

Before, during and post-pandemic: What happens to cultural events? The case of Perlim - the biggest Christmas Theme Park in Portugal

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Abstract

The importance of tourism nowadays is crucial for the strengthening of the economy, not only for tourist cities but also for the cities that promote some type of event to boost the economy, that is, using events to generate income and a different dynamic for the communities. However, the Covid-19 pandemic caused numerous barriers to the events market around the world. Portugal was no exception, with all events being cancelled or postponed. This article aims to highlight the differences and challenges of preparing an event before and during the pandemic, with a special emphasis on the lessons for future events, whether in a pandemic environment or not. As an illustrative example, the case of Perlim, the largest Christmas Theme Park in Portugal is used, which had to adjust to government measures when the event was already underway, after being cancelled in 2020. This article describes the strategic and operational adaptations that were necessary and the changes that should remain for future cultural events like Perlim.

Keywords: Cultural events, Event Marketing, Event Management, Covid-19, Perlim

1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century had already taken a bump when it came to tourism, because of the 2001 terrorist attack, the 2003 SARS outbreak and the financial crisis in 2008 (Aldao et al., 2021). The third decade of the century started with another obstacle: COVID-19. The COVID-19 (SARS-COV-2) pandemic brought drastic changes to the world. When it came to the tourism sector, everything was shut down or cancelled, from travelling to hotels or (cultural) events. The hustle and bustle of the cities gave place to a scary silence and calm in places where that had not been a memory. Portugal was one of the last countries in Europe to identify cases of infection, with the first being reported on the 2nd of March of 2020 and it was mentioned by international media as probably the country with the best response to it in the early stages (Ames, 2020; Rutschman, 2020).

The entire country was sent on lockdown and all borders with Spain were closed and guarded by police on both sides. Reports show that during the Easter season, about 79% of the population stayed at home as asked for (PSE, 2020), and those who were not, were the most essential workers that could not leave their jobs, to keep the country functioning as smoothly as possible.

When it comes to tourism the rates reflect the measures taken by Portugal and most of the countries in the world. In 2020 the number of international tourist arrivals decreased by 74% compared with 2019, which represented a regression of 30 years in tourism (UNWTO, 2021). According to INE (2021), since March 2020, every month of the year there was a decrease in the number of overnight stays, with rates above 90% in April and May. Alongside tourism, most events got cancelled or rescheduled, including major worldwide events, like the Olympics or the European Championship. The events' cancellations affected the world economy and tourism, having impacts on the workforce and supply chain (Shrestha et al., 2020). It seems to be clear that the impacts of COVID-19 will be unprecedented (Gössling et al., 2021) and will take long to stabilize.

In Portugal, all kinds of events got cancelled, including the music festivals that would start at the end of the Spring. Santa Maria da Feira, a small town in the North, about 30km from Porto, had to follow the same safety strategy, cancelling all its major cultural events, such as "Viagem Medieval em Terra de Santa Maria", which takes place in August, and "Perlim", in December. Both usually have thousands of visitors each year and fulfil the hotels in the surrounding area. The interruptions and changes lead to the question: What happens to cultural events after a worldwide pandemic?

2. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to understand what happens to events during the biggest health pandemic of the century and how organizations will continue their operations despite of it. This paper follows a case study methodology. Therefore, it was analysed the case of Perlim, the biggest Christmas Theme Park in Portugal, the changes that had to be made to make the event again and the challenges that this represents to the organizers.

Using a case study to investigate a certain topic of interest, allows one to directly study social matters at a lower cost than the other methodologies and that can use both qualitative and quantitative data (Orum et al., 1991). Furthermore, it permits a detailed examination of the topic of interest (Tight, 2010) and is an opportunity to get insights into a case.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. EVENT MANAGEMENT

Event management refers to everything that "involves designing, planning, marketing and staging events, managing the logistics, legal compliance and risk issues involved and evaluating and reporting after the event" (Quinn, 2013, p. 38).

