

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359528949>

Reimagining Tourism Events: Spain's Preparation for the Return of a Healthier Breed of Tourists

Chapter · June 2022

CITATIONS

0

READS

8

1 author:



[Nuria Recuero-Virto](#)

Complutense University of Madrid

87 PUBLICATIONS 483 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

14 Reimagining Tourism Events

Spain's Preparation for the Return of a Healthier Breed of Tourists

Nuria Recuero-Virto

Introduction: Tourism Events Industry at a Tipping Point

Travel and tourism used to account for 12% of the gross domestic product (GDP, in advance) of Spain, which meant that Spain was ranked as the second destination in the world in terms of tourism arrivals and receipts (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2021). Given such a significant role played by tourism activity in the country, understanding how the event industry has been affected by COVID-19 pandemic is a relevant aspect so as to acknowledge the present tourist behaviour and the future challenges (Gholipour et al., 2020). The effect of the management of the COVID-19 health crisis on the tourism industry is unprecedented mainly in terms of the volume of tourist arrivals, which has a great impact on the economies of all the destinations (Arbulú et al., 2021).

The year 2020 was the year that redefined the event industry. The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed our way of socializing and, thus, the tourism landscape. In the case of Spain, the state of alarm and emergency lasted for 99 days, which implied a strict lockdown where any kind of tourist movement was forbidden (inbound and outbound). As a consequence, the number of international tourist arrivals dropped to zero and the economic loss reached about 43.47 billions of euros (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2021). Thus, it is a fact that the industry has been one of the most affected sectors. Event planners, who are professionals used to reinventing themselves, now have to confront two main trends that have come to stay, namely new safety concerns and the rise of virtual and technological hybrid events.

Recently, we have begun to see important face-to-face events coming back, such as Fitur and the World Mobile Congress (WMC), that are smartly dealing with the virtual dimension. This new hybrid panorama is offering the possibility of increasing presence of speakers and participants as many of them could not physically assist due to financial, conciliation or sanitary reasons. The risk of contagion has risen the popularity of events that entail less participants than before the pandemic, which is not only ensuring the social distance but also is permitting an improvement in the personalization and the human connection during the events. As a result, partnerships and hence stakeholder collaboration have become more critical than ever to recover and achieve a successful hybrid event.

Due to uncertainty, there is a strong need to work jointly to forecast and act for possible scenarios. The last lockdowns and first face-to-face events have been a process for events planners of intensive learning, which have brought out the identification of some problems that need to be solved, such as videoconferencing saturation, COVID tracking, among others. In contrast, other kind of initiatives have arisen. For instance, Ibiza has recently diversified its portfolio of tourism products by adding to nightlife tourism activities, sports tourism, in particular mountain bikers' races (Rejón-Guardia et al., 2020).

Innovativeness is vital for creating expectation and surprising and unique experiences, which result in unforgettable events. Therefore, the linkages and connections the events create have to be authentic, now more than ever due to the unprecedented situation we have suffered. The digital needs of tourists have increased and they are now expecting creativity, a hybrid social engagement. Tourists are demanding mobile attractive content that ensures their contactless sanitary secureness and that entertains them. Thus, in this chapter the future tourism event trends will be described, which are connected to the new desires and needs of this new generation known as Generation Clean.

Spanish Post-COVID-19 Patterns

Despite the fact that the uncertainty is great, the forecast for the upcoming years reflects a notable increase in the number of events (as many were postponed), but a decrease of participants and spending (Vuletin, 2020). This disruptive pandemic has had an unexpected impact on tourism flows, behaviour, expenditure, travel choice, perceived risk and the redefining of tourist satisfaction (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2021). This has meant the appearance of new tourism patterns that have come to stay. The most significant changes will be explained below.

Generation Clean

Due to the “new normal”, postponements and cancellations of in-person events may still take place. Until effective vaccines are available, the reputation of the brands, and indeed of event organizers, will be built on health and safety. New safety measures will still be adopted so as to fulfil the needs of Generation Clean. A duty-of-care strategy will remain at the forefront from policy design to business planning as onsite protocols will be critical factors for face-to-face events, and safety measures are paramount.

