Event Tourism

Although numerous prefixes can be attached to ‘tourism’ to describe special-interest markets, one of the most important is that of ‘event tourism’. It is both an applied field of study and a globally significant sector of the economy. Subdivisions relate to either the form of event (e.g., festival or sport, entertainment or exhibition), industry-related classifications (e.g., the meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions [MICE] or business-events sector, leisure and cultural events) or functions (e.g., employing modifiers like mega, major, hallmark, iconic, destination, signature). Events of all kinds have grown to be substantial components in destination and country attractiveness, so much so that it is normal for cities and tourism organizations to have professionals assigned to event bidding, production and servicing events, and increasingly to strategic event portfolio management (Getz, 2008, 2013).

Event tourism can be defined and studied by reference to supply, demand and context. At the destination level, specific to tourism marketing, the focus is on the various roles that events can play: as attractions (i.e., destination events), catalysts (a role normally associated with mega events and their related infrastructure investments), animators of public spaces, central areas and redevelopment precincts, image
Event tourism also has a demand-side definition, based on the propensity of people to travel to planned events of all kinds: event tourism is travel to attend events, both on the part of dedicated event tourists who are motivated to travel for specific events and other tourists who attend events while away from home. It has been impossible to ignore the rise of event tourism and its importance to cities and destinations around the world, giving rise to ‘eventful cities’ (Richards and Palmer, 2012), and, in some cases, to ‘over-tourism’. Bringing this phenomenon into sharp focus was the pandemic of 2020, which resulted in the rescheduling or cancellation of innumerable events, ranging from the smallest of private functions to the Olympics, alongside devastating impacts on the entire travel and hospitality sectors. Indicating their economic and social importance, and the almost unlimited demand for them, major periodic events were some of the last to be cancelled, leading to quicker spread of COVID-19; both informal and formal mass gatherings were held in defiance of legal restrictions and health recommendations, and almost all major periodic and global mega events announced 2021 rescheduling despite great uncertainty about feasibility. Sports leagues took great pains to hold events in ‘bubbles’ or without audiences. Festivals and entertainment producers went online, greatly accelerating the trend for virtual events – mostly not as replacements but to sustain audience interest and raise money.

The anticipated resilience of the events sector as a whole will become evident as the pandemic subsides, but not without many bankruptcies and perhaps major structural changes to event populations. As advocated by Antchak, Ziaikas and Getz (2019), the impacts of the pandemic will accelerate the need for event portfolio management, replacing the almost-universal emphasis of practitioners, researchers and teachers on single-event management and marketing.

Getz (2013, p. 18), has developed a framework for understanding and researching event tourism by identifying the core phenomena as ‘events as attractions, the event-tourist experience and meanings attached’. It might be thought of as a system defined in terms of supply and demand, but which ignores many social, cultural and environmental issues. To the suppliers and marketers of event tourism it is business, either for private hospitality and tourist servicing companies, venues that host events, cities and destinations pursuing growth or renewal and repositioning, and government agencies and not-for-profit organizations pursuing tourist segments for a variety of reasons related to efficiency, revenue generation or within the framework of policy fields such as cultural and community development. Their goals provide the meanings, although negative impacts and over-tourism can become problems to solve or limits on growth. Event tourism is also important to residents of host communities in the form of non-use values, including the importance citizens assign to tourism as a wealth generator, catalyst for leisure developments, new entertainment choices of preservers and enhancers of valued traditions.

Antecedents to the event tourist experience are complex. The general motivations behind travel apply, both seeking and escaping, but there are many special interests that must be examined. In this context, the event travel career trajectory has been theorized and a considerable body of empirical evidence exists to support its main hypotheses (Getz and Andersson, 2020). For the highly involved person in any sport, hobby, lifestyle pursuit, profession or social world there are events that cater to their particular needs and preferences as well as ‘iconic’ events that hold symbolic meaning for them apart from the anticipation and decision making, travel to and from, and on-site enjoyment. The reasons and therefore the meanings are diverse. Business travellers seek learning and marketing opportunities, amateur athletes pursue challenges as part of
their personal growth and development, music lovers want to hear their favourite group or mix with kindred spirits, and so on. The event experience, co-created among organizers, performers, participants and audiences, is similarly diverse and may be a simple matter of hedonistic fun or a process of personal and social identity building and reinforcement. Because there are so many event types, settings and audience segments, the range of experiences and meanings is very wide.

Planning, design and marketing of event tourism was once very straightforward, consisting of positive imagery and messages to attract tourists or normal sales processes within venues and at individual events. Very few destination management organizations (DMOs) do more than market events, but an increasing number also produce their own events and manage event portfolios.

The event tourism portfolio, first advocated and illustrated in a pyramid model by Getz (1997) represents the future of event tourism marketing and development (see the entry ‘Event Portfolio’ in this Encyclopedia). The original pyramid model illustrates both an idealized event tourism portfolio and possible measures of value for designing and managing event tourism at the destination level, a community-oriented portfolio that eliminates the mega event and stresses a different set of values. Mega events have increasingly been criticized for their high costs and negative impacts and are entirely inappropriate when the purpose of an event portfolio is to foster community development, social integration or cultural identity. This is not to say that tourism and community interests cannot be combined, but it is important to emphasize that in most cities it will be necessary to foster networks and collaboration to manage overlapping event portfolios with different mandates. This represents a major challenge to policy makers, event producers and marketers.

The expanded version shown in the figure features the main roles of events in tourism, incorporating possible measures of value and reference to the main types of events within a portfolio management context (i.e., balance, diversification and synergies).
The outcomes of event tourism must be evaluated from multiple perspectives, reflecting the goals and meanings attached to events and tourism by all stakeholders. Impact assessment has been dominated by economic concerns, most notably the application of multipliers to tourist expenditure and other event-dependent monetary income for destinations—often leading to exaggerated benefits and discounted or ignored costs. This has been especially true for mega events (McGillivray and Turner, 2017; Zimbalist, 2015), which have become highly politicized in many cities and countries. Traditional impact assessment methods have also largely ignored equity issues such as who gains (generally perceived to be various elite groups) and who pays the price (leading to taxpayer opposition) for hosting events. Social and cultural impact assessment has caught up to economics in terms of methods and measures, while ecological impact assessment for tourism and events lags far behind. The incommensurability problem, pitting monetary measures of impact against (for example) resident opinions or concerns about cultural commodification, means that a completely different approach to evaluation and impact assessment is required.

With regard to patterns and processes, policy directly impacts on event tourism, both in terms of tangible and political support, often linked to ideology and its strategic linkages with various policy domains. As event portfolio management grows in sophistication, tourism must synchronize with culture, social policy and environmental priorities. The spatial dimensions of event tourism are important in this context, related to where events are held (some settings being off-limits—for example, for conservation purposes—and others preferred for reasons of regional development). The temporal dimensions are relevant when it comes to the role of events and tourism in overcoming seasonality of demand, and also with regard to the evolution of events and their individual life cycles—can these be managed within portfolios?

The final process in the framework is that of knowledge creation, much of which is practical marketing and impact assessment in nature, but increasingly there is a need for research and theory development on how events and tourism can serve social, cultural and environmental policies.

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References


