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How do residents experience their own festivals?

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How do residents experience their own festivals?

A qualitative approach to meanings and experiences

Nídia Brás, Júlio Mendes, Manuela Guerreiro and Bernardete Dias Sequeira

Introduction

Rural communities have recently been using events as tools for local development, especially if they are part of their community development policies (Richards & Palmer 2010; Ziakas & Costa 2010; Ziakas 2016). Economic benefits, feelings of belonging to the community, urban regeneration, quality of life, and cultural and social benefits are usually recognised as the main impacts of events (Fredline, Jago, & Deery 2003; Chalip 2006; Richards & Palmer 2010; Schlenkorf & Edwards 2012; Ziakas 2016). Ziakas (2016) suggests that more research into the impacts of cultural or festival events is needed (Ziakas 2016). Moreover, de Geus, Richards and Toepoel (2016, p. 276) argue that literature ‘on event experiences is very scarce and fragmented’.

There is little understanding of what kind of meanings and experiences residents attach to a festival that occurs in the place where they live. Therefore, this study aims to examine the meanings and experiences residents ascribe to a festival in a local community in a small inland region in Portugal – Mértola.

Mértola is a small town with 7,274 inhabitants (Instituto Nacional de Estatística [Statistics Portugal] 2011), located in the interior of Portugal. The abundant archaeological remains from the Muslim occupation in the 11th and 12th centuries have given rise to several little museums within the town, which are one of the main tourist attractions and a source of pride for the inhabitants. Known as ‘Museum Town’, Mértola has been the stage of the Mértola Islamic Festival since 2001. The event takes place every two years and ‘seeks to evoke and preserve the heritage of the Muslim period in the south of the Iberian Peninsula’ (Câmara Municipal de Mértola 2015, p. 8).

The methodology included semi-structured interviews with residents from different areas of the town and had three main objectives: (i) to understand the experiences of residents in the Islamic Festival, (ii) to understand the meanings that residents attach to the Islamic Festival and (iii) to characterise the most relevant memories of their participation in this festival. Findings of this study are likely to make significant contributions to theory and practice
by furthering our understanding of how residents feel and experience the events that take place in their own cities. Also, the study highlights the often undervalued role of residents as meaning makers and as consumers of the event.

Literature review

Festivals as special events in local communities

Events have been considered as temporary and special happenings, and ‘each one has a unique ambience created by the combination of its length, setting, management (i.e., its program, staffing, and design), and those in attendance’ (Getz 1997, p. 4). The word event can include a wide range of typologies such as mega events like Olympics or World Fairs, hallmark events like European Capital of Culture or Rock in Rio as well as ‘community festivals and local events’ (de Geus et al. 2016, p. 275). When the event is specially attached to the community, and it is considered sustainable and beneficial to the place itself, it is usually recognised as a hallmark event or festival (Hall 1989; Getz 2008; Todd, Leask, & Ensor 2017). Its uniqueness and its special attachment to the community also characterise a festival as an ‘event, a social phenomenon, encountered in virtually all human cultures’ that ‘begins with a valorisation (or sacralisation) of the setting, a ‘ritual which modifies the usual and daily function of time and space’ (Falassi 1987, p. 1). Festivals are the ‘products of a cultural frame conveying symbolic representations’ (Ziakas 2016, p. 1148). In addition to the importance of their physical setting, they also generate affection and meaning, feelings and emotions among visitors and residents (Johnstone 2012; de Geus et al. 2016).

Festival performances, a source of personal experiences and meanings

For Pine and Gilmore (1999, p. 12), from the marketing perspective, experiences are the ‘set of activities in which individuals engage in personal terms’. Each event is experienced subjectively by those involved in physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual ways (Tung & Ritchie 2011, p. 1371). An experience is a multidimensional concept of an affective, cognitive and behavioural nature (Pine & Gilmore 1999).

