024, Hodge and Wikle, 2021).

Thus, Lumina appears to serve as a strategic leisure choice for mid-life adults—accessible, intergenerational, and low-cost (it is free)—satisfying desires for both cultural enrichment and quality family time. Its ability to attract such large proportions of family units (up to 62%) suggests successful positioning as a family-friendly nocturnal cultural offer.

The relatively lower participation of romantic pairs among the youngest (18-24: 10% in 2017 and 5% in 2018) and oldest

(55+: 9% and 4% in 2017 and 2018 respectively) age brackets may reflect different life stages. For younger adults, peer companionship dominates; for older adults, companionship may shift toward extended family, friends, or solo attendance. Attending with a romantic partner reflects motivations grounded in togetherness, aesthetic enjoyment, and affective co-presence. Lumina's visual and emotional atmosphere facilitated these experiences, particularly for young and middle-aged couples who see cultural outings as part of their relational lifestyle. The steady presence of romantic pairs suggests that the festival successfully functioned as a shared urban ritual, reinforcing couple intimacy through cultural participation.

While the majority of Lumina attendees came accompanied, a noteworthy segment—particularly among older adults—visited the festival alone. Solo attendance was highest in the 55+ age group, with 20% of visitors in 2017 and 22% in 2018 reporting that they attended alone. In comparison, only 4% of those aged 18–24 in 2017 and 3% in 2018 attended without company. The pattern shows a clear trend: as age increases, so does the likelihood of attending alone, reflecting life-stage factors and differentiated motivations.

In leisure studies, solo cultural participation is increasingly seen as a marker of autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Ghenta *et al.*, 2022, Toepoel, 2013). Older adults, particularly those who are retired or living alone, may have more flexibility and willingness to engage in cultural outings independently. Unlike younger groups for whom socializing is a primary motive, older individuals may be more driven by a personal interest in the arts, city life, or nostalgia (García-Ruiz, 2024b).

The 20–22% solo attendance among the 55+ population at Lumina supports this: these visitors might be long-term residents, art lovers, or habitual event-goers who feel comfortable navigating public festivals independently. Solo leisure is not necessarily lonely leisure; rather, it reflects personal agency and a pursuit of meaningful experiences on one's own terms.

Attending alone may also allow greater freedom to follow one's pace, explore installations at will, or focus more attentively on the artistic experience (Zhang *et al.*, 2024, Naor and Mayseless, 2020, Yang, 2020). At Lumina, the spatial layout and open access meant that solo visitors could participate without needing to "belong" to a group—fostering casual interaction with strangers, volunteers, or other attendees. This aligns with studies highlighting how solo attendees often find spontaneous social encounters more accessible in public cultural events than in private settings.

That younger attendees were significantly less likely to come alone (3-4% in the 18-24 group and only 2-5% in the 25-34 group) underlines their reliance on peer networks and the perception of festivals as shared, not individual, experiences. In contrast, for older visitors, solo attendance at Lumina reflects a pattern of self-directed cultural consumption—a social practice of continued civic participation and aesthetic appreciation.

The following discussion situates the observed patterns of visitation companionship within broader scholarly debates on leisure practices, social motivations, and cultural participation in urban night-time settings. Drawing on relevant literature, the analysis aims to interpret how different life stages and social profiles shape the ways in which individuals and groups engage with light festivals as shared cultural experiences.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Attending a nighttime light festival like Lumina is not merely a matter of individual choice or passive cultural consumption. Rather, it reflects complex motivational structures tied to life-course stage, emotional needs, and the symbolic appropriation of nocturnal urban space. As observed, different companionship patterns (e.g., with friends, family, romantic partners, or alone) are not arbitrary but socially structured and emotionally meaningful.

The decision to attend Lumina with peers, especially for youth, reveals how leisure becomes a form of identity work (Hodkinson, 2016) and collective belonging. For younger participants, the nighttime setting provides both a space of freedom from adult supervision and an aestheticized environment for social bonding. It is in the night – under the shadows and glow of public art – that many young people experience affective intensities tied to emerging autonomy and shared enjoyment.

For families, the festival serves a different emotional and motivational function. Attendance reflects not just availability, but a desire to perform family togetherness in public, blending cultural participation with caregiving, and a good excuse for adults to have a rupture of the routine patterns of leisure consumption. In this sense, festivals operate as ritualized expressions of urban family life, offering parents an opportunity to foster cultural exposure while also offering the spectacular and entertainment that the younger need for creative stimulation.

Romantic couples, whether young or middle-aged, approach Lumina as a nighttime intimacy space. The nocturnal city, transformed by luminous art, becomes a terrain of shared emotional experience, where public space is temporarily imbued with private meaning. As (Ahmed, 2014) argues, emotions do not reside solely within individuals, but circulate between bodies and objects, shaping attachments and the surfaces of sociality. In this context, the festival acts as a generative affective infrastructure, inviting participants to feel with and through others, while also reorienting their relations to the urban night.

Solo attendees, particularly older individuals, reframe the nocturnal city as a space for solitary engagement and reflexive appreciation. Their motivations often lie in the pursuit of aesthetic, cultural, or even meditative experiences. Their presence at Lumina challenges the notion that festivals are necessarily group-oriented, instead highlighting how public night-

time events can also fulfill individual emotional needs—such as autonomy, nostalgia, or sensory curiosity.

