

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Portuguese Events: The Case of Northern Portugal

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Abstract: Events, as forms of leisure and tourism, have had an exponential growth, visible in academic studies, but also as a new form of communication. Acting as important tools for territorial dynamization, they are assumed as generators of development opportunities for a region and leverage the positioning of a strong and positive image for tourist destinations. COVID-19 has had an impact on almost all aspects of our life. Many industries have faced significant revenue losses and contracted in terms of their growth and, naturally, one of the worst affected by the pandemic was the events industry. This pandemic crisis has introduced an unparalleled level of doubts regarding the type of events that will take place in the coming years and how they will be produced. Also, with restrictions and a population less willing to be in the physical presence of others, it's important to understand how participants are facing the possibility to attend future events. This research study aims to investigate and understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the tourism sector, particularly on the events industry, especially in the North of Portugal. It is also analysed how Portuguese were affected by the cancellation and/or postponement of events and also how they anticipate the future of this area. It is also analysed the risk and fear management and its relationship with the pandemic. In methodological terms we present a literature review to support the theoretical basis of the ongoing research work. We also used secondary sources of information, namely studies carried out among entrepreneurs of the sector, to identify supply concerns. In addition, an online survey was applied, via email and social networks, using snowball sampling. The study allowed us to collect data on how the Portuguese have been affected and what their expectations are regarding alternatives and the return to face-to-face events. The results show the importance of managing the risks, the resilience and adaptability of professionals and participants to a new paradigm in the events industry.

Keywords: events industry, impacts, Coronavirus (Covid-19), Portugal

1. Introduction

The contribution of events, in their various aspects, cultural, recreational, sports or leisure, are a strong attraction and an increasingly relevant element associated with the competitiveness of tourist destinations.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought with it several negative impacts that affect numerous areas of the labour market and, as many other industries, live events venues around the world were forced to close to prevent the spread of infection. As the event industry is connected with other sectors, including the hotels that receive participants, the aviation that transports them, the companies and suppliers involved in their organization, the catering and the spaces of fun in the places where the events take place, hundreds of companies and workers have been affected (Fox, 2020).

Since the beginning of the year 2020, events have been cancelled or rescheduled all over the world and this is a scenario that continued the following year. The pandemic generated a health outbreak and an unprecedented economic crisis on a global scale. It affected multiple sectors of activity of which the event industry, particularly targeted, since it only makes sense and exists when there is public.

In this context, this research work was developed in order to understand the impact of Covid-19 on the tourism sector, particularly in the events industry, by trying to see how the Portuguese, especially in northern Portugal, were affected by the cancellation and/or postponement of events. At the same time, it was intended to know how the future of this area of events is anticipated.

In the first part we review the literature on some concepts related to the events sector, referring to the environment created by the pandemic and what impacts have been observed in the sector. We also analyse and reflect on risk management and its relationship with the pandemic.

The second part analyses the results of the survey conducted in July 2020, as well as those of other studies carried out by various entities in different regions, with the same objective of bringing some light to the situation

of the events industry induced by Covid-19. Finally, the main conclusions of the study are presented, as well as its limitations and directions that research in this field may take in the future.

2. Methodology

This study was conducted using primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were obtained through an online survey, with the aim of obtaining the perspective of demand. The questionnaire was designed by the authors, based on the literature review. However, since this is a recent topic, no bibliography was found to adapt a pre-existing questionnaire, so it was necessary to use the knowledge and experience of the authors in these subjects in order to create it.

The survey form was divided into two parts. The first part refers to the sociodemographic framework of the sample. The second consists of multiple-answer questions regarding the perceptions of the Portuguese towards the events scheduled in Portugal that have changed due to the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) and their future perspectives.

The sample was selected using the snowball sampling technique, a non-probabilistic sampling technique, in which individuals selected to be studied invite new participants from their network of friends and acquaintances.

The survey was shared online, via email and social media, for a period of three weeks between 4 and 24 July 2020. A total of 187 responses were obtained, of which 181 were considered valid. Invalid responses reported situations where respondents confused events with travel. The data obtained were later analysed using IBM SPSS v26 software.

Secondary data were obtained through the bibliographic review of scientific articles available in several platforms, selected according to the relevance of the title, abstract and keywords.

Due to the lack of published articles on this very recent theme, newspaper articles were also scrutinized, as well as surveys and various studies conducted by official entities, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) or the APECATE (Portuguese Association of Congresses, Tourism Animation and Events Companies). These secondary sources of information, namely the studies carried out among entrepreneurs in the sector, aimed to identify supply concerns.

Based on the data analysis, we perspective the perception of the Portuguese regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and what is the near future of the sector.

3. Literature review: Event perspective

An event is a phenomenon that can be classified or categorised in different ways based on its size, shape and content, being very important for tourist's destinations, as they can generate a variety of benefits. By being unique and unrepeatable, those who experience them intend to be part of this unique moment, which will never happen again (Getz, 2007).

There are several types of events that can be classified, among others, as to their typologies and their dimension and function. Regarding typologies, i.e. the element that distinguishes them and makes them different, they are grouped into cultural celebrations; political and state; arts and entertainment; business and trade; educational and scientific; sport competition; recreational and private events (Getz, 2007; 2008).

With regard to the dimension and function, with implications for the experience and impacts it originates, the following stand out: mega-events, big events, affecting all communities, countries and continents, less frequent and only comparable, for example, to the London or Beijing Olympic Games (Müller, 2015); major-events, may involve tradition and symbolism, attract a number of nations; hallmarks, larges in scale, intrinsically linked to the community and quickly identified as members of a place, as is the case of the Tour de France; Local or Community Events, small in scale and size, which celebrate aspects of the community livelihoods (Getz, 2008).

