

## **CULTURAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF EVENTS HELD IN TOURISM DESTINATIONS. A MANAGERS' PERCEPTION POINT OF VIEW**

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This research aims to contribute to the study of the relationship between events in tourist destinations in Catalonia and the perception of their social and cultural impact. The research is based on an online survey aimed at those responsible for the organization of public and private events in tourist destinations in Catalonia. The objective of the survey was to measure their perception of the social and cultural impact of the celebration of these events. The interest of this study lies in the fact that it analyses not only the effects that tourism has on local events designed to residents, but also takes into account events intended for tourists. It requires overcoming the difficulty of the fact that events celebrated in tourist locations often assume hybrid formats that are aimed at both local residents and visitors (as is the case of events aimed at promoting local products or summer festivals). To solve it we have classified the events according to the purpose the organizers give to the event, especially if they include or not tourism among its objectives. The different variables to characterize social and cultural impacts of the events have been selected from a literature review on the subject. However, we must keep in mind that there are multiple approaches to this kind of studies, something that prevents a holistic approach.

In this sense, events have been classified into five different types from two categories: the tourist orientation and the degree of touristification. To determine the first category, we have taken into account, as a variable, the objectives pursued by the organizers with the celebration of the event and the main objective among those mentioned. The second category takes as variables the existence of activities within the program of the event specially designed for tourists and the number of tourists who attended the event during the last three editions. The first category differentiates between two types of events: 1) events that claim to promote tourism or attract tourists as their main objective (T1 or events geared to tourism) and 2) events that aim to promote tourism though it is not considered as the primary goal (T2 or events partially oriented to tourism).

In the second category we distinguish three types of events: 1) events that have experienced a significant increase in foreign tourists in the last five editions (T3 or

events with capacity for tourist attraction); 2) events that adapt part of its program to the preferences of global markets (T4 or events transformed by tourism) and 3) events that have been specially designed for tourists and visitors (T5 or tourist events). Finally, the responses on the social and cultural impact of the event obtained from different variables have been analyzed for each of the five types of identified events. This is to analyze the degree of existing relationships between the tourist orientation of an event, the degree of touristification and the social and cultural impacts generated by the event.

Data used for the study were collected through an online survey conducted between December 2007 and January 2008 to determine the relationship between local development and the holding of cultural events. The survey was sent to 2,045 events recorded in the census of the Department of Culture of the Generalitat de Catalunya, obtaining 263 valid responses (12% of all events). Surveys were sent by email directly to the organizers registered in the census. Questionnaires were sent to different types of celebrations and events (art festivals, traditional music festivals, medieval markets, sport events, fairs and markets, etc.) held in Catalonia from a stratified random sampling by regions. The results of the survey have a margin of error of  $\pm 3\%$  with a confidence interval of 95% ( $p = q = 50\%$ ). The survey was divided into different blocks. One of the blocks was referring to the relationship between events and the creation of social capital. A second bloc asked about the perceived socio-cultural impacts in the place as a result of the event. In a third block we asked about various aspects related to institutional relations promoted by holding events.

The first conclusion of the study is that social and cultural impacts are related to the level of touristification of the event. Events that include tourism among its objectives, obtained higher values of social and cultural impact (both positive and negative) than those which do not include tourism as its principal objective or not suited to the tastes of tourists. In this sense, touristification of events results in the generation of positive effects on the sense of place, strengthening the sense of community, their local identity and their welfare. The level of tourist involvement of an event is also related to the increased perception of negative social impacts.

This study provides enough empirical evidences to open a debate about the role of social and cultural impact of the events organized in tourist destinations. Although some studies indicate that the success of events and festivals implies a process of commodification (Getz & Frisby, 1988; Chacko & Shaffer, 1993), the study of Catalan events shows that while there are negative cultural and social impacts, the tourist character of events does not prevent the emergence of positive impacts. Events with a tourist character generate positive effects on different variables which indicate a stronger sense of place, sense of identity, a sense of community and a increasing level of welfare in the local community.

There are two other worth noting aspects. First, we have shown that the organization of events with a tourist character strengthens local identity, social cohesion and well-being in the local community in the Catalan tourist destinations. This result allows us to introduce a new point of view to those interpretations about tourist events that promote cultural shock or trivialize the local culture and traditions.

Second, the social construction of identity of tourist destinations seems to be also explained by the event. The impacts perceived by organizers are affected by their

connection to a place where tourism has a central role in local production and shapes the local way of life. Events with a tourist character (as some festivals, food festivals or markets aimed to promote local products are) may be perceived by organizers as an active tourism value for the destination. For this reason there is a high positive perception of event's impact on improving the image of the destinations, on the interest that international media put on the destination or the feeling of pride that the event cause in the local community. Moreover, the low perception values of social and cultural impact on the local community suggest that they are more interpreted as a side effect than as the result of a cultural shock. The perceived authenticity of events (for example in relation to historical accuracy or its capacity as an instrument to interpret the past) is not very high. However there is a general perception that events favor the sense of local identity and that they are an expression of local culture and local tradition. This apparent paradox is explained by the fact that tourism is considered an element fully integrated in the local way of life.

Two practical management considerations for tourism destinations arise from the analysis. First, events can foster the development of new local tourist products based on narratives related to local identity and cultural heritage. Although the increasing number of tourist activities and the excessive theming may jeopardize event's authenticity in some cases, they will remain valuable tools for the strengthening of local identity inasmuch as they do not exclude local community. The analysis of the Catalan events in tourist destinations reveals that a strategy of tourism diversification based on holding events could not only improve the image of a destination and its position in the international tourist map, but is also compatible with the strengthening of the sense of place and the sense of local pride. On the other hand, event organizers perceive synergies between the event and the improvement of the destination's image. For example, some events like "Tarraco Viva" in Tarragona (an event of historical reenactment centered in Roman times) are used proactively in the tourist promotion of the city and is linked to the image of the destination.

Finally, the appearance of moderate negative impacts of the event in the local community is also evident. However this apparent weakness can be transformed in an opportunity if these impacts are used as an argument in favor of strengthening social cohesion through the proper design of social strategies. In this sense, it is important to recognize the opportunity of the legacy that the management of events can generate in the long term as a tool for social integration, a way to create social capital and to strength the sense of belonging to the community. This can be achieved in those tourist communities that use events to show to global markets their identity and traditions. A question for future research is to analyze, in a context of incessant process of cultural transformation, to what extent current tourist events will incorporate local tradition and culture into collective imagination. And to what extent the narratives of these events will transform them in the traditional events of the future of the destinations where they currently take place.