For an event to succeed it is necessary to plan properly for the future, but also adapt to technological changes, environmental conditions and customers' and stakeholders' needs (Daniel et al., 2012). Therefore, to ensure that all host destinations manage the positive and negative outcomes of events, it is necessary a structured

plan by governmental authorities, to facilitate the development process of large outdoor events (Maguire & McLoughlin, 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2019). Maguire and McLoughlin (2020) reinforce the major importance of these events for tourism and the economy, and, because of it, it is substantial to preserve them and manage them well.

Event management must be aware of all details, including the different kinds of crises that may appear, even if they are small ones. For instance, Chamberlain et al. (2019) elucidate the importance of the location of a Formula One Grand Prix, because of the climate. The authors explain that managers must be aware that in tropical countries is common to have excessive rainfall, which means that they must consider the infrastructure and electrical works and be prepared for any surprises from nature. That means as the authors explain event managers need to have a wide range of skills and knowledge of their events.

3.2. THE IMPORTANCE OF EVENTS FOR CITIES

Cities are often associated with events, being sometimes recognized because of them. That is one of the reasons it must be given high attention to marketing associated with touristic destinations, as the connection to the events can be an influential element when it comes the time to choose one (Borges et al., 2016). A cultural event can be an effective tool for promoting and marketing a territory, having an impact both on the city's image, perceptions, expectations and evaluations from visitors and residents, and contributing to local development (Ventura, 2014). The challenge is to create innovative events and guarantee their success (Gerritsen & van Olderen, 2014) and simultaneously create attractive experiences:

“A city is always rich in experiences, but only particular kinds can serve the purpose of the experience economy. It, therefore, becomes crucial to maintain control over the experience production process. The festival, perceived as an easily marketable, aesthetic experience that is contained in time and space, presents an attractive means.” (Johansson & Kociatkiewicz, 2011, p. 402)

Gerritsen and van Olderen (2014) indicate that events are more and more used by marketing ad communication professionals as a strategic tool. Nevertheless, cultural events are also a way to attract stakeholders, such as artists, visitors, residents, volunteers, and managers from the public and private sectors, being essential for marketing and development strategies (Johansson & Kociatkiewicz, 2011).

Morales and Vela (2009) have no doubts about the importance of events to promote a city or territory because they can generate and reinforce a city as a brand. Events turn out to be a touristic attraction that generates economic benefits with more money available to invest in the city, to coax visitors that someday may become permanent residents (Morales & Vela, 2009; Richards & Palmer, 2010). It is estimated that on an economic level, cultural events impact sales, wages, taxes, and (un)employment rates (Ventura, 2014; Chamberlain et al., 2019).

Zouni et al. (2021) concluded in an analysis that if the city's image is positive, then it positively influences visitors' satisfaction. Therefore, organizers can interpret this result as a motivation to cooperate more with local stakeholders, in order to establish a positive image of the city's brand and offer a positive experience. Rola et al. (2018) follow the same conclusion in their study about the cultural event “Braga Romana” and Mainolfi and Marino (2020) come to a similar conclusion, adding that tourists' internal sources of motivation will affect their willingness of revisiting an event or recommend it to others. In fact, Aktas (2018) concluded that a positive event experience affects the willingness to recommend the event and creates positive intentions towards other products from the city. Scheinbaum and Lacey (2015) even say that an event WOW “is one of the best outcomes for reoccurring events” (p. 4).

3.3. COVID-19 IMPACTS ON EVENTS

COVID-19 had, and somehow still has, a huge impact in all sectors, especially in tourism, being not only a health threat but also a social and economic one. According to Gössling et al. (2021), from now on, all forms of events with large groups of people will have restrictions, whether it is a concert, a conference, sports or weddings. Banks and O'Connor (2020) even recognized that many stage performances could not survive until

governments lighten the restrictions and for that, they could be needed financial support. However, despite the measures, such as subsidies, taken to mitigate the cultural industry losses, including in Portugal, Betzler et al. (2020) claim it is still difficult to say the actual effects of the COVID-19 crisis. Nonetheless, the authors infer that the pandemic can threaten cultural innovation and diversity.