Thus, the next actions have been adopted as during live events there is still a substantial risk of contracting COVID-19:

- social distancing is the preference for open air-spaces;
- monitoring on-site testing or request of updated COVID-19 related information in QR codes (vaccine, PCR test or others) for attendees and employees;
- temperature check support for attendees and employees;
- mask wearing compulsory indoors and handwashing or disinfecting stations;

- allocated seating spaces and separated spaces by plexiglass or other materials, especially for meal areas and preferably food will be skipped to avoid unnecessary risks;
- stewards to control attendees and foster obedience of safety measures;
- cleaning frequency planned;
- real-time COVID-19 related data;
- Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) initiatives to ensure contactless is a priority (such as QR codes with COVID-19 related information or facial recognition);
- quality stamps that ensure that safety protocols have been implemented;
- events bubbles are also guaranteed by a technological system that ensures constant tracking of COVID-19 information.

Tourists will ask for destinations that are secure in sanitary terms and that are medically prepared and within almost all the population vaccinated. Thus, Spain reunites all these requirements.

Micro Experiences

Experiences that cater for a small number of persons will be considered less risky, more personalized, exclusive and intimate than large events as these imply a lot of complications. This will mean an opportunity to redefine in person connections during events so these can be meaningful. Events will be measured taking into account the number of connections they enable. Thus, this context will increase competition and will push the limits of creativity to foster engagement. All this context is not only highly segmenting audiences but also is resulting in a strong tendency towards personalization. Thus, tailor-made experiences happen to be in vogue and now destinations that offer small spaces for these kinds of events are demanded by planners. Moreover, micro experiences offer the possibility to surprise and excite attendees as ever before but as a disadvantage the prices for tourists will inevitably rise.

Several event organizers have realized the opportunity of creating a niche-market of events for very specific topics, which build a community towards those themes. These smaller events with fewer participants could be more frequent and avoid the peaks of tourism flows (or even tourism seasonality) and increase interaction. The rise of frequency will result in higher rates of engagement as event planners will be able to personalize and hence attendees will perceive experiences as unique and memorable. In this regard, Barcelona is achieving this objective by focusing tourism economic recovery on the reactivation of corporate travel business and locating unique and singular spaces for these sorts of events. These spaces have evolved into innovative areas equipped with the most advanced technology and centred on sustainable purposes, which is emphasizing Barcelona's role in the tourism event industry.

We are all facing an aging world, where the elderly has been the segment most affected because of the pandemic not only in terms of losses but also regarding

the willingness to travel. As part of the new normality, tourists are demanding destinations that can organize open-air activities (and thus, with a favourable climate) and less mass tourism. Spain is in a position to take advantage of these new requirements (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2021).

Hybrid Tech Events

As a way to ensure attendance, events will continue to have a mixed format as online audience is always guaranteed. In-person events will be more segmented and smaller than before the pandemic and the budget per event will unfortunately tend to decrease, due to the economic crisis, as the number of events increase but with fewer participants. Despite the limited budget, the format of these events is now transforming into a TV show that relies on live speakers, shorter sessions and a strong tech infrastructure that increases the production quality. Precisely, new tech devices have replaced other priorities such a square metre space to support on-site and virtual connections such as improving VR (i.e., virtual reality), AR (i.e., augmented reality), video meetings, chats, polls access, among others. The budget spent before in food and beverage will be dedicated to the investment for digital transformation and for broadcasting the hybrid event production.

The challenge is winning the race to develop and implement the virtual event platform and thus now many partnerships are taking place. Deeper understanding of attendees' changing behaviour is required, and hence the success of events will depend on the ability to adapt to the events by using technological advancements such as AI (i.e., artificial intelligence), 360° videos, among others, that avoid screen fatigue and entertain. The reduction of budgets and the increased expectations as the audiences are increasingly demanding available technology and quality shows rather than simple events is complicating the labour of event planners. In addition, the duality of the events (online and offline) is making the logistics more sophisticated, which is intensifying planning and strategy that takes into consideration possible technology failure and unexpected emergencies. Besides, these events are now entailing two audiences: the online users and the in-person attendees, that have different needs to be covered.

