



The economic impact of cultural events. A focus on professionals' perceptions

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper:

The purpose of this research is to explore the economic impact of a cultural event, Tocati – International Festival of Street Games, that takes place each year in Verona (Italy). In particular, the perceptions of professionals operating in the hospitality and food service businesses about the economic impacts of the Festival are investigated.

Methodology:

The qualitative research is conducted through in-depth interviews with 14 professionals addressing the economic impacts of the Festival for their business and the city. The sample includes 7 hospitality businesses and 7 food service businesses.

Main findings:

Interviewees display an overall positive perception regarding the economic impacts of the Festival, both for their business and the city. A major difference however emerges between hospitality and food service businesses, since the large majority attending the Festival consists of residents or day-trippers, that do not stay in Verona overnight.

Practical implications:

Festival organizers should promote the participation to the Festival for more days, encouraging people to remain in Verona overnight. Professionals' awareness about the Festival should also be improved.

Originality/value:

Differently from other impact studies, this research is based on the perceptions of professionals working in hospitality or food services businesses during the Festival, a topic that has generally been neglected by previous research.

Type of paper:

Research paper

Keywords:

Cultural events; festivals; economic impact; professionals' perceptions.

1. Introduction

Cultural event may provide both tangible and intangible benefits to the city and the host community (Kim and Uysal, 2003), and economic impact studies of cultural events should be conducted to stress the importance of the positive economic externalities that arts and cultural heritage may generate (McHone and Rungeling, 2000).

Tocati – International Festival of Streets Games is a cultural event, unique in Italy and in Europe. It offers the opportunity to take part in games of different kind and origin, carefully selected for their ludic quality and the historical and cultural heritage they testify. The Festival takes place since 2003 in the historical city center of Verona and it lasts 4 days. In 2017, Tocati registered 300.000 attendees in more than 220.000 square meters in the heart of the city.

A correct assessment of the economic impact of a cultural event has important implications for all the stakeholders involved in the realization and organization of the event (Van Niekerk and Getz, 2016). In addition, it allows a more effective allocation of public resources in event planning and realization (Bracalente et al., 2011).

In order to obtain the economic impact of an event, expenditure categories by participants to the event have to be assessed, and according to previous impact studies, overnight stays and food and beverage (Crompton et al., 2001; Della Lucia, 2013) are among the major expenditure items.

Previous research however has also stressed the importance of addressing the perceptions of different stakeholders with respect to the economic impacts of an event for a number of reasons. As an example, when event organizers hold the same perceptions as residents, they can better understand residents' needs and therefore plan the event more efficiently (Kim and Uysal, 2003). Residents' positive perceptions toward the event have also been found to enhance the sustainability of cultural events (Negruşa et al., 2016). In addition, considering the perceptions of people working for the realization of the event may contribute to the success and the long-term sustainability of the event (Gursoy et al., 2004). Research on vendors' perceptions about the economic impact of events is however still limited, despite their relevance among expenditure categories.

Therefore, the aim of the research is to explore the perceptions of the economic impact of the Tocati Festival by professionals operating in the accommodation and food service businesses of Verona.

The qualitative research is conducted through in-depth interviews with 14 owners of managers of accommodation and food service businesses operating on the city of Verona.

Results show a general agreement with the positive externalities generated by the Festival, both for the city and for the facilities involved in the study. Food service business, however, may benefit higher economic advantages due to the fact that the large majority of participants to the Festival consists of residents and day-trippers that do not stay in Verona overnight.

The research adds to current literature on impact studies of cultural events, by focusing on an insufficiently investigated topic, i.e. professionals' perceptions.

In addition, practical implications can be derived from the research. First and foremost, Festival organizers should promote the participation to the event for more days, thus encouraging people to

stay in Verona overnight. Professionals' awareness about the Festival should also be improved, to provide the opportunity of increasing positive externalities.