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a large number of losses, leading to what can be described as the biggest event crisis, as the public became afraid of travelling and gathering (Gajjar & Parmar, 2020). The restrictions and the fear felt led to cultural events cancellations, which affected negatively the sector workers, especially freelancers (Dümcke, 2021), self-employed and part-time workers (Khlystova et al., 2022). Many turned to digital strategies, using virtual platforms to broadcast live performances (Banks & O'Connor, 2020). These were crucial for the survival of the cultural sector (Khlystova et al., 2022). However, it also showed the disparities in access, as not everyone could afford technological means (Reyes-Martínez & Andrade-Guzmán, 2022) or was simply excluded (Kantor & Kubiczek, 2021).

In a webinar, OECD demonstrated that COVID-19 can put pressure, positively, on public governance to demonstrate how investing in culture is a public good (OECD, 2021).

Considering five traditional events that take place in the five most populated cities in Spain, and that had to be cancelled, postponed or redesigned due to COVID-19 in 2020, Estanyol (2021) points out some measures indicated by those event organizers, to design events after the pandemic, such as:

- Livestreaming, which will allow the broadcast of live events when there is low attendance capacity;
- social media communication has to be strong to promote the events to the target;
- virtualization, as they are an alternative during the pandemic, but also if it is taken into consideration social responsibility and sustainability;
- hybrid events, with the option to attend by distance, to prevent infection;
- reduced duration of events, because the audience attention online is lower than live;
- event apps, if created for future usage, will allow to communicate to the audience and even engage with them.

The virtualization of the cultural sector not only increases the willingness to give quality but also gives the chance to target newer segments, that had not been noticed or were not reachable (Kantor & Kubiczek, 2021). Besides, the authors remind many cultural institutions, being without events, took activities of social responsibility, like sewing masks, and contributed to a digital revolution in the industry.

In a study that addresses the changes in the pattern of Mexican people's attitude towards cultural events, Reyes-Martínez and Andrade-Guzmán (2022) concluded that those who have higher levels of education, tend to attend cultural events during/after the pandemic more, in spite of the risks that may be associated. The same happens if it is a younger person who already had an interest in cultural attendance. Smith et al. (2022) consider it important to reduce the number of people entering events and to promote the attendance of those who are fully vaccinated, to reduce the risk of transmitting the virus between the community and create different entry and existing points, so there is less contact.

Event organizations had to adjust, in spite of the difficulties and losses and realized that this could be the moment to re-invigorate and create long-term investments, to boost tourism and create jobs, which means, that by creating local benefits, events can be designed according to citizens' expectations (OECD, 2021). Aldao et al. (2021) believe this to be a different crisis compared to the previous ones, so it is needed new tools to overcome it.

4. PERLIM – BEFORE AND DURING THE PANDEMIC

Perlim is the biggest Christmas Theme Park in Portugal, and it takes place in Santa Maria da Feira, a small town, near the coastline and about 30km from the city of Porto and 50km from the city of Aveiro. The Park had its beginning branded as “Terra dos Sonhos” (The Land of Dreams), in 2008, and it did not take long to become a success among the youngest targets, with each edition having more and more visitors. Feira Viva -

Cultura e Desporto E.M., the municipal company that organizes the event, made its rebranding in 2013 due to bureaucratic issues and created a new concept and brand: Perlim.

The Christmas Theme Park has its own characters, as well as scenarios, songs, wardrobe and shows. Each edition is different, and everything is unique – all details and stories are created exclusively for Perlim, not being possible for other organizations to replicate or use it. However, the pandemic obligated the organization to make changes and adaptations, resulting in two eras: before and after the pandemic.

4.1. Before the pandemic

Perlim arose amongst other Christmas events that usually take place in different cities of the country, each with its own characteristics, allowing the creation of different concepts. However, the uniqueness of this story seems to have thrived, making this the Biggest Christmas Theme Park in Portugal, not just in area, but also in visitors. Its growth over the years is notorious and can be seen by the number of visitors from 2008 to 2021, exposed in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1 – Number of Perlim's visitors from 2008 to 2021

Year	Number of visitors (thousands)	Year	Number of visitors (thousands)
2008	28	2015	71
2009	32	2016	102
2010	37	2017	109
2011	42	2018	129
2012	Not available	2019	109*
2013	62	2020	Cancelled
2014	84	2021	90**

Source: Self elaboration

*Portugal was severely affected by the storm Elsa and the Theme Park was obligated to close or work in restricted areas for 3 days.

