



# The Lucca Comics and Games Festival as a platform for transformational cultural tourism: Evidence from the perceptions of residents

Enrica Lemmi<sup>a</sup>, Pier Luigi Sacco<sup>b,e,f,g,\*</sup>, Alessandro Crociata<sup>c</sup>, Massimiliano Agovino<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Pisa and Fondazione Campus, Lucca, Italy

<sup>b</sup> IULM University, Milan, Italy

<sup>c</sup> GSSI - Gran Sasso Science Institute, L'Aquila, Italy

<sup>d</sup> Parthenope University, Naples, Italy

<sup>e</sup> Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, United States

<sup>f</sup> metaLAB (at) Harvard, Cambridge, MA, United States

<sup>g</sup> FBK-IRVAPP, Trento, Italy

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## ABSTRACT

There is ample literature on residents' perceptions of the costs and benefits of tourism activities. Much less attention has been provided to residents' perceptions of transformational cultural events redefining local identity and tourism demand. We examine one such case study, the Lucca Comics and Games (LCAG), whose interest also derives from the fact that Lucca is an established Italian heritage city, with relevant attraction capacity for traditional heritage tourism. We have administered a questionnaire to a sample of the local population (411 interviews), with high educational and cultural access levels. We find that LCAG-related tourism is perceived to have differential impact with respect to tourism in general on several dimensions of interest, both in terms of perceived costs and benefits, also as an effect of cognitive biases. Our results provide interesting implications in terms of the role of transformational cultural events such as LCAG in driving change in heritage cities.

## 1. Introduction

Italian heritage cities, as well as many other European ones, are characterized by a significant tension between their traditional cultural identity, firmly rooted into their historical heritage, and the opportunities generated by new forms of cultural consumption and tourism (Pechlaner, 2000). Today, tourists increasingly perceive themselves no longer as a passive audience but as prosumers who consider travel experiences an occasion for creative, pro-active personal storytelling (Chronis, 2012). This scenario calls for a deep rethinking, not only in terms of how tourist products and services are designed and offered, but especially in terms of questioning the nature of the heritage city itself (Gospodini, 2004). A significant shift is occurring, from the city-monument perspective, with its emphasis on physical heritage and on somewhat stereotyped experience paths and narratives, to heritage-based creative ecosystems (Richards & Wilson, 2006), where the identity of the city naturally evolves through the interaction with visitors, and the creative contamination between local and outside narratives (Ennen, 2000). However, it is not always the case that events with strong touristic appeal such as festivals improve the tourist destination image, not even for actual participants (Boo & Busser, 2005). More

insight is therefore needed to understand the complex relationship between such events and city image, both from the viewpoint of tourists and of residents.

Lucca is a particularly interesting case study in this respect. It mixes a very traditional Italian heritage city identity with its being home to a major event of prosumer culture in Europe, the Lucca Comics and Games Festival (LCAG), that can be regarded as one of the tourist hallmark events in Italy (Chirieleison & Scrucca, 2017). LCAG brings to the city a huge European pool of fans – more than 400.000 presences with 220.000 sold tickets, for a city of about 82.000 inhabitants. Such visitors are not primarily interested in traditional heritage, but rather in the contemporary narratives of comics, cartoons, gaming, cosplay, and so on. The event's impact in economic terms is clearly relevant, and it contributes substantially to Lucca's visibility and city branding, especially in the teenagers and young adults age groups. But how does it cope with the city's traditional positioning as a refined, somewhat aristocratic heritage city – and especially, how do the residents perceive and evaluate such a tension? This is the topic of the present paper, which opens a new sub-theme in the rich literature on the attitude of residents toward the tourism sector and activities (Sharples, 2014).

The study of residents' perceptions toward tourism has produced a

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Humanities, IULM University Milan, Via Carlo Bo, 1, 20143 Milan, Italy.

E-mail addresses: [enrica.lemmi@fondazionecampus.it](mailto:enrica.lemmi@fondazionecampus.it) (E. Lemmi), [pierluigi.sacco@iulm.it](mailto:pierluigi.sacco@iulm.it), [pierluigi\\_sacco@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:pierluigi_sacco@fas.harvard.edu) (P.L. Sacco).

huge amount of research, although somewhat biased toward rural environments and emerging tourist destinations rather than urban ones (Schofield, 2011). Therefore, there is still room, and need, for further research to attain a reliable understanding of the phenomenon as a basis for effective public planning (Petrova & Hristov, 2016). A common, intuitive finding from the literature is that generally residents who are more favorable to tourism are those who benefit from it the most, and vice versa for unfavorable ones (e.g. Kayat, Sharif, & Karnchanan, 2013). Perceived benefits mediate the relationship between community attachment and involvement, and support to sustainable tourism development (Lee, 2013). On the other hand, residents of emerging tourist destinations tend to de-emphasize the negative externalities of tourism with respect to more established destinations, even in the case of heritage cities (e.g. Da Cruz Vareiro, Remoaldo, & Cadima Ribeiro, 2013). Residents' informational basis, however, may be fragmentary and biased (Upchurch & Teivane, 2000).

The case of Lucca presents, as anticipated, an interesting specificity in this respect, as it deals with residents' perception of a huge visitors' flow which is however *not* directly related to the city's established identity, but rather at odds with it. Therefore, in this case the evaluation of the relative costs and benefits of LCAG does not have simply to do with weighing the economic benefits of the event against its costs and negative externalities, but also on its perceived transformational impact on the city image and identity itself (Pavlovich, 2014). Every year, when LCAG closes, there is a lively debate in the local community and media about the pros and cons of the Festival, and the identity issue plays a significant role in it. This case study thus allows us to gain some insight into the nature of the heritage-innovation dynamic tension from the viewpoint of city residents.

