



Events, Urban Tourism and Cultural Appropriation: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

Events in urban tourism destinations are continuously gaining prominence globally and are recognised to have substantial economic and socio-cultural impacts on countries, communities, and individuals. Despite this, the socio-cultural impacts of community events in urban destinations have not been widely researched. While the event industry and its different aspects have been extensively explored, there is a lack of literature on the cultural impacts of events and how cultural events in urban locations may impact local communities and their culture. This paper extensively reviews the literature pertaining to event impacts and offers a critical insight into the concepts and empirical findings on the significance and impacts of cultural events in urban destinations.

Keywords

Event impacts, cultural impacts, cultural festivals, cultural appropriation, urban tourism, urban destinations

Introduction

Events of different scales create various impacts on not only host communities but also other stakeholders (Grosbois, 2009). Despite the abundant literature on the impact of events, it primarily focuses on economic impacts, whereas identifying socio-cultural impacts remains a challenge (Grosbois, 2009). Cultural impacts are quite difficult to measure quantitatively and can only be evaluated in qualitative terms (Nicosia, 2022). This complexity of assessing cultural impacts has led to researchers grouping them or generally associating them with other impacts (Colombo, 2016), especially with social impacts. Predominantly, the socio-cultural impacts of events have been studied and measured using an evaluation survey or social impact assessment based on the perceptions of stakeholders, mainly that of residents (Liu, 2014). Contemporary literature on cultural events and festivals calls for further study on cultural impacts, given their diverse roles in contributing to the local economy and circulating distinct forms of cultural expression (Salvador et al., 2022). This review paper attempts to investigate the significance of cultural events and contributes to a scholarly discussion of the role of events and festivals in cultural appropriation and its influence on the local communities and their cultures.

Methodology

This interdisciplinary study uses a qualitative approach (Faisal et al., 2017; Bryman, 2012), introducing and examining the concepts, empirical findings and theoretical constructs from the published articles and reports on event impacts and legacies, tourism marketing and destination management. Findings from the scientific papers, news articles and public documents are compiled and cited to identify the impacts of cultural events and explore the insights into the phenomenon of cultural appropriation. In this systematic review, the lead author extensively engaged with the reviewed literature and examined the findings to explore the insights into the phenomenon under study. The search process was not limited to any specific academic field; in addition to mainstream media reports and public documents on event impacts and legacies, the authors used Scopus and ScienceDirect, Scopus and Google Scholar databases to search, identify and retrieve scientific publications relevant to this study. The selection process in this qualitative study (Merriam, 2002) excluded publications beyond the scope of this study or those published without any institutional affiliation. Key findings of this paper emerged from a critical review of the selected articles and reports cited in different sections; “rich and thick description of the phenomenon under study and the audit trail embedded in different sections of this paper was created to ensure external and internal validity, which corresponds to the notion that the researcher is the instrument of credibility” (Faisal, 2021, p. 887).

Findings and Discussion

Significance of cultural events

Cultural events provide various groups in a community with an arena to showcase their own culture (Liu, 2014a). Nicosia (2022) argues that festivals give the local community a chance to revive its identity and promote culture amongst its residents. Cultural events and festivals promote traditions, heritage and ethnic backgrounds strengthening a community's sense of identity (Buch et al., 2011). Some communities are on the verge of losing their culture, but events or festivals can help preserve culture or strengthen a sense of identity. Booth (2016) finds that

festivals and celebrations have long been provided by cultural organisations in response to the needs of diasporic groups concerning their cultural traditions. Specifically in urban locations, cultural festivals play a fundamental part in the local representation of diasporic cultures (Booth, 2016). For instance, Pasifika communities in urban New Zealand remain at risk of cultural and language loss (Buch et al., 2011), and the implementation of events such as the Auckland Pasifika Festival and ASB Polyfest has helped reduce this risk.

According to Salvador et al. (2022), there is an increasing demand for more research on cultural events and festivals, given the diverse roles they play in terms of circulating distinct forms of cultural expression. In addition to the aforementioned, special events provide an opportunity for unique experiences different from daily experiences, making events a potential platform that creates lasting memories (Booth, 2016). Cultural festivals in urban centres also create a sense of belonging by offering residents and visitors opportunities and a place to share interests in a community in which they seek to fit in (Booth, 2016). It can be reasoned that a society's culture should be visible throughout the festival, and therefore, cultural events and festivals are viewed as meaningful cultural sites which induce and alter or modify culture and identity.