Critically, night itself is not merely a temporal backdrop but a constitutive element in these dynamics. The festival's positioning after dark taps into what scholars of night studies have described as the "liminal promise of the nocturnal" (Shaw, 2018, Mateo and Eldridge, 2018). Nighttime offers spatial and emotional affordances unavailable during the day: the softening of architectural forms, the transformation of familiar streets through light and shadow, and the heightened sensory awareness that darkness cultivates. These qualities support the emergence of what can be termed "nocturnal aesthetic communities" – gatherings of strangers bound by shared wonder and mutual affect.

## CONCLUSIONS

Light festivals such as Lumina must be understood not simply as artistic events or tourism products, but as dynamic and layered cultural phenomena that reconfigure the experience of the night. Sociologically, they illuminate—both literally and symbolically—the shifting roles of urban nocturnality in contemporary societies. These festivals operate at the intersection of urban renewal, public culture, and emotional geographies, reclaiming night-time space from historical connotations of danger or deviance and reframing it as a terrain of visibility, play, and belonging (García-Ruiz, 2023, 2024a).

Sociologically speaking, light festivals can be interpreted as collective rituals enacted in public space, fostering urban belonging through shared sensory and emotional experiences. They are deeply intertwined with processes of emotional anchoring, place-making, and everyday cultural participation, operating as affective infrastructures where the city is temporarily reimagined and communally felt. They become stages where individuals negotiate their social positions—based on age, companionship, or lifestyle—while performing roles as

friends, parents, partners, or solitary wanderers in a curated nocturnal environment. In this sense, they exemplify how the night can be transformed into a shared cultural infrastructure: aesthetic, democratic, and emotionally loaded.

The motivations identified —cultural curiosity, novelty seeking, escape from routine, and social interaction— reveal the layered meanings that visitors project onto the night. These motives are not evenly distributed; they reflect distinct life stages and social roles. For younger visitors (15-24), the night festival becomes a space of peer bonding and experimentation, a stage for forging identities through group affiliation, romantic intimacy, and aesthetic discovery. In contrast, for visitors aged 35-54, motivations shift toward family enjoyment, intergenerational bonding, and moderate cultural engagement, which (Stebbins, 2007) might be framed as “serious leisure” constrained by obligations and structured routines. Meanwhile, among older adults (55+), visitation often acquires a quieter, habitual dimension—less about exploration and more about ritualized presence in the urban night. This mirrors Ghenta *et al.* (2022) insights into how cultural participation among older adults is embedded in emotional continuity and proximate social networks.

Patterns of companionship further deepen this picture. The data reveal not only that many younger people attend with friends or partners, but that a significant number of couples with children intentionally use the festival as an opportunity for adult reconnection, leaving children with relatives to reclaim the night as an intimate, affective space. The night, in this context, becomes a site of negotiated domesticity, socialization, and symbolic capital (Macías, 2020a).

These dynamics connect with broader arguments in sociology about the emotional textures of public leisure. Festivals like Lumina are not only spaces for cultural consumption but platforms for the negotiation of intimacy, care, visibility, and urban affect. They open affective circuits that connect individuals to their companions, to the city, and to the temporality of the night—a time often experienced as ‘other,’ slow-

er, softer, more open to emotional and sensory intensities. In this sense, light festivals serve as nocturnal laboratories of the social, staging the interplay between private selves and collective urban life.

In this context, light festivals can be interpreted as socio-temporal interventions. They reorder daily rhythms, invite multi-generational participation, and foster emotional atmospheres that contrast with the instrumental rationalities of daytime urban life. The act of walking through a luminous installation at night with a friend, partner, or family member becomes a form of social choreography, both playful and meaningful. These experiences cannot be reduced to passive consumption; they involve negotiation of proximity, attention, conversation, and memory-making. Likewise, the emotional and relational dimensions identified in this study support the growing body of literature within night studies that sees the night not only as a temporal niche but as a space of identity expression, community formation, and urban belonging. Light festivals provide structured opportunities for people to “feel the city” differently. This emotional ecology of the night is central to how individuals construct place-based attachments and participate in urban cultural life.

The sociological findings from Lumina’s case offer meaningful insights for cultural policymakers and urban planners aiming to activate nocturnal public space in inclusive and sustainable ways. First, the evidence that motivations and companionship patterns vary strongly by age and life stage suggests that one-size-fits-all programming is insufficient. Rather, light festivals should be curated with differentiated publics in mind—creating zones or experiences that appeal simultaneously to youth peer groups, romantic couples, intergenerational families, and older adults. For example, quieter contemplative installations may foster accessibility for seniors and parents with small children, while interactive or experimental pieces may resonate more with younger and exploratory audiences (Richards and King, 2022, Ghenta *et al.*, 2022).



The findings also invite a re-evaluation of how urban night-time is managed and valued. Light festivals shift the symbolic meanings of the night away from risk and deviance toward warmth, beauty, and creativity. However, they may also generate tensions—between temporary enchantment and long-term inclusion, or between aesthetic spectacle and social inequality. As such, more comprehensive frameworks are needed to evaluate their impact beyond visitor satisfaction. Participatory governance, multi-actor dialogues, and mixed-method evaluation tools (qualitative, quantitative, spatial) are essential to assess how these events reshape nocturnal urban life.

Although Lumina concluded its last edition in 2018, it is scheduled to return in 2025. This makes the present study particularly valuable, providing a timely and empirically grounded framework for interpreting past visitation patterns and shaping future editions. It offers festival organizers, urban policymakers, and cultural programmers insights into the emotional, familial, and social motivations that drive public participation in night-time cultural events. Understanding these dynamics is key to designing inclusive, engaging, and socially sustainable festivals in an increasingly nocturnal urban world.

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