To this purpose, we have specifically designed a questionnaire administered to a sample (411 interviews) of the local population. It covers issues such as perceptions of social and economic value, identity, and citizens' involvement. Moreover, we have conducted in-depth interviews with the Festival management and artistic direction. We are particularly interested in exploring the social sustainability of the developmental impulse of LCAG on the city. This leads us to inquire about the capacity of the local community to tap into LCAG's potential as a driver of social and cultural change, intercultural dialogue, and ultimately of deployment of innovative forms of heritage tourism.

## 2. Literature background

The literature on residents' perceptions of the impacts of tourism is too extensive to be surveyed here, however briefly. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning some findings from previous studies. The everyday life of residents is influenced by tourism in at least three respects, both on the positive and negative sides (Prayag, Hosany, Nunkoo, & Alders, 2013). At the economic level, tourism may create jobs in related sectors, as well as additional income and local tax revenues. At the sociocultural level, it can revive traditional crafts and skills, and to bring fresh attention upon local tangible and intangible heritage. However, it can also cause an increase in crime rates (Dyer, Gursoy, Sharma, & Carter, 2007), prompt changes in local traditional culture that may threaten its authenticity (Gu & Ryan, 2008), and put residents under stress (Bimonte & Faralla, 2016). At the environmental level, it may endanger the sustainability of parks and wildlife, and increase air, water and noise pollution (see Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005 for a critical review on each dimension).

Early work in the field already showed, however, that the relationship between tourism development, economic development and residents' expectations and perceptions about the impact of tourism activity on the area may be complex (e.g. Johnson, Snepenger, & Akis, 1994). For instance, there could be negative tradeoffs between local community orientation and positive perceptions of tourism (Williams & Lawson, 2001), but proactive community commitment seems to play on the contrary in favor of constructive attitudes toward tourism (Jackson

& Inbakaran, 2006). Also different forms of tourism may elicit different attitudes (Ritchie & Inkari, 2006). Several studies take the lead from Social Exchange Theory (SET); see Nunkoo and Gursoy (2012) for a recent literature review. SET, as applied to the tourism sector, postulates that individuals correctly evaluate the costs and benefits of tourism, including non-economic ones (Wang & Pfister, 2008), and decide accordingly. Thus, if perceived benefits exceed perceived costs, locals will be inclined to participate in the exchange and consequently support tourism, and vice versa. For instance, Jurowski and Gursoy (2004) show that resident heavy users of tourist attractions close to them are more disturbed by tourism than those living away from them. Building on the work of Gursoy, Jurowski, and Uysal (2002), Gursoy and Rutherford (2004) develop a structural model that identifies nine basic determinants of residents' support, five of which interacting. However, starting from a similar approach Ko and Stewart (2004) find much less clear-cut results. Moreover, the number of relevant intervening variables and their interdependencies are substantially affected by the socio-economic context. For example, Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2011), following an analogous approach, find that, for a Mauritius case study, residents' support is directly influenced by three variables, and indirectly by a complex pattern of interdependencies. Thus, every place seems to have specific cultural characteristics influencing residents' attitudes toward tourism (Twining-Ward & Butler, 2002). The quest for a 'universal' explanatory model is therefore bound to be difficult (Vargas-Sánchez, Porrás-Bueno, & Plaza-Mejía, 2011). Peng, Chen, and Wang (2014) develop for instance an alternative framework of analysis for emerging tourist destinations in terms of relative deprivation theory, showing that most relatively deprived residents are also likely to be the ones showing more negative attitudes toward tourism. Styliadis, Biran, Sit, and Szivas (2014) bring attention toward the role of contextual factors of place image in determining residents' attitudes.

In lack of a common explanatory framework, there has been a proliferation of studies exploring the most diverse socio-cultural environments. A preferential focus has been put, as already remarked, on rural or emerging destination environments, possibly as a consequence of the relevance of such studies for local development planning (Harrill, 2004) and local consensus building (Oviedo-García, Castellanos-Verdugo, & Martín-Ruiz, 2008) purposes. For instance, Tovar and Lockwood (2008) focus upon the social sustainability of tourism in an Australian rural environment. Chuang (2013) finds strong evidence of local residents' support in a similar Taiwanese rural environment. Su and Wall (2014) analyze residents' attitudes in a Chinese heritage city, where the notion of heritage itself is subject to a complex process of cultural redefinition. Harrill, Uysal, Cardon, Vong, and Dioko (2011) examine the polarization of residents' attitudes toward the gaming tourist industry in Macao in a growth machine theory perspective. Garau-Vadell, Díaz-Armas, and Gutierrez-Taño (2014) focus on residents' perceptions in two major Spanish island tourist destinations, Mallorca and Tenerife. A general lesson that can be taken from such studies, beyond the many local specificities, is that residents' attitudes vary with the stage of the life cycle of the local tourism industry (Vargas-Sánchez, Oom Do Valle, Da Costa Mendes, & Silva, 2015), and that in rural or emergent tourist destinations where congestion effects are less binding, the overall perception tends to be relatively more positive, although with significant differentiations and nuances. One can expect that less positive attitudes are to be found in congested, historically consolidated tourist destinations, but there has been to date not enough research in these contexts to allow a reliable comparison.

The analysis of a diverse enough spectrum of case studies also casts doubt on perspectives, such as SET, which regard residents' attitudes as the outcome of a rational cost-benefit analysis. Sdrali, Goussia-Rizou, and Kiourtidou (2015) show for example how, in a Greek case study, residents are only partially aware of the nature and entity of non-monetary benefits and costs of tourism activity. In our study, we find further confirmation of such cognitive biases – a particularly remarkable result in view of the high educational level of our sample

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