Cultural festivals as a tourism marketing tool

Events and Festivals are gradually being used by cities and countries as a promotion tool to market themselves to different tourist markets (Booth, 2016; Goh et al., 2022). Due to the scale and media interest of events and festivals, it has the capability to appeal to a substantial number of visitors to a destination. In many migrant-destination societies, cultural festivals have become quite popular and more diverse as a result of the influx of new and diverse migrant groups (Wood & Homolja, 2021). These festivals are viewed as key places to generate opportunities to not only celebrate but also share and exchange culture (Wood & Homolja, 2021). Wood & Homolja (2021) explain previous research findings on the significance of cultural festivals in mobilising group identities by creating and sustaining ethnic identities within culturally diverse nationals. Similarly, Giles et al. (2019) find that festivals help bring together ethnic and cultural identities. Additionally, festivals function as a convergence of cultural identities; thus, the identities of both participants and the local community are enhanced and supported through the intergroup interactions integral to these festivals (Giles et al., 2019).

Cultural festivals celebrating indigenous culture stimulate the exchange of indigenous traditions and rituals and are receiving more recognition for contributing to the growth and strength of communities globally (Whitford & Dunn, 2014). Furthermore, these cultural festivals are frequently used to attract tourists to a host community and therefore contribute to the growth and development of the destination (Whitford & Dunn, 2014). As an example, in Auckland, cultural festivals are principles of the city's vibrancy (OurAuckland, 2023) and have long been fundamental to community life as well as the local representation of cultures of diasporic ethnic communities (Booth, 2016).

Tourism Destinations, Events and Cultural Appropriation

Events have become a major element in the growth plans of many tourism destinations to attract visitors so as to provide them with significant economic benefits (Goh et al., 2022; Moisescu et al., 2019). However, harsh critics have persistently revealed numerous cases of misuse, exploitation, and caricature of values, customs, rituals, and religious objects (Gertner, 2019) for various purposes. Most countries or places rely on tourism and events to create revenue streams, which may have led to the exploitation of culture for the commercial purpose of engaging tourists. One example of this is the commercialisation of Polynesian cultures in general and of Hawaii culture within the Hawaii tourism sector itself, which instead of being perceived as culture appreciation or preserving culture, as claimed, they have been perceived as cultural appropriation (Gertner, 2019). Although cultural appropriation is a well-known concept, not many seem to understand what it actually means.

Cultural appropriation can take various forms and have many consequences (Arya, 2021). Largely, cultural appropriation is understood as the taking or adopting of one's cultural practices and elements by members of another culture (Thomas, 2021). According to Gertner (2019), cultural appropriation is the inappropriate, unauthorised, or unacceptable "use of cultural elements in a context other than that of the culture by outsiders who might lack understanding and/or respect for the culture in question" (Gertner, 2019, p.873). The concept of cultural appropriation, however, demands into question this behaviour and may prevent future sharing of culture (Freire et al., 2022). Festivals and events create a medium for which culture and identity are produced and altered (Aitchison & Pritchard, 2007; Whitford & Dunn, 2014) and may lead to the misuse of different cultural elements. In some cases, event hosts or planners in tourism destinations are ignorant that they are misusing aspects of a culture; therefore, this paper calls for further study to determine the relationship between events and cultural appropriation.

Conclusion

This study presents a holistic perspective on the significance of cultural events in urban destinations. However, this research does not intend to criticise the growth of the event and tourism industry, but it is rather an attempt to shed light on the issue of cultural appropriation and build awareness among event stakeholders about the increasing importance of planning and executing events that are culturally appropriate and acceptable. Key findings of this review paper posit that cultural events in urban centres create a platform to showcase the local culture and history and that there are blurred lines when it comes to using events to represent and share culture and using community cultural elements as a marketing tool by organisations or cities to attract tourists primarily for economic gains. Future research may investigate how events can contribute to sustainable event tourism without cultural appropriation whilst maintaining cultural authenticity, which should rely on insights from local communities on what constitutes cultural appropriation, authenticity, and the parameters to which cultural events or festivals can resist the commercialisation of culture.

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