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LIMEN 2024

Vienna University of Technology (TU Wien), Austria
December 5, 2024 (hybrid)

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LIMEN 2024

Leadership, Innovation, Management and Economics: Integrated Politics of Research

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Aspects of Social Sustainability in the Management of Cultural Events in the Post-COVID Scenario

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Abstract: *Cultural events stimulate creative industries, enhance the attractiveness of cities, and promote social cohesion. This is what the authors aim to highlight in this work, which represents the case of a small town in southern Italy: Putignano, "home of Carnival." The event begins on Boxing Day and continues until Mardi Gras, blending the sacred and the profane. The city is famous for its Carnival, and its residents are so proud that they strongly identify with this event. However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the suspension of the Carnival for two editions (2021, 2022). Through an empirical investigation, including a survey of residents, interviews with stakeholders, and the analysis of reports, this study explores the meaning of "losing" an event so deeply rooted in the territory, even for a limited period. The results provide original insights into the connection between social impacts and the dynamics of social sustainability related to cultural and tourism events.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The organization of a cultural event aimed at attracting tourists to a specific destination represents one of the most used methods for promoting the image of a city at the local, national, and international levels and allows for sustainable tourism development. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), cultural events attract so-called cultural tourists who travel for study purposes and religious reasons, visit art cities, or attend food and wine events, festivals, conferences, and exhibitions. Moreover, these visitors are attentive and respectful of the surrounding environment, strengthening this type of tourism. In recent decades, events in Europe have grown in popularity and number, and since all events are different, it can be assumed that each type of event produces different impacts. For example, various cultural events present culture through different nuances. Following the idea that other kinds of events may generate several impacts, it can be argued that "each event generates an action, stimulating social changes and effects, including political, economic, and cultural impacts. The cultural ones may differ from the political and economic ones in terms of their content, as they are related to culture, such as knowledge of culture, interest in culture, respect, and cultural acceptance, among others" (Colombo, 2015, p. 7).

As early as the 1970s, large Western cities began to perceive the cultural and creative sector as an essential opportunity for socioeconomic revival and a tool for revitalizing post-industrial areas. It became increasingly clear how event tourism could generate enormous economic benefits for destination communities and influence local economies (Dhariwal et al., 2023).

Europe appears globally as a territory characterized by localism and diversity. This is even more true for Italy and, even more so, for the Italian regions. The theme of cultural identity emerges as various Italian cities increasingly strive to attract investments to create an image that they can identify with. It is crucial to analyze the location, that is, the venue of the event, which consists of the physical

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structure, the setups, the furnishings, and the external environment. It is an essential element for the event, without which it could not exist. Its uniqueness makes the event experience unique and inimitable. This has a significant social impact, as what is emphasized is precisely the uniqueness of the event, which creates a shared sense of community and belonging among organizers, the host city, and residents (Oshimi & Harada, 2019). Since, from a sustainability perspective, the social dimension is usually the least analyzed in event studies, with sustainability often being associated more with reducing negative environmental impacts (Mair et al., 2024), the objective of this work is precisely to study the impact and sustainability of cultural and tourism events, particularly from a social perspective. Many cities are so strongly identified with the events they host that they are defined as "Eventful Cities." This could be considered the case of a small town in southern Italy: Putignano, the birthplace of one of the oldest Carnivals in Europe. The connection between the city and the cultural event is so strong that the city is often identified with its Carnival.

Based on the assumptions outlined, this work provides, in an original manner, an analysis of the social aspects in the management of a cultural event in the post-pandemic scenario, as the COVID-19 crisis can be seen as a potential amplifier of the social consequences of events, particularly in contexts where it led to cancellations, downsizing, or reconsideration of the events themselves. This study sought to analyze the social impacts of the Putignano Carnival in an unprecedented pandemic context. In 2021 and 2022, thanks to strategic planning and the organizers' efforts, the event was conceptualized in a revised format, returning to its traditional version in 2023 and 2024. The empirical research conducted on residents provided crucial data for analyzing the social impact of the event, highlighting how an unexpected and negative situation like COVID-19 can profoundly influence the perception of the inhabitants of a destination that has hosted a cultural event for centuries.