There are several effects impacts on the community or the region that could be observed not only by economic aspects, but also by taking into consideration personal, social, political and cultural impacts. As for the impacts at a personal level, they affect individuals as participants in an event and those who do not participate feel their

impact. The social, cultural and political impacts occur, especially when economically the local community is benefited by the influence that the event generates in tourism. Also, by the interaction it generates with the local population and by its participation in the event, but also by the effect created by the media.

The economic impacts are more visible in large-scale events as they generate infrastructure investments, which can be beneficial, but it can also contribute to the building of infrastructure that becomes useless after the event. It also generates a positive economic impact on tourism and all the activities that revolve around the event, such as accommodation, restaurants and tourist attractions. However, the opposite may happen, given the excessive concentration of activity at the event site, which translates into a negative and visible environmental impact visible in the increased production of waste, in the incorrect management of the territory, due to the construction of equipment, and in the pollution caused by travel. Thus, the costs and benefits of organizing an event should be weighted as potential transformers of places.

In general, events correspond to strategies for the development and promotion of destinations, contributing to improve their tourist image. As tourist attractions they can allow visitors to stay longer and residents not to travel out, spending money locally (Getz, 2007; Golob and Jakulin, 2014; Sutton, 2016; Wong, Xu, Tan and Wen, 2019).

With the global growth of events the ability to offer different experiences is essential for the event to remain relevant and competitive (Lockstone-Binney and Ong, 2019).

Virtual events, although different, do not fail to add value to consumers (Getz, 2008) and perhaps become the norm. The pandemic by Covid-19 will lead to, at least, a paradigm change, as happened after 9/11 (Young, 2020).

4. Risk management and Covid-19

The risk is the likelihood of a particular hazard causing injury and, if they do occur, how serious they may be. In this sense, the first responsibility of those organising an event is to ensure the safety of workers, participants and all who can potentially be affected by the event. To anticipate this, risk assessment is essential (Conway, 2008).

In 2015, the World Health Organization produced, alongside existing legislation on mass concentrations, a guide on public health at mass events. It provides guidance on risk management for various types of incidents and risk situations, including contagious infectious diseases (WHO, 2015).

The risk depends on several factors. The typology of the event, its duration and size, the location and conditions of the venue, catering, hygiene, the possibility of spreading diseases in the participants' countries of origin and in the country where the event is held. Therefore, in the planning phase of the event a risk assessment should be done, and the action plan should be drawn up and tested, shared with stakeholders and implemented during the event. The entire process must be monitored by local health authorities and communicated to staff and participants (WHO, 2015).

Everyone should be aware of their own vulnerability to the possibility of being infected and becoming potential agents of infection (Petersen et al., 2020). Measures such as social distancing and frequent hand washing can reduce the risk of infection (Petersen et al., 2020; WHO, 2015), but if this occurs, specific international and national standards of action should be applied.

The last known pandemics were H1N1 and SARS-COV-1 (2003). Although they did not have the impact of SARS-COV-2, several events were eventually cancelled in Canada, Singapore and the launch of the marketing campaign for the 2008 Olympic Games was also postponed (Mason, Grabowski and Du, 2005).

As far as the event industry is concerned, infections such as Covid-19 can be transmitted in gatherings, first during the trip, then while the event is taking place, and when they return home, they can carry the virus back to their home community. In view of this, international and national health organizations have prepared a set of guidelines for the events sector (WHO, 2020).

In Portugal, the Direção Geral de Saúde - Directorate-General for Health (DGS) published on 28 February 2020 a set of recommendations for public and mass events, which also refers to the risk assessment and advises some procedures in order to minimize it, namely the creation of a contingency plan and procedures that reduce the risk of contagion (DGS, 2020a). On March 16, it again published a guideline for mass events, but this time advises the postponement and cancellation of events, as a preventive measure to spread the disease and prohibits gatherings of more than 100 people (DGS, 2020b). A few days later, on March 19, following the implementation of the State of Emergency and several restrictions, all events in Portugal were postponed and cancelled (Presidência da República, 2020). The same has happened all over the world, which caused strong economic and social impacts, both nationally and personally (McCloskey et al., 2020).

In April, the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA) conducted a survey of event professionals and obtained 1,776 responses. Many of the respondents said they were using this forced stop period to rethink the future of events, digitally and in-person. The survey results reported that the events planned over the next three months had been cancelled (87%) or postponed (66%), with the exception of those scheduled for the end of June and July, and there were even some that had already been cancelled for 2021. 25% of the events had not yet been rescheduled and those that were moved, was to dates after the summer and for the first months of 2021.

The main reasons presented for doing so were travel restrictions, mandatory social distancing, participant cancellation, worry and fear. Only 18% of respondents moved events to online platforms and 52% did so partially. Of all respondents, 400 said they had suffered economic impacts and were concerned about their business workers.

Regarding the future, they considered that it would be a combination of face-to-face and digital, because people will be hesitant to travel (44%) and certain events, such as exhibitions, are not yet technologically adapted to the virtual system (PCMA, 2020). They also considered that this was a time for companies to improve their skills, particularly in the field of digital technology. In the future they will further enhance hygiene measures and the economic aspects of events. They expected to be back in business in six to nine months (PCMA, 2020).

In Portugal, the industry's concern was evident. On February 17, 2020, there was still no record of postponed or cancelled events (Event Point, 2020b), but the situation quickly changed. A month later, APECATE recorded 90% of events, of its members, cancelled and losses of 300 million euros (Event Point, 2020a; Sousa, 2020b).

Many companies saw all events postponed or cancelled in a short time and the entire value chain was affected, persisting the doubt as to