A major limitation of the study is that it explores only the perceptions of professionals working in the accommodation or food service businesses, while it lacks an objective quantification of the real economic impacts of the Festival. Another important limitation consists in the fact of focusing mainly on the economic impact, while other intangible benefits can be derived from the presence of the Festival.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: theoretical background is presented in section 2; methodology is explained in section 3; results are reported in section 4; and section 5 deals with concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical background

Cultural events are gaining growing importance for the multiple tangible and intangible benefits they offer to the host territory and community (Hernández-Mogollón et al., 2018). Economic, cultural, social, environmental and urban impacts of special events and festivals have been extensively examined by previous research (Getz, 2010).

In particular, wide evidence of both positive and negative effects of events on the host territory and community is available. As regards the positive impacts, most of the studies have taken the tourism destination perspective, showing that events may: attract tourists (Getz, 2008; Woosnam and Aleshinloye, 2018) and play a strategic role in addressing seasonality stimulating demand in the off-peak season (Connell et al., 2015); contribute to create, enhance or reposition a destination image (Deng and Li, 2014; Hernández-Mogollón et al., 2018); stimulate urban regeneration (Carlsen and Taylor, 2003; Paiola, 2008); strengthen the sense of pride and social cohesion (Delamere et al., 2001); enrich the local economy (Bracalente et al., 2011). On the other side, the negative effects encompass traffic congestion, increased pressure on services and infrastructures, air and water pollution, increased noise and extra costs for police and fire protection, garbage collection, increased prices to local residents in shops and restaurants (Chirieleison et al., 2013; Crompton and McKay, 1994).

The analysis and the estimation of the economic impacts of events have particularly attracted the interest of researchers for several reasons. First, the estimation of these impacts can support event organizers and policy makers to optimize resource allocation to enhance the positive effects of the event (Bracalente et al., 2011; Van Niekerk and Getz, 2016). In addition, the economic sustainability of an event often depends on its capacity to generate a positive economic impact for all stakeholders, among the others: event organizers, sponsors, residents and the local community (Della Lucia, 2013; Martini and Buffa, 2015). Even cultural festivals that are more dependent upon the enthusiasm of the local community and local volunteers than upon expensive built attractions may have considerable economic impacts on the host territory (Gursoy et al., 2004).

The total economic impact of an event includes three components: a) the direct expenditure of visitors attending the event; b) the direct expenditure of the event organizers; and c) the indirect and induced multiplicative effects, that are related to the increased production of goods and services and

the increased residents' consumption that are activated by the presence of the festival or the event (Crompton and McKay, 1994; Della Lucia, 2013). However, calculating the economic impact of an event presents several challenges such as: the estimation itself of visitor expenditure, the identification of the correct multiplier to assess indirect and induced effects, the decision to include or not residents' spending, and the frequent overestimation of benefits (Crompton and McKay, 1994; O'Sullivan and Jackson, 2002).

Another central point is the distinction between the total expenditures associated with the event and the economic impact of the event strictly defined as "the net economic change in a host community, excluding non-market values, which results from spending attributable to the event" (Crompton and McKay, 1994, p. 33). For example, to calculate the net economic impact, residents' spending should be considered only for those residents who stay for the festival rather than holidaying or undertaking other activities outside the region (Jackson et al., 2005). Depending on the adopted methodological choices, the estimations of the economic impact of an event can vary considerably (Crompton and McKay, 1994).

Moreover, available studies demonstrate that each stakeholder of an event or festival may have a specific view and perception of its impacts. In their effort to map festivals' stakeholders, Van Niekerk and Getz (2016) identified 8 groups and 45 subgroups of stakeholders. Impact studies have mainly adopted the perspective of event organizers and residents.

Gursoy et al. (2004) and Kim and Uysal (2003) found that festival and special event organizers' perceptions of the socio-economic impacts of festivals and special events on local communities encompass four aspects: community cohesiveness, economic benefits, social incentives and social costs. Organizers think that festivals and special events determine more social benefits than social costs. Moreover, impacts on community cohesiveness are perceived as higher than those on local economy. However, other studies suggest that event organizers tend to overestimate the economic impacts of their events to legitimize the event's public support (Crompton and McKay, 1994; Lee and Taylor, 2005).