Each experience derives from the interaction between the staged event, the actors (like a theatrical play) and the individual’s state of mind (Pine & Gilmore 1999). This is similar to Ziakas and Costa’s (2012) approach when they used the event dramaturgy metaphor. In the field of events, little attention has been dedicated to the topic. De Geus et al. (2016) conceptualised and developed a scale to measure event and festival experiences. In their study, de Geus et al. (2016, p. 277) conceptualised an event experience as

‘an interaction between an individual and the event environment (both physical and social), modified by the level of engagement or involvement, including multiple experiential elements and outputs (such as satisfaction, emotions, behaviours, cognition, memories and learning), that can happen at any point in the event journey’.

The theme of the event (in this study, a festival) represents a unified storyline, and it must drive all the design elements of the event to capture the customer emotionally (Pine & Gilmore 1999). Chalip (2006) argues that the theme, through metaphors and symbols, promotes and reinforces the meaning among those who attend the event as well as the sense of celebration and the festive atmosphere (Richards & Palme 2010) that will offer the stage for visitors to live their unforgettable experiences.
Residents’ narratives and event meanings allow the development of festivals that really matter to the host population. The host community members are simultaneously performing the narrative and consumers of the experience (Pine & Gilmore 1999; Binkhorst & Den Dekker 2009). The city is prepared as a stage where residents and tourists can have memorable experiences. The preparation of the stage aims to ‘engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event’ (Pine II & Gilmore 1998, p. 98). Experiences are, thus, personal outcomes that result from the interaction between the individual, his own state of mind and the stage, like in a theatrical play. The local community, those who are performing the narrative in the stage, will be engaged in a co-creative process (Binkhorst & Den Dekker 2009; de Geus et al. 2016). In summary, events provide the attendees with a ‘leisure and social opportunity beyond everyday experience’ (Jago & Shaw 1998, p. 29), which can be classified as ‘meaningful experiences’ (Stokowski 1992, p. 12) that can influence attendees’ mood, emotional state, feelings and fantasies (Hull 1990; de Geus et al. 2016).

The five human senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste) ‘are of crucial importance to the individuals’ experience’ as they can act as filters through which individuals acquire and interpret the information from the environment (Agapito, Mendes, & Valle 2013, p. 64). Therefore, experience is a perceptual phenomenon that affects the formation of meanings and belief sets (Tafesse 2016). In the case of festivals, meaning refers to ‘all experiences, feelings and thoughts as well as the subsequent sense of salience that people obtain from their participation in, or attendance of, event-based activities’ (Ziakas & Boukas 2013, p. 95). Festivals, as cultural performances, should be grounded in the local identity of places as they are, at the same time, a source of group and place identity itself (Green & Chalip 1998; De Bres & Davis 2001; Derrett 2003). In this sense, the meanings that residents attach to events and festivals give clear insights about local values that will be then appreciated by tourists and visitors. Thus, an understanding of festival meanings may shed light on the grounding cultural forces that determine festivals experiences.

Experiences and meanings attached to events and festivals are subjective constructions (Ziakas 2016), therefore, a case-study analysis is an appropriate method to use in order to better develop a framework that will provide policymakers and tourism and event managers with clear insights that will contribute to design the best festival settings and programme. Some research has been done to understand the event experience from the perspective of residents (Ziakas & Boukas 2013). However, it remains a subject that has not yet been fully studied.

Methodology

**Sampling and data collection procedures**

Since the literature is relatively scarce on the meanings residents attach to a festival performed in the place where they live, we decided to employ grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978) as our main approach to data analysis. This method was chosen because the present study aims to explain and deepen the understanding of a complex social phenomenon (personal experiences and meanings residents attach to a festival).

The aim of this chapter is to improve knowledge about how policymakers can design events in order to improve attendees’ experiences. In order to assess the perception of residents on the festival we conducted in-depth interviews (Miles & Huberman 1994) and semi-structured interviews (Bryman 2008). The interview script was developed based on
the objectives arising from the research problem. Resident respondents were selected by purposive sampling (Bryman 2008), i.e. based on their sector of activity, experience and knowledge about the festival, in order to obtain a diversified sample. The determination of the sample size followed the criterion of data saturation (Ghiglione & Matalon 1997). After 13 interviews, the collected information content became repetitive and no new themes were emerging, so we considered that saturation point was reached and we stopped interviewing.