Virtuality

The virtual dimension of events is yet a challenge for organizers as it is planned at the same time live in-person experience takes place. Event organizers have to prepare live and on-demand content for its clients, which raises up the level of sophistication as it entails the preparation of two experiences that require fulfilling the needs of each audience. Attendees' needs are getting more sophisticated. They are demanding synchronous (i.e., live-streaming) and asynchronous content in platforms that have an easy-to-use interface, that display three or four speakers' views on livestreaming, overlays, popups content, among others. The trend is moving from webinars, live streaming and content creation, which lacked

human interaction, to events that entail on-stage representation timely structured to foster connections among attendees. Thus, the metrics of engagement will be measured regarding the connections made during events. Social media channels will be more interactive and will improve the two-way communication. The expectations are rising. The market is growing.

Bundling could be an option to clients that demand an added value service and it could be performed by even generating a subscription model, better content on demand or one-to-one meetings that strengthen connection possibilities for business objectives. Corporate clients may prefer virtual events as it saves money and reduces the time to reach the destination, for just a two-hour meeting. Moreover, the virtual dimension reduces the environmental impact, as it has been proved with the rapid drop of carbon footprint, as well as avoiding the threat of contracting COVID-19.

Dealing with Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) in Favour of Purposeful Events

The current climate of uncertainty is leading to prioritize purposeful events worldwide and particularly in Europe that is facing an unprecedented scenario due to Brexit, political instability and weather emergencies. Specifically, in the event industry, Spain is mainly confronting the consequences from the economic slowdown, the volcano's eruption in La Palma, and the cancellation of the World Mobile Congress during the coronavirus crisis in 2020. Thus, in this unusual moment sustainability, specifically local social and environmental commitment, has gained popularity among events and local residents are more involved than before. After the isolation, everyone is willing to attend awesome sensorial purposeful events. The experience design will require that socializing not only the sanitary measures abovementioned, but also the possibility of creating community across connecting with other attendees rather than networking.

Sustainable and Diversity Priorities

In this new normality, there are two key priorities for the Spanish event organizers for the next years: fostering sustainability and diversity. The reduction of environmental impacts has been emphasized during the COVID-19 lockdowns and the diminution of the carbon footprint is now a policy to accomplish in every single worldwide company. A plethora of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives have been endorsed by the tourism event industry that deal not only with hygiene and safety protocols, but also with the meanings of the events, the topics and even the messages offered during them.

In this regard, Vuletin (2020) conducted a survey with a sample of more than 850 Spanish organizers of business, networking, musical, community, gastro-nomic, scientific and gala events, where it was pointed out that almost 70% of Spanish event organizers have made progress on environmental issues, although most are in the early stages of applying sustainability to their events. Specifically,

it was found out that 84% use digital tickets and 50% employ biodegradable or reusable elements for food and beverages.

Creativity formats that entail contactless activities will be highly demanded (such as design BYOD, Bring Your Own Device; virtual design thinking sessions; hackathon videoconference meetings, among others) as ways to foster co-creation and collaboration. Event professionals will try to arrange these sponsorships with local businesses as the quarantine precautions have emphasized the need of ensuring local economies, as these are essential to guarantee sustainable development.

Concerning diversity, 50% are attracting assistants of different religions, ages, nationalities, among other aspects, and four out ten are looking for speakers that meet the interests of a diverse audience. In this respect, many event organizations have been recently establishing policies that provide the necessary education to address inclusion and diversity and also to ensure that event employees become mindful so as to improve attendee experience taking into account individual variances. Thus, many specific activities have been introduced such as the consideration of dietary particularities due to health or religious reasons, the representation of diverse speakers, among others. In other words, attendees' wellbeing will have maximum relevance and for all businesses the approach will be customer centred, with their satisfaction the most important priority towards guaranteeing sustainable tourism development.