Residents' view has also been analysed by several studies. Among the others, Zhou and Ap (2009) reported residents' positive perception about the economic benefits of events for their community. Similarly, in a study by Custódio et al. (2018) economic benefits ranked third immediately after those related to image promotion and entertainment. However, research also shows that residents' attitudes toward the economic impacts of events are more positive for those who derive direct economic benefits from tourism (Jackson, 2008).

Despite being among the most important festivals' stakeholders (Van Niekerk and Getz, 2016), the perceptions of vendors at the festival (accommodation providers, food vendors, restaurants) have not been specifically investigated in previous impact studies.

3. Methodology

3.1. The research setting: the Tocatì Festival

The Tocatì – International Festival of Street Games is a cultural event that takes place every year since 2003 in the historical city center of Verona (Northeast Italy). The Festival is promoted and



organized by Associazione Giochi Antichi (AGA) in cooperation with the Cultural Department of the Municipality of Verona. The Festival lasts 4 days and in 2017 counted with 300.000 participants.

Tocati is a unique event in Italy and Europe, since it offers the opportunity to take part in different street games, that are selected for the historical and cultural heritage they testify. In 2003 traditional sports and games were declared Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. During the Festival, more than 40 traditional games are offered, and their quality is guaranteed by AGA. Every year, a different country, with its traditional games, is invited to participate to the Festival as “Guest of Honor”. The Festival offering is however not limited to street games, but happenings, traditional musical events, forums and workshops take place for the entire duration of the event.

Tocati can be considered an event of extraordinary success among the audience and the press, and it has increased its relevance both in Italy and abroad. Although participation is free, the Festival provides important economic benefits for the city of Verona: several economic actors, such as hotels, bars, restaurants, service operators, transport services are involved; a wide audience spends the entire day in the streets where the Festival takes place, that are mainly reserved to pedestrian transit allowing both to discover new places and to give value to commercial activities; lots of guests, lecturers, musicians and players come to Verona some days before the Festival, to visit the city; around 1.100 room nights are reserved in hotels and B&B by AGA.

3.2. Research design

In order to investigate professionals’ perceptions about the economic impact of the Tocati Festival, a qualitative methodology was selected. Qualitative, exploratory research is deemed appropriate to find out “what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light” (Robson, 2002, p. 59).

The research was conducted through in-depth interviews with professionals. In depth-interviews are frequently used in exploratory research, since they allow to explore in depth a general idea, interviewees are given the opportunity to talk freely about their perceptions and beliefs, and may lead the discussion into areas not previously considered, allowing unexpected issues to emerge (Saunders et al., 2009).

A total of 14 interviews were conducted, with owners or managers of 14 businesses: 7 accommodation facilities and 7 food service businesses.

To select interviewees, a purposive sampling approach was adopted, that is generally used when working with very small samples (Saunders et al., 2009) and to select cases rich in information although not statistically representative of the entire population (Neuman, 2005). “Practicality and convenience” were also considered in the sampling procedure, as it is common in qualitative, interview-based studies (Gobo, 2004), and personal acquaintances and connections with the team of researchers were included in the unit of analysis.

Both accommodation and food service businesses were involved in the research, since overnight stays and food and beverage can be considered among the major expenditure categories incurred by Festival attendees (Crompton et al., 2001; Della Lucia, 2013). In addition, the selected facilities vary for type, size, proximity to the Festival and type of connection with the Festival. With this

respect, it should be noted that some facilities are proper AGA partner, and therefore work in close connection with the Festival organization from several years, other facilities work in cooperation with AGA but without any formal agreement, while other do not have any kind of connection with AGA nor the Festival organization. A list of the selected facilities is reported in Table 1.

Interviews were conducted on-site, according to the managers' or owners' availability, between November 2018 and January 2019. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Accurate notes were also taken during the conversations.