The interviews took place in the first week of June 2015 during the eighth Mértola Islamic Festival. Respondents were invited to participate in the study, and following their consent, the time and place of their interview was arranged. Each interview was assigned a numerical code (R1; R2; … R13) to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the data.

**Data analysis**

First, the data was organised and then analysed and interpreted using the coding system of grounded theory based on three coding levels: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin 1990). *Open coding* aims to identify, name, categorise and describe phenomena presented in the text (Glaser 1992). *Axial coding* is the process in which relationships between categories and subcategories are clarified and established through a constant movement between the inductive (elaboration of concepts, categories and relations from the text) and deductive reasoning (test of concepts, categories and relations in contrast to the text) (Flick 2005, p. 184). In this stage, causal relationships between the concepts are emphasised in order to construct a matrix of analysis in which the generic relations are visible (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Finally, *Selective coding* corresponds to the process of identifying core categories around which other categories or concepts are integrated. It is thus possible to draw the data analysis storyline.

In this research, data collected through the interviews were registered, organised and then analysed through qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 9, QSR International).

**Results**

**Sample characterisation**

The age of the respondents ranged between 17 and 65, and the average age was 46 years. Nine respondents had a college education, nine are women and four are men. As for occupation, it should be mentioned that four respondents were directly linked to tourism and four to teaching. The municipality, the organising authority of the festival, is represented through the respondents’ occupations, R2, R3, R4 and R7.

**Experiences and meanings: Mértola Islamic Festival**

The analysis of the empirical data collected through interviews with residents of Mértola allowed us to identify four main central categories: (i) the experiences of the festival, (ii) the meaning of the experiences, (iii) the feelings and emotions aroused by the festival and (iv) the memories of the festival. From this, other subcategories were integrated, establishing relationships between categories and subcategories, through a constant movement between inductive and deductive reasoning (Table 27.2).
Residents’ experience of their festivals

Table 27.1 Profile of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Education level</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R1</td>
<td>M Civil society: President of the Student Association</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>M Sports: President of the Nautical Club</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3</td>
<td>F Volunteering</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R4</td>
<td>F Culture: Librarian</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R5</td>
<td>F Civil society: Blogger</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R6</td>
<td>F Education: School Director</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R7</td>
<td>M Municipality: President</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R8</td>
<td>M Education: Kindergarten teacher</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R9</td>
<td>F Tourism: Rural tourism owner</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R10</td>
<td>F Commerce: Local business entrepreneur</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R11</td>
<td>F Tourism: Director of Merturis (municipal company)</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R12</td>
<td>F Commerce: Local business entrepreneur</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R13</td>
<td>F Civil society: Retired</td>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Festival experiences

In terms of the experiences of the festival under study, the responses of the respondents led us to three subcategories: namely sensory experience, cultural experience and the stage design.

The Islamic Festival was perceived as a sensory experience insofar as the various activities in which visitors can engage were a constant stimulation of the senses. As one respondent noted,

Sometimes we anticipate with an interactive exhibition … in the Casa das Artes (House of Arts) … It is an exhibition that appeals to the five senses. We set a table with tagine with mint, oranges, dates and raisins for people to savour ….

(R8)

The respondents mentioned this type of stimuli several times. For example, the music filling the space continually stimulated hearing: ‘A very different experience is the concerts which, despite the nature of the themes and music being from the Arab world and the unusual sounds, are very interesting experiences’ (R2). Other respondents highlighted the earthy colours of the landscape sprinkled with white houses, the clothes of the vendors, some of whom come from Morocco, enchanted the eyes. The scents of the incense scattered in the air delighted the nose: ‘I always mention two aspects that strike me most, the scents, and the colours! The sight, the smell, are the two senses that at this point I feel more agitated’ (R5). Finally, the texture of the fluttering fabrics, carpets and artefacts sold by artisans was a source of unique tactile sensations.