The work is structured as follows: Section 2 examines the literature on the social sustainability dimension of a cultural event; Section 3 describes the research methodology adopted; Section 4 presents the results obtained from the empirical analysis; Section 5 discusses the results; finally, Section 6 provides the conclusions of the work.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: THE ROLE OF CULTURAL EVENTS

All events have or create an impact on people, places, and environments (Biaett & Richards, 2020). Today, events play a key role in the planning and development decisions of the places that host them, contributing to the formation of the image and positioning of the brand because, in many cases, people tend to associate events with the places that host them (Cudny, 2019; Hahm et al., 2019). Many studies have shown how events and tourism are cultural phenomena intertwined with daily life, through which it is possible to establish and manage social networks that were previously unavailable, allowing for the development of social sustainability even in rural contexts and on a small scale (De Jong & Varley, 2018).

Events can have profound social effects that enhance integration, promote diversity, and strengthen cultural value. The social effects of events can be observed from various perspectives:

1. **Promote social inclusion**: Events often serve as platforms where people from different backgrounds can come together, interact, and engage, helping to break down social barriers and foster a sense of belonging for all participants. By providing opportunities for diverse groups to connect, events are crucial in creating inclusive environments that celebrate diversity.
2. **Support inclusiveness:** They support inclusiveness by ensuring accessibility and equal participation for everyone, regardless of their social, cultural, or economic status.
3. **Strengthening cultural identity:** By celebrating traditions, art, and heritage, they enable communities to express their unique cultural narratives, fostering pride and cohesion.

Considering these basic concepts, a key point to analyze may concern the absence of a cultural and traditional event for a community. This absence can have profound consequences beyond the simple lack of a celebration. When a tradition is lost, the community experiences a loss of identity, as such events are often the pillars that connect people to their history, roots, and culture (Reverté & Pérez, 2017). Canceling a traditional event interrupts the collective bond that forms a sense of belonging and social cohesion.

Additionally, the absence of traditional events can lead to declining social relationships. Opportunities for gathering, exchanging, and celebrating are fundamental moments for strengthening ties between community members and creating spaces for sharing that foster inclusivity. When these opportunities are lost, the chances for interaction also decrease, leading to increased isolation and reduced cohesion between generations.

These aspects took on unique characteristics during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to emphasize how the spread of the pandemic changed travelers' behavior, as they avoided overcrowded and mass tourism destinations, preferring lesser-known and more remote locations. The virus prompted tourists to avoid travel or anything that seemed unknown, thus fueling the so-called "tourist xenophobia." Several studies have shown how safety has been a decisive factor in their choice, as tourists showed greater interest in acquiring information and in destinations with a cultural offer. Furthermore, over 43% of tourists stated that they would continue to be interested in interacting with the local population (Rodrigues Soares et al., 2020, pp. 13-17). This is also a possible source of nostalgia and sadness among the locals, who can suffer from the absence of that traditional sense of sharing and social inclusivity that the event organization typically fosters. Another tangible effect of this absence, caused by COVID-19, is the decline in tourism and local economic activities. Studies show that international arrivals have decreased, major tourism events have been canceled, and hotel occupancy has dropped (Matikiti-Manyevere & Rambe, 2022). Indeed, several studies emphasize the value of cultural events in increasing local spending, creating jobs, and driving economic development. A relevant point to analyze is the growth of economic opportunities associated with cultural events (Hemmonsbey et al., 2024).

Besides being important for culture, traditional events are often a driver of development for local businesses, attracting visitors and tourists. The absence of these events can reduce the flow of people, undermining the local economy. On an emotional level, losing a cultural event can generate frustration and nostalgia. Community members, especially those actively involved, may experience a strong sense of emptiness and disorientation. These feelings can contribute to a sense of disconnection and dissatisfaction, even toward all attempts to organize alternative events that may somehow try to recall the traditional event. Finally, the lack of these events also reduces opportunities for learning and sharing among residents. Cultural traditions and community events are occasions for passing on knowledge and stories from one generation to the next. Without these events, the cultural heritage risks fading, and with it, the chance to educate new generations about what makes that community unique. Cultural events create spaces for communicative action, bringing people together in a shared cultural context to engage in dialogue, exchange knowledge, and develop mutual understanding (Rutagand, 2024). The absence of cultural and traditional events can lead to a profound change in a community's social, economic, and emotional fabric. Their revival becomes essential for the return of a strong collective identity, the growth of social relationships, economic revival, and strengthening the bond between generations.