Although in-depth interviews do not require a formal structure, an interview protocol was still adopted, to ensure validity and reliability of the interviews, and that all relevant items were covered during the conversation. In particular, the interview involved 3 sections: the first part refers to the facility's characteristics such as type, size, location and proximity to the Festival; in the second part the perceptions of the economic impacts of the Festival for the city of Verona are investigated; while the last section investigates the perceptions of the economic impacts of the Festival for the interviewees' own business. Questions addressed not only the current impact of the Festival, but also stimulated a comparison with past editions, in order to gain insights about the Festival trends.

A content analysis based in thematic coding (Saldana, 2009) was then performed on the collected data, in order to explore how professionals operating in the city of Verona perceive the economic impacts of the Tocatì Festival.

Table 1. The unit of analysis

Facility type	Size	Proximity to the Festival	Connection with the Festival
Accommodation			
3 stars hotel	44 rooms	No	AGA partner
Holiday home	23 rooms	No	AGA partner
Guest house	11 rooms	Yes	AGA partner
Holiday home	6 rooms	Yes	AGA partner
B&B	3 rooms	Yes	None
B&B, guest house	2 rooms	No	None
B&B	2 rooms	Yes	None
Food service			
Restaurant	Medium-small	Yes	AGA partner
Café	Medium	Yes	AGA cooperation
Ice cream parlor, café	Medium-small	Yes	AGA cooperation
Tavern	Small	Yes	AGA cooperation
Café	Large	Yes	AGA cooperation
Café	Large	Yes	AGA cooperation
Restaurant	Medium	No	AGA cooperation

Source: authors' elaboration

4. Findings

The respondents were asked to express their opinions about the economic impact of the Festival on the city of Verona and on their specific businesses. With regard to the economic impact on the city, the findings show a general agreement about the positive effect of the Festival on Verona, even if two operators highlight that other types of events such as concerts or fairs have a greater economic impact than the Tocatì Festival. In particular, some respondents suggest that bars, restaurants and shops are the businesses that benefit the most from the Festival in terms of increased customers and increased revenues. Some other respondents state that cultural service providers (such as museums and travel guides) and taxi drivers take advantage of the positive effect of the Festival attendees' presence. Only two respondents explicitly claim that the Festival has an important economic effect on accommodation services.

The operators also highlight the ability of the Festival in attracting tourists and visitors from nearby towns and regions, as well as from foreign countries, which is in line with previous research (Getz, 2008). Specifically, 4 respondents highlight that the Festival represents an opportunity for developing return intentions among visitors, who might decide to return to Verona in other periods of the year. In this sense, Tocatì can be considered a positive driver of future traveling intentions.

In addition, as it emerges in most previous studies (e.g. Deng and Li, 2014; Hernández-Mogollón et al., 2018), all respondents but one claim that the Festival has a positive impact on the city image. In particular, two operators believe that the Festival creates positive associations related to the preservation of cultural heritage and traditions. Two other operators emphasize that the involvement of "guest countries", which is a peculiar characteristic of the Festival, promotes a positive context in which it is possible to learn about other cultures. One respondent also suggests that such context can be a stimulus for further developing a welcoming culture in the city of Verona.

Several respondents highlight the impact of the Festival on residents' perceived city image, and urban regeneration (Carlsen and Taylor, 2003). Specifically, the Festival enables the rediscovering of some areas of the city center by changing for a few days their intended use. As a result, residents can see their own city in a new light and appreciate the freedom of moving around in the city center without the presence of cars.

Only one respondent out of 14 expresses an entirely negative opinion of the Festival, claiming that it does not create positive economic effects, nor it improves the city image.