The residents interviewed also considered the festival as a cultural experience wherein the past, the spaces and the experiences typical of the Arab culture are revived and where residents enjoyed an environment of multiculturalism and peaceful coexistence between different cultures. As mentioned by one respondent,

[the Festival] focuses on a certain period of history that was important for Mértola and that over time has always maintained its historical and cultural influence in various aspects of life that we know today, whether in architecture, language or music, or gastronomy.

(R11)
The souk was one of the most relevant spaces of this festival: ‘What I like most is undoubt-
edly the visits to the souk, because I know real Arab souks in Morocco, (…). This experience
here in Mértola is extremely well done and very like the real souks’ (R2). Another respon-
dent pointed out that the festival arouses the attendees’ imagination: ‘everything reminds me
of the medinas of the Arab countries … it’s like you’re in a different country’ (R8). Also,
Residents’ experience of their festivals

the harmony between different cultures was highlighted: ‘The Festival celebrates a healthy coexistence between cultures (…). The Festival is also a way of demonstrating that coexistence between cultures is perfectly possible without this dark cloud of fundamentalism that in fact accompanies the word’ (R11).

The organisation of the festival caused great pressure and fatigue on the residents involved in their organisation, an aspect highlighted by Respondent 7: ‘There is enormous pressure on the whole organization to ensure that things go well, without accidents, thefts, problems with security forces or with visitors, or that there are enough parking spaces, etc., etc., therefore it’s a general concern’ (R7).

In making an overall assessment of the festival, some of the interviewees said that they wanted the festival to ‘happen again’: ‘There is a desire to have the Festival again …’ (R2). They also referred to the need for more facilities so that future festivals can be improved, as well as a greater participation of civil society and the improvement of infrastructures, namely parking and access. Two respondents expressed such an understanding of how the festival should be ‘redesigned, in a different register, more participation from civil society… I think the Festival will have to reinvent itself quickly … it must be reconsidered and involve civil society’ (R2). ‘… But there are details here that are not well organized … we do not have parking lots, access, we are not prepared for so many people, and the village does not seem to have the size for that’ (R10).

In the end, the assessment was positive because the sense of mission accomplished and desire to start over prevailed: ‘Society is happier, people are waiting for the Islamic Festival, we already feel that desire, that the souk arrives and takes us back to other times. And there is always a wish that it happens again’ (R5).

Festival meanings

Through the content of the interviews it was possible to identify the three main meanings respondents assigned to the Islamic Festival: namely sociability, spirituality and sense of community.

Six of the respondents referred to the festival as a social experience that provided participants with opportunities to socialise and communicate with different people. It is a context of interaction and healthy coexistence between visitors and residents, where social relationships are established. One respondent was particularly clear when expressing this understanding: ‘For me, it’s the people, I really like to see a lot of people, completely different people, the participants, and all the conviviality there (…) this is a very interesting experience’ (R11).

Some of the respondents gave the festival a spiritual significance to the extent that there are religious demonstrations related to Islam, albeit without fundamentalisms: ‘hour of prayer, when they go through the streets singing and with instruments, they all follow in line, with songs so different, that seem like prayers’ (R10). ‘I hear the call to prayer, I hear different languages in the streets’ (R8).

Seven of the respondents considered the Islamic Festival as a way of expressing the values, the identity, the history and the physical environment of Mértola related to its Arab roots; thus the festival was seen as a manifestation of identity, evoking a sense of community. According to a respondent, the festival ‘is mainly culture, tradition, the common aspects with us, with our community and their identity that are similar to ours and our historic village and that is what we seek to explore’ (R7). Another participant emphasised the historical aspect: ‘The very historical area of the village, easily brings us back to the Arab times, to our very roots’ (R3).
Festival feelings and emotions