The research question of this work is related to investigating the social consequences, specifically related to social sustainability profiles, of the absence of a cultural event for the resident population.

The paper, taking advantage of the opportunity to analyze a case in which the temporary cancellation of a significant cultural event, such as the Putignano Carnival, occurred due to the crisis caused by COVID-19, therefore seeks to conscientiously assess whether the effects and impacts of a social nature related to the realization of an event are missed in the absence of the event itself.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study focuses on the case study of the "Putignano Carnival" as it is one of the most attractive events in the Puglia region, and one of the most important nationally, attracting over 25,000 visitors every year. The choice of this specific case study is based on several relevant motivations: the intention to focus on the cultural sector, which was particularly affected by the Coronavirus, highlighting how it managed to adapt and create new opportunities (Rahman et al., 2022), and analyzing, as the focus of this research, the social sustainability impact in the management of this cultural event. Additionally, there is curiosity about how an event with a centuries-old tradition, deeply rooted in the local population's culture, managed to reinvent itself and survive due to the crisis caused by the virus. This study aims to analyze the social impact of COVID-19 on a destination that hosts a highly identity-driven cultural event like the "Putignano Carnival."

To highlight how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the event's organization and, consequently, to analyze its social impact on the local population, the methodology used was based on a qualitative research approach, focusing on "How?" and "Why?" questions. The research was conducted using semi-structured interviews consisting of five open-ended questions to allow more flexibility for the interviewees. Furthermore, the interview structure was slightly adapted based on the participants' specific expertise and roles. A questionnaire was administered to the residents of Putignano, consisting of twelve questions mainly related to four macro-themes. Finally, the methodological protocol followed was supported by the analysis of web channels, study materials, and sources provided by institutional representatives of the Foundation. Specifically, the interviews were primarily conducted through online video calls lasting one hour via the "Google Meet" platform, except for a single in-person interview conducted at the University of Bari Aldo Moro, lasting one hour and thirty minutes. The semi-structured interview format proved productive as it allowed interviewees to express their opinions more freely and delve deeper into specific aspects of the research. The questionnaire, titled "The Impact of Covid-19 on the Social Sustainability of the 'Putignano Carnival' Event," was created using "Google Forms" and, before being distributed to residents, was tested to adjust the questions based on the participants' feedback. This feedback was particularly valuable since some of the testers included papier-mâché masters and professionals who were more familiar with the events and the various challenges surrounding the festival. The methodology used for the questionnaire employed the "Likert Scale," a rating scale consisting of a series of pre-filled response options. This satisfaction scale ranges from one extreme to the other, in this case: not at all; slightly; moderately; very; extremely. The evaluation technique provided detailed feedback, highlighting the varying opinions of the respondents. Moreover, the research was conducted through two methods of response collection: online via the Facebook group of Putignano residents and through direct response collection. On October 20, 2022, the research team visited Putignano to administer the questionnaire to residents who had not yet participated online. The research involved all age groups, as the respondents' ages ranged from under 20 to over 60, revealing generational differences in how they approached the event. A total of 131 residents participated, the majority of whom were female, representing 80% compared to 20% male participants. However, both those who responded through the Facebook group and those who participated via direct collection proved to be interested and attentive, providing their perspectives and additional details. Finally, thanks to reports, research, and the official website of the Foundation, a more detailed analysis of the strategic and organizational elements was conducted.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS – THE PUTIGNANO CASE: BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION

