



The “Pink Night” festival revisited: Meta-events and the role of destination partnerships in staging event tourism



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ABSTRACT

This paper adopts a managerial perspective to revisit an original case study of the “Pink Night” festival presented by Giovanardi et al. (2014) in an earlier issue of this journal. Our in-depth qualitative study contributes to the event tourism planning and management literature in three ways. First, we shed light on how and why competing Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) cooperate to plan, develop and manage event tourism. Second, we introduce and describe the brand new concept of the meta-event, which is the main theoretical contribution of this work. Third, we elucidate the role of meta-events as brand architecture tools to rebrand and reposition wide tourism areas. We illustrate the theoretical and managerial implications of the meta-event concept for event tourism studies and destination managers.

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Introduction

Demand for tourism activities has expanded dramatically worldwide over the last six decades (UNWTO, 2015). Meanwhile, globalisation in travel and business, technology development, and increased income allocated to travel have intensified competition between tourism destinations and among companies (Baggio & Mariani, 2012; Mariani, Baggio et al., 2014). In this context, destinations and their communities are challenged to find new ways to be competitive by providing compelling and memorable tourist experiences (e.g., Coghlan, Buckley, & Weaver, 2012; Snepenger, Murphy, Snepenger, & Anderson, 2004) while preserving their sense of place (Jamal & Getz, 1995). Historically, destinations have established Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) to attract visitors and market their destinations (Ward, 1995).

Their role is progressively more crucial in the current turbulent environment (Ashworth & Page, 2011; Pike & Page, 2014), and today they operate at different levels of government (nation, state and municipality) and uncover other roles, such as leadership and coordination, planning and research, product development, partnership and team-building and community relations (DCG, 2012; Morrison, 2013). In some countries, such as England, the public sector austerity cuts have led to a rationalisation and sometimes a reduction of DMOs (Pike & Page, 2014), while in other countries DMOs still play a major role. This is the case in Italy, where a decline in public expenditure for DMOs is pushing competing DMOs to search for partnerships to achieve common goals (such as developing new tourism products) by sharing costs (Kylänen and Mariani, 2014; Mariani, Buhalis et al., 2014).

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Recent literature has described the way destinations strategically deploy events to attract visitors and encourage new spending, spread tourism geographically, combat seasonality, help urban and economic development, contribute to place marketing, branding and positioning and act as catalysts for development (Getz & Page, 2016). DMOs themselves increasingly plan and develop events. For example, a study on Canadian visitor and convention bureaus found events to be one of the few areas of product development engaged in by DMOs (Getz, Anderson, & Sheehan, 1998). However, most of the extant research has focused on how individual destinations plan, develop, manage and market their own events, overlooking the fact that destinations are increasingly aware that they can seize opportunities for collaboration and networking with nearby destinations to increase their scale and competitiveness in a globalised arena. In this vein, the “Pink Night” festival presented by Giovanardi, Lucarelli, and l'Esprit De Costa (2014) in an earlier issue of this journal constitutes an interesting example of how event tourism products can be jointly planned and developed by two or more nearby competing destinations in a wider tourism area.

Accordingly, this paper contributes to the literature on event tourism planning and management by further exploring the aforementioned case study. In their article, the authors adopt a sociological perspective grounded in performance and performativity (Cohen & Cohen, 2012) to analyse the event through participant observation in the form of “insider-ethnography” and conclude that “residents, tourists and tourism workers co-perform to shape, reproduce and coalesce with the place” (Giovanardi et al., 2014: 113). Their units of analysis are the practices and processes inherent in encounters between residents and tourists in a wide tourism area, including a number of different competing destinations/cities and administrative units, but they also implicitly draw conclusions also about the place where encounters take place and ultimately provide insights on tourists' place experiences.

While we recognise the value of the insider-ethnographic research in shedding light on the social dynamics and outcomes of the festival (we also participated in the event), we believe that the way (i.e., the managerial processes) those outcomes were achieved remain confined to a closed and impenetrable black box. For example, the article by Giovanardi et al. (2014) does not clarify the managerial processes and decision-making that underpin the activities involved in staging the festival and ultimately lead to the creation of a “carnival-like atmosphere” where hosts and guests interact (ibidem). Our investigation uncovers another dimension of the place tourism experience related to the festival, based on the perspectives of the service providers, the DMOs and the hosting community. Accordingly, we describe what happens “behind the scenes” of the festival experience from a managerial point of view (Mariani & Zan, 2011; Walls & Wang, 2011). This analysis allows us to contribute to the event tourism planning and management literature in several ways. First, we shed light on how and why competing destinations (and their DMOs) deliberately cooperate to plan, develop and manage an event capable of generating positive economic and social outcomes while influencing tourist and resident experiences and behaviours. Additionally, we partially address the issue of the “simultaneous use of competitive and collaborative strategies in tourism planning and destination management by organisational stakeholders” (Jamal & Getz, 1995: 200), beyond the boundaries of an individual destination and with specific emphasis on event tourism. Second, we deploy the “Pink Night” festival to introduce, define and explain the concept of a *meta-event* (i.e., a tourism product involving complex layers of organisational and spatial collaboration between competing destinations) which is the main theoretical contribution of the paper. This brand new concept is discussed in relation to the event portfolio model of a destination (Getz, 2005). Third, we elucidate the role of *meta-events* as brand architecture tools for competing DMOs willing to leverage their event portfolio cooperatively to rebrand and reposition wide tourism areas.

Theoretical background

In this section, after critically illustrating the findings of a recent study on the “Pink Night” festival (Giovanardi et al., 2014) in relation to event tourism and tourism destinations, we review the literature on event tourism planning, management and marketing. In particular, we focus on the relationship between event tourism and destination partnerships on one hand and event tourism and destination branding on the other.

Event tourism and destinations in the “Pink Night” festival

The analysis of the “Pink Night” festival carried out by Giovanardi et al. (2014) significantly contributes to the well-established sociological tradition in events and festival studies (for a review, see Cohen & Cohen, 2012). In their study, the authors conducted an insider ethnography of the event based on participant observation carried out over a four-day period in the summer of 2011 in the municipality of Rimini (Italy). Based on a sociological perspective grounded in performance and performativity (Edensor, 2000; Cohen & Cohen, 2012) as part of an inclusive ecology recognising the interrelations between the elements constituting a place and that are “in play” (Allsopp, 2000), they suggest that “residents, tourists and tourism workers co-perform to shape, reproduce and coalesce with the place” (Giovanardi et al., 2014, p. 113). Interestingly, they emphasise both the role of physical encounters of residents and tourists (i.e., the embodiment of tourism experiences through corporealised co-performance) and the role of place for the tourism experience. Overall, they implicitly suggest that important relationships exist between three elements: the event, the place or destination and the tourism experience interpreted as the co-performance of residents and tourists.

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