According to some of the respondents, the festive atmosphere of the festival provided a feeling of celebration where they felt very good, highlighting the experience of some emotions, such as a positive spirit, a sense of peace, happiness, joy, magic and mystery. A feeling of well-being was mentioned by one respondent: ‘I feel good, of course always with the concern that everything goes well, but the people are very nice and above all we see happy people these days’ (R4). Respondents found a good atmosphere among residents and visitors as well as among the Moroccan craft vendors: ‘there are many high-spirited people, not only the visitors… the Moroccans themselves are friendly’ (R10). The magic atmosphere, the surprise and the peaceful coexistence were also mentioned in the interviews: ‘Concert nights that are magical, the ambience and the surroundings always surprise me positively… it is always a peaceful environment’ (R3). The feelings aroused by the festival were highlighted by a respondent: ‘I feel very Moroccan, very Islamic in all that charm’ (R9).

Given that the festival is based on a concept associated with Islam, the staging of the event raised some fear in the local community. This feeling was highlighted by Respondent 6: ‘But this year we were in some sort of fear – not that it was a confessed fear – but with some fear that one might think that our relationship with Muslims was not the right relationship to have’ (R6).

Memories of the festival

The statements of respondents showed that the strongest memories of the festival were mainly those related to people, the sharing, authenticity, cultural mix based on the acceptance of the difference and experiences from the past. Respondents also mentioned a sense of achievement, the memory of hard work and a nostalgic memory of the last day of the festival: ‘When it ends, there are good memories of what we can enjoy, with our friends, the time we spend with them … and there is the remembrance of the village with lots of people’ (R1). One respondent stressed the authenticity: ‘There are many festivals that are very “Tiriló”, are very artificial, this one is very authentic’ (R6). The local culture was also said to be as one of the elements that contributed to the success of the festival: ‘the people from Alentejo always have the table set… only for a greater number of visits and that is what happens pretty much in every house of Mértola these days’ (R3). Once again, the intercultural exchange of experiences is mentioned as one of the most relevant outcomes of this kind of festival: ‘But what remains is also the children realizing that we respect and accept what is different. This aspect of our action in the festival is, in the first place, a sign of its interculturality’ (R8).

Conclusions

The Mértola Islamic Festival was the setting for a study that aimed to understand the meanings and experiences residents attach to a festival in a local community. Interviews were conducted with residents who, despite having diverse profiles and occupations, were involved in various ways, both in the organisation and in the experience of the Festival, as audience, exhibitors or part of the organisation.

From the residents’ responses when interviewed in the town of Mértola, where the Islamic Festival takes place every two years, four main themes emerged: (i) the experiences lived throughout the preparation and during the festival, (ii) meanings associated with these experiences, (iii) the feelings and emotions aroused by the festival and (iv) the memories of the festival.
Residents’ experience of their festivals

At the same time, other striking characteristics included a fondness for the past, facing the future very much aware of their roots and, in this encounter of cultures, the residents welcomed the traditions and senses of other peoples of North Africa with open arms. The festival is, above all, a paradigmatic case of openness to other cultures and the strengthening of a deep relationship between the Alentejo region and Morocco.

The experiences of this festival appear to be fundamentally lived on three levels: a sensory experience, a cultural experience motivated by permanent associations to the historical past of the village, and the preparation of the stage in which residents and visitors interact during the festival.

The meanings that the residents attach to the festival are guided by three main domains. First, the opportunities for social interaction between elements of the local community, exhibitors (many of whom are outside the community) and visitors. Second, the atmosphere of the event is guided by the moments associated with religion and spiritual life. Finally, from the perspective of the interviewed residents, the Mértola Islamic Festival seems to strengthen the sense of community by promoting a sense of belonging, valuing local roots and sharing the community’s identity with visitors.

Insights from event experiences and meanings from the perspective of residents can help managers to design a festival that will contribute to the local development and, at the same time, will better meet their audience’s desires and expectations. It will also contribute to develop an efficient communication strategy to the target market as well as to design and leverage meaningful event tourist experiences.

We acknowledge the need for further research before, during and after the festival, not only among residents and organisation entities but also, and especially, among the festival attendees. Knowing their opinions, satisfaction and loyalty are an essential reference for the sustainability of the Mértola Islamic Festival.

Acknowledgements

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References