**The COVID-19 and its restrictions obligated the Theme Park organization to cut the number of visitors allowed per day to half (instead of the usual 10 000, it was only possible to have 5 000).

Perlim has a capacity for 10 000 visitors per day simultaneously, however, if it was legally possible, this number could be higher, as there was, usually on weekends, a long queue of people wanting to buy a ticket after being sold out. There were visitors from all over the country, but especially the North and Central parts, and also a large group of Spanish visitors. They were, and still are, mainly from the north of Spain, especially the area near the Portuguese border, which means most are from Galicia.

Before the pandemic, the preparation of the event would start during the Summer, making communication efforts on social media and using the Summer grand event to share some information about it. Typically, by that time of the year, there would already be tickets for sale and groups' reservations. The creative process would have begun, so that all the scenarios and spectacles could be ready on time, as this requires other logistics, such as story development, scenario construction and actors' and staff recruitment.

Being an event thought especially for children, it was common to see different itinerant animations, including some with public interaction. The interaction with the public was something very characteristic of the event,

as kids were allowed to sit on Santa's lap and have a conversation to ask for their Christmas wishes, or even to have photos taken with the main characters of the theme park. All these things that implied proximity and touch disappeared during the pandemic, to keep the safety of the actors and visitors.

Consumer behaviour was also different. It was more common for people to wait to buy tickets by the entrance of the Theme Park and get most of the information there as well, including their paper maps. Visitors would start coming in the morning to walk around the city, go to the local shops and restaurants and enjoy the local historical patrimony, such as the castle and the churches.

4.2. During the pandemic: what changed?

Due to the pandemic and the restrictions the country was in during the Autumn and Winter of 2020, it was declared by both organizers - Feira Viva, Cultura e Desporto E.M. and the Municipality - that it was impossible to produce Perlim in that year. It was the first time since 2008 that Santa Maria da Feira did not have its Christmas grand event, which represented a huge impact on the local economy, especially if we take into consideration the tourism sector.

To diminish the negative impacts, the city Municipality and the local commerce developed the project "Natal Presente", which consisted of the colocation of mailboxes in each shop or Association adherent. The initiative allowed children to send letters to Santa Claus, through Perlim and Pim Pim, the main mascots of the Theme Park. Each letter got an answer that was manually written by members of the organization.

When it comes to communication and engagement, Feira Viva created the Perlim TV, a YouTube channel with content for the younger target and, once again, with the mascots. To engage the platform followers, it was even created a "Happy Birthday" page, where all kids could subscribe with the birth date and then receive a birthday felicitation message. Both strategic actions are still functioning, due to the positive response from the public.

From the perspective of changing paths and bringing back to the city its joy and dynamism, Perlim returned for its 13th edition in December of 2021. However, making an event with these characteristics has been revealed to be more challenging than expected, due to the constant uncertainty and changes in the sanitary rules defined by the Portuguese Government, that affected the entire continental territory. With a capacity of 10 000 visitors per day in a typical edition, these numbers define the event as a "big cultural event", but to keep those numbers during the pandemic the visiting rules were even tighter, obligating every visitor to present a negative test certificate.

Taking that into consideration, it was decided to cut the Park capacity to half, which was known would result in difficult management of the tickets, particularly on the weekends, as said before, typically sold-out days. Moreover, this option also considered the sanitary safety of the visitors and it turned out to be the best resolution, as the Government changed the conditions on the 29th of November, obligating all visitors to present one of the three options to enter: i) UE vaccination certificate; ii) negative test certificate; and iii) COVID-19 recuperation certificate. The rules started on the first day of the event, the 1st of December of 2021, with the country in the second higher level of attention and that allows special measures: the calamity state.