With regard to the economic effect of the Festival on the respondents' business activities, 11 out of 14 interviewees state that they were able to increase the number of customers thanks to the Festival. This is an attractive result, also in line with the overall perceptions of the Festival. However, when it comes to variations in turnover, 8 interviewees report a positive variation, ranging from 5% to even 50% in one case; 4 interviewees do not face any change in turnover, 3 of which also declared that they did not have more customers during the event, and one interviewee is not able to answer the question. It is also worth mentioning the case of one professional in the accommodation business, that reports a 50% decrease in turnover during the Festival, due to the



discounted rates that AGA partners have to implement. Probably, terms of the agreement with AGA should be revised, also considering the fact that the interviewee could easily sell the rooms at the regular price on those days.

One of the questions of the interview regarded the opportunity to provide diversified goods and services with respect to the normal offer, in order to better adapt to the needs of the Festival participants. Results indicate that interviewees do not diversify their offer during the Festival, and only one professional says that he would be willing to widen his offer if he could reach some kind of agreement with AGA. Interestingly, two professionals are providing a dedicated service at the moment, but in both cases they are not responding to the needs of residents nor tourists attending the event. In particular, one accommodation facility is offering a “welcome banquet” to its guests: residents are clearly not influenced, and it is improbable that tourists would value this kind of service in terms of loyalty or revisit intentions. The other service is provided by a restaurant that offers a dedicated menu during the Festival, but the menu is limited to AGA partners and guests. Again, this service is not responding to residents’ nor tourists’ needs and is not useful to increase their level of satisfaction. To sum up, results suggest that professionals do not seize the opportunity to increase their economic benefits through the diversification of their offer to better meet the needs of residents nor tourists participating to the Festival.

Lastly, with respect to the Festival trends in the past editions, the majority of interviewees perceives a stable trend in the last 3 editions. One operator reports a positive variation in the economic impact of the Festival, while another one perceives a declining impact in the last edition. Two operators are not able to answer this question.

5. Conclusion and further research

The aim of the research was to explore professionals’ perceptions of the economic impact of the Tocatì Festival, both for the city of Verona and their businesses. Results indicate overall positive impressions among all interviewees, even if some businesses can benefit more than other. In particular, bars and restaurants seem to derive more economic advantages from the Festival than accommodation facilities. In addition, most interviewees agree with the positive impact of the Festival on city image and with the ability of the Festival in attracting tourists and visitors.

Several implications can be derived from these results. First, Festival organizers should promote the participation for more days, encouraging visitors to stay in Verona overnight, thus increasing the economic impact for the accommodation industry. Another important implication consists in the need for improving professionals’ awareness about the positive externalities they may derive if they were able to widen and diversify their offer to better respond to the requirements of the Festival participants, both residents and tourists.

It is also worth mentioning that several interviewees complain about the fact that the Festival is not completely satisfactory for the target “children”. Children, however, do not represent the target of the Festival, that is mainly directed to adults, and therefore, the organization of the Festival (services, timing, use of spaces) is not conceived to meet children needs and requirement. This fact



does not represent a problem in terms of event organization, but it raises a significant issue on professionals' awareness about the Festival and its goals and important implications about the need to improve communication with professionals, and to clarify Festival goals and objectives, can be derived.

The research is not free from limitations. First, the focus of the study is on professionals' perceptions about the economic impacts of the event, but further research should investigate the perceptions of other stakeholders of the Festival, since the long-term sustainability of an event depends on its capacity to generate positive externalities for all the stakeholders involved (Della Lucia, 2013). In addition, the current research is limited to the assessment of perceptions, but the real economic impact of the Festival should carefully be measured through a more objective method, to support event organizers and policy makers (Bracalente et al., 2011). More emphasis could also be placed on a more in-depth investigation of other intangible benefits of the event that have emerged in the current study, such as the improvement of city image and urban regeneration.

Finally, it should be mentioned the issue of congestion and increased pressures on public infrastructures, that is also generally reported as negative externality by previous studies on events (Chirieleison et al., 2013; Crompton and McKay, 1994). In particular, most interviewees perceive a general problem for residents that consists in the significant number of participants to the Festival, the inadequate management of waste, and, in some cases, the excessive occupation of public spaces and changes in viability. Further research should investigate also residents' perceptions with respect to these issues.

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