The Putignano Carnival, one of the oldest and most significant events in Italy, represents an exemplary model of social sustainability. From a social perspective, this event not only celebrates deep-rooted cultural traditions but also plays a crucial role in building and strengthening the sense of community. Its ability to engage citizens, fostering a strong sense of belonging, is one of the most significant aspects in terms of sustainability. Indeed, many studies highlight how, from a territorial marketing perspective, these significant events become a tool used by the area to improve and reposition its image. In addition to ensuring tourist attraction and entertainment, they have a significant social impact on the host community, contributing to the formation of a strong sense of belonging to that place (Pepe A., 2018). In this regard, it emerged as a very delicate issue for the people of Putignano, as there were individuals interviewed who had always been involved in the organization of the event, participated as performers, or volunteered in its preparation. For this reason, they felt an even stronger connection to the event, which has become a symbol of the city. Very few residents, in contrast, showed indifference to the event. Therefore, when asked, «As a resident of Putignano, do you believe that the 'Putignano Carnival', which characterizes and distinguishes the city, creates a strong connection with the local population?», 22.9% of respondents answered "extremely"; 40.5% answered "very"; 28.2% answered "moderately"; 9% answered "slightly"; and only 1.5% answered "not at all." This is an event that, while requiring continuous improvement, is so deeply embedded in the Putignano tradition that it has always been an integral part of the city's history, such that no one has ever known Putignano without it. The strong cultural identity of the local population has also strengthened the sense of belonging and solidarity among community members, all of whom are committed to preserving the memory of this ancient yet still vibrant event. Respondents, therefore, feel a strong connection to their territory and express a willingness to be active and collaborative citizens in local decision-making. This is also due to the favorable opinion they hold of the event, which helps promote the image of their city, even on a national level, as a city that hosts one of the most famous Carnivals in Italy. Indeed, it is up to the local community to find the right balance between preserving its traditions and promoting tourism, between safeguarding its identity and embracing innovation, and between protecting its local environment and increasing visitor influx, all while maintaining a continuous dialogue between residents and tourists. One of the central elements of the Putignano Carnival is its ability to ensure that the economic benefits generated by the event benefit the local population, which is in some way involved in the celebration. Residents who took part in the survey mentioned that the event had a significant impact on their work activities. Moreover, the tourist activities the Carnival attracts, such as the influx of visitors, stimulate the local economy, benefiting not only large companies and merchants but also small family-run businesses or those operating in traditional sectors of the area. Therefore, the event contributes not only to inclusive economic growth but also to the preservation of traditions that are essential for maintaining the cultural identity of the community. The absence of the "traditional" Carnival in Putignano due to COVID-19 had a significant impact. On the one hand, it allowed for the organization of a series of alternative events during the summer, making it possible to promote year-round tourism by implementing visitor distribution policies over several months of the year. The aim was to avoid overcrowding and, therefore, gatherings, ensure safety, and prevent the spread of the virus in compliance with anti-COVID regulations, such as "Racconti di carta: in cammino con Dante," which offered free participation.

As the former mayor of Putignano stated, “From a social perspective, we carried out an exciting operation as we decided to move the event from the winter period to the summer, marking the seven-hundredth anniversary of Dante Alighieri's death. Thanks to this project, papier-mâché masters worked on setting up the historic center as if it were a diffused museum. As a result, a

large number of families were able to enjoy these works, both because there was no entry fee and because the works were spread throughout the historic center for the entire summer period. The damage caused by COVID allowed us to carry out this summer experimentation, which, from a social perspective, rewarded us". The vice president of the Foundation supported this by stating: "The challenge was to extend the tourist season, not the Carnival itself, but to think of something that would attract visitors even in the summer months. The launchpad was created precisely during the COVID period, when we experimented with a different event that was successful and helped promoting year-round tourist flows". In this regard, the former president of the Foundation added, "The idea came from the desire to keep the relationship with the local community alive, but it is clear that in the summer it is different; it is not the Carnival as we know it, but we wanted to underline that the Foundation, as an institution, was still present, as our vision project was not only about worrying about the winter event but also about having an annual program". Economically speaking, it should be noted that "Racconti di carta" replaced the main event. However, its cost was minimal, amounting to 100,000 euros, generating a return greater than the initial investment. According to one of the award-winning papier-mâché masters who leads one of the seven groups currently building the large floats, this side event, held in the historic center, took place in an environment suitable for slow tourism: pedestrianized areas without noise or light pollution. Each master created their installation, with the central theme being the Divine Comedy, in an area assigned to them. During the pandemic years, people had to adapt, and this initiative demonstrated that an alternative path using a noble material like papier-mâché was equally valid. "I supported it strongly because compared to the parades, installations are even more sustainable since the parades, concentrated in four days, create 'hit-and-run' tourism, whereas permanent installations allow for extending the tourism season".