In less than a week, the organization set up a COVID-19 test centre where all visitors, either Portuguese or foreign, could have a test done for free, in case they did not have a valid vaccination certificate. The initiative allowed to facilitate the entrance in Perlim without giving visitors more preoccupation – all they had to do was show the certificate's QR code to be validated and entered. When everything seemed to be on the right path, the Government guidelines changed again and became more restricted for all events, despite their capacity limits, due to the escalation of the pandemic situation. The new rules, which began on the 26th of December, during the last week of the event, indicated that everyone had to present either a recuperation certificate or the negative test certificate, meaning that it was no longer possible to enter the Theme Park with the vaccination certificate. This had a huge impact on the organization, which had to increase the testing capacity to give a better response to the public and prepare for the worst-case scenario: few visitors being aware of the legally changes communicated before Christmas.

Speaking of consumer behaviour, it was clear that visitors, either national or foreign, were more informed and prepared. By the 5th of November, there were already more than 6 000 reservations and by the 18th, around 13 000 – a more digital purchases than in earlier editions. This is also reflected in the contact area pre and during the event, with individual consumers, schools and companies calling or sending emails to learn all the information to do a safe visit. This showed the limitations of the organization, which did not expect this complete change of behaviour and did not have the human capacity to respond. That was reflected in the record numbers of contacts: more than 1 000 missed calls and 900 unread emails.

The organization realized more visitors were choosing electronic tickets (e-tickets) and bringing their own maps, on their smartphones or on paper. The local restaurants still got the visitors, but the city mornings were no longer full of tourists walking around, visiting, and buying. It seemed that it was preferred to come only by the opening hour and some only when the event's "rush hour" was over.

5. CONCLUSIONS

We are in 2022 and many events have not yet gotten their chance to present again after the pandemic, which means that few have had the opportunity to adapt, but many have the opportunity to innovate. Despite the difficulties, Ratten (2020) implies that the cultural sector was highly valued and supported by creators and consumers, however, the author too wonders what is going to be the "new normal" for this industry.

It seems obvious that it will take a long take before the tourism sector and, consequently, the event industry, will be able to stand back on their feet and restore the public's trust. However, the cultural sector apparently got recognition for its importance for the public well-being, democracy, economy and sustainability (Jeannotte, 2021). Perlim is the proof of it, as its return was not just for profitable reasons, but also to claim that the city is still alive and willing to battle against COVID-19, while giving back what had been taken from all of us. However, it was also obvious the difficulties of doing an event like this during such tight restrictions and difficult circumstances.

As Estanyol (2021) reflected, the changes provoked by COVID-19 also revolutionized the sector, bringing more technology to it – a step that had to be taken, as we are living in a digital era.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper focused on cultural events, specially Perlim, a Christmas Theme Park, but other (types of) events should be considered for future research, as most were cancelled or postponed due to COVID-19. It also seems not to exist much research in this field, and once this paper is based on a case study, we recommend further investigation into this topic using the different methodologies available, qualitative, and quantitative, to give more accurate data.

The world, Portugal included, is now lightening the restrictions and mask is no longer needed in most cases, so we recommend taking this fact into account to compare the willingness of going to events, cultural or not, before and after the face masks. In a larger paradigm, we suggest the comparison of the public behaviour during the pandemic towards the time we are living now, with lower conditions. These studies may be important for the future of event management, as another crisis can come across at any time.

7. IMPLICATIONS

This research must be taken into consideration because cultural events seem to have more space in the lives of different targets. These targets are not important for this sector, but also many others, as it is common to have partnerships with companies from different industries. If we think of Perlim, the sponsorships come from the retail industry to the car market. This means that a crisis in one of them can result in a domino falling down, one by one.

The event organizations need to consider that people want to get back to the places they once were happy, but nothing is the same. The public expects differences, news and, above all, the feeling of safety. Not finding these

will probably lead to dissatisfaction and it will result in negative comments on social media platforms and complaint books. (E)WOM can have dramatic consequences, and each negative comment to a close one represents a higher loss than just one person. It is not just about the economic impacts; it is also about the social ones.

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