Business Travel

It is undeniable that MICE tourism (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions/Conferences and Exhibitions) is an essential pillar of the event industry as it encompasses the various types of group business travel (Rojas et al., 2020), a segment which is characterized in Spain by the following factors: high average expenditure, slight seasonal fluctuation, demanding qualified travellers, excellence of service quality, tailored service, predisposed to high-tech advancements (Rojas et al., 2020). Local economies benefit from corporate travel as these tourists normally have a big budget to spend on the destination. However, the consequences due to the pandemic for many companies are resulting in a need of cutting luxuries such as business travel.

This segment is particularly interesting for Spain, as it constitutes 15% of our tourism sector – which, overall, accounts for 12.4% of GDP – and generates more than 80,000 jobs. According to the Events Industry Council (2018), congress and event tourism generated a direct impact of more than ten billion euros on the Spanish economy in 2017, ranking us as the 12th country with the highest direct income generated due to MICE tourism. Before the pandemic, in 2019 this sector was growing: the number of meetings was 29,603, 14.7% more than the previous year; and meeting attendees reached 4.8 million, 11.4% higher than in 2018 (Events Industry Council, 2018). The two main sectors of activity are still the medical-health and economic-commercial industry; the

months in which a larger meeting is held continue to be spring and fall and the annual average of stay is 2.16 days; and the percentage of men is still higher than that of women aged 35 to 54 years. Finally, *bleisure* (i.e., business and leisure) has risen in the last decade, where business events are combined with other tourism activities. Therefore, business travel is expected to grow in the upcoming years.

Conclusion: Lessons Learnt

COVID-19 has defined the reboot of the tourism activity since this industry has been one of the sectors most touched, and Spain one of the countries most affected (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2021). This pandemic has seriously affected society's quality of life and the well-being of people, and thus it has implied changes in the tourism market. This chapter has pinpointed the future patterns the tourism event industry will have to deal with so as to be successful. To sum up, Spain has done its homework. During these first initial trials, we have seen that the country is medically ready to receive tourists, is posing as a destination for open-air micro personalized events, is prepared for amazing hybrid high-tech business travel events such as the WMC, and is mindful about rising awareness of the relevance of sustainability and diversity organizing purposeful events. However, the next challenge lies ahead, which is coping with the new technological advances so as to compete and generate online and offline engagement during the tourism events.

References

- Arbulú, I., Razumova, M., Rey-Maqueira, J., and Sastre, F. (2021). Can domestic tourism relieve the COVID-19 tourist industry crisis? The case of Spain. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 20, 100568.
- Events Industry Council (2018). *Global economic significance of business events study*. Retrieved from: <https://insights.eventscouncil.org/Portals/0/OE-EIC%20Global%20Meetings%20Significance%20%28FINAL%29%202018-11-09-2018.pdf> (accessed 23 October 2021).
- Gholipour, H.F., Arjomandi, A., Marsiglio, S., and Foroughi, B. (2020). Is outstanding performance in sport events a driver of tourism? *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 18, 100507.
- Rejón-Guardia, F., Alemany-Hormaeche, M., and García-Sastre, M.A. (2020). Ibiza dances to the rhythm of pedals: The motivations of mountain biking tourists competing in sporting events. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 36, 100750.
- Rojas, A., Alarcón, P., and del Alcázar, B. (2020). The MICE tourism value chain: Proposal of a conceptual framework and analysis of disintermediation. *Journal of Convention & Event Tourism*, 21(3), 177–200.
- Sánchez-Pérez, M., Terán-Yépez, E., Marín-Carrillo, M.B., Marín-Carrillo, G.M., and Illescas-Manzano, M.D. (2021). The impact of the COVID-19 health crisis on tourist evaluation and behavioural intentions in Spain: Implications for market segmentation analysis. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 24(7), 919–933.

- United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2021). *World Tourism Organization underscores tourism's importance for covid-19 recovery in audience with the king of Spain*. Retrieved from: www.unwto.org/news/unwto-underscores-tourisms-importance-for-covid-19-recovery-in-meeting-with-the-king-of-spain (accessed 2 November 2021).
- Vuletin, M. (2020). Informe tendencias de los eventos en 2020 by Eventbrite. *MICE.ES*. Retrieved from: www.mice.es/post/789-informe-tendencias-de-los-eventos-en-2020-by-eventbrite (accessed 27 October 2021).