Additionally, one of the most veteran papier-mâché masters of Putignano stated, "There are still tourism operators and B&B managers who are asking the Foundation to repeat a similar experience in the summer because they saw how attractive it was. When we talk about Putignano and papier-mâché, everyone expects to see something new and different. Even the floats we make are built from scratch every year, so there is never a repeat of something from the past, and this is another point in our favor. However, this also led to feelings of nostalgia and sadness within the population, who had to give up the most anticipated event of the year. The former president of the Foundation stated, "In 2021, the pandemic situation was clear, all of Italy was at a standstill, so our choice to organize parallel events was a winning one. I can say there was a collective feeling of disappointment, but there was also an understanding of the reality of the situation. In 2022, however, the reaction from residents was different because a general sense of discontent spread. Despite strong regulatory barriers, their reaction was quite critical as they longed for a return to normalcy. The citizens were not always ready to fully understand the choices made by us organizers". In this regard, many of those personally interviewed expressed their sadness in recalling those two difficult years when the streets were devoid of the grand allegorical floats that have always paraded through the streets of Putignano in February, as well as devoid of the people and visitors who are always drawn to the colors and joy that Carnival inevitably brings, expressing hope for future editions.

Despite this opportunity for involvement and the creation of new events, this experience also confirmed just how deeply the city of Putignano and its population are connected to and identify with their Carnival. Indeed, it is exciting to analyze how the implementation of alternative events more effectively involved tourists from other parts of Italy than the local community itself. The survey revealed that the residents were significantly affected by the absence of the event, as when asked: «How much did the absence of the 'Carnival of Putignano' due to COVID-19 impact

the general sentiment of residents?», 32.1% of respondents answered "extremely"; while 39.7% answered "very". This aspect was also highlighted by the former mayor of the city, who stated, “These new events attracted more tourists than the local population.” In fact, the production director of the Foundation pointed out that “these were completely different events, so the local population felt a sense of nostalgia for the most iconic event of the city, which has always represented a colorful note in the grayness of winter”. In this regard, residents were asked several questions, including: «How efficient do you think the different organization of the 'Carnival of Putignano' due to COVID-19 was in attracting visitors?». Sadly, it became clear that the various proposals put forward and implemented by the event organizers to try to replace the traditional Putignano celebration at least partially were not perceived as efficient by the local population. In fact, to this question, most respondents, 48.1%, answered negatively with "slightly". Residents are so attached to their Carnival that they cannot imagine that these new events, held during the summer, could replace it. However, the organizers had not imagined this either; they tried to bring something to the streets of the city that could evoke the harmonious atmosphere of Carnival among the people. The survey was structured with an open-ended question at the end, allowing residents to express their opinions or possibly offer personal suggestions. There were several responses to this final question that highlighted the desire of the people of Putignano to make the "Carnival of Putignano" an event renowned not only at the regional and national level but, with the right effort and dedication, also internationally. The aim would be to transform it from a more popular event into a well-planned and organized event. Many suggested a better promotion of the event, particularly to give young people the opportunity to manage an event that needs innovation, including the use of more effective and efficient communication tools to reach a broader audience. Others proposed extending the event, with a greater number of activities as was common in the 1990s, to highlight local traditions for a longer period. This is an event that the population feels deeply connected to, with a strong identification between the local community and the event itself. As a result, everyone is driven by the desire to spread the folklore of Putignano, ensuring that this ancient tradition is never forgotten but passed down in all its beauty and authenticity to future generations. The "Putignano Carnival" Foundation has made significant progress in studying the data and analyzing the economic, social, and cultural impacts of the event. Measuring the results was a crucial step in understanding the extent to which the Carnival contributes to local development and overall sustainability. Thanks to data analysis, it has been possible to identify areas for improvement and implement targeted policies to optimize the event's impact, defining future strategies that ensure a balance between tradition, innovation, and well-being for the local community.

5. DISCUSSION: THE PUTIGNANO CARNIVAL DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COVID-19 was a real tragedy for the “Putignano Carnival” as it led to changes in the traditional and impressive parade of allegorical floats. The sudden and unexpected arrival of the Coronavirus caused an unprecedented halt, preventing the realization of the “Putignano Carnival” as it had always been done. This resulted in a loss of identity and social cohesion among residents and the city, as well as frustration and feelings of nostalgia among the inhabitants, who were deprived of this historically significant event for two years. Additionally, due to the guidelines that needed to be followed to contain the pandemic, which were certainly incompatible with a significant event that thrives on social gatherings, there was a decline in social interactions, profoundly altering the way people interacted and participated in the event. The people of Putignano had to adapt to new ways of experiencing the Carnival, albeit with less motivation to take part in it. In this regard, another issue to address is the decline in tourist and economic activities. With the introduction of health restrictions, the event saw a drastic reduction in attendance. During the years affected

by the pandemic, the absence of tourists crowding the streets of the historic center had serious repercussions on the local economy, particularly on businesses that directly depended on the tourist flow generated by the event. Therefore, one positive aspect of the city was the introduction of alternative events during the summer season, which, as mentioned earlier, were very successful and attracted the interest of visitors and tourists. These events represented, even if in a different way, an opportunity for promoting the area, although they did not guarantee any economic return for the Foundation's finances. Moreover, the Carnival has always represented a moment of strong sharing and conviviality among residents. There has always been a strong sense of unity and collective celebration during the event, which unfortunately was lost due to the restrictive measures imposed to contain the spread of the virus, which inevitably reduced these experiences of social gathering. This change had an emotional impact on the community, which faced the temporary, thankfully, loss of one of the most significant moments of unity and cultural exchange that represents the beating heart of the city.

6. CONCLUSION

The main objective of the present work was to analyze the aspects of social sustainability in the management of a cultural event in the post-pandemic era, investigating the cultural and tourist event that symbolizes a small town in Southern Italy. This is a highly timely topic and one that is at the center of the debate, as we have faced an unprecedented health emergency that has disrupted the way cultural events are organized and conceived. This work highlights the strong connection between crisis management and event management; indeed, the connection between the two areas becomes evident when planned events must confront crises like the one caused by COVID-19. In such cases, the skills and practices of both areas overlap, with the common goal of ensuring the safety and success of the event. As is well known, cultural events have faced extraordinary challenges during the health emergency, highlighting key elements for their survival and evolution: resilience – demonstrated in the ability to adapt to unprecedented crises and quickly reinvent themselves; adaptation – a fundamental element in responding to the changes imposed by the pandemic; and, finally, social sustainability – emphasizing the need to ensure inclusivity and accessibility during events. From this perspective, the present work has sought to highlight how these elements were all involved in the cultural event of the "Putignano Carnival". Local communities play a fundamental role as the beating heart of an event, as it is also thanks to them that a cultural event can be realized. The key element for enabling better enjoyment of the event by tourists and visitors is the strong identification between the local community and the event. The more the local community is involved and identifies with the event, the better it will be able to overcome the difficulties that inevitably arise in organizing such an event. As highlighted by the interviews conducted for this paper, during the years when the Putignano Carnival could not take place, residents realized that the "sacrifice" they made every year during the event was not as great as they thought, instead understanding how important it was to have that atmosphere, not only from a tourist perspective but also as a long-standing tradition of the town.

Based on these considerations, some aspects emerge on which potential future developments can be based. The comparison between different experiences in event management and organization, both at the national and international levels, allows for the highlighting of best practices, innovative solutions, and common challenges in order to address similar issues, learning from the successes and failures of others to improve the effectiveness of events in the future. A crucial element in this regard is the role of digital innovation in "traditional" events, which certainly helped overcome, albeit virtually, a significant obstacle imposed by the pandemic. Despite the end of the health crisis, this practice is still strongly utilized by event organizers, allowing them to reach a much

wider audience. Finally, another key issue when discussing cultural events is the involvement of stakeholders, as effective strategies aimed at success include partnerships with public and private entities, local associations, and other organizations to obtain greater economic, logistical, and social support. Moreover, greater involvement of the local community, show business personalities, and artists can certainly help promote the development of the area and the innovation of the event itself while maintaining the core elements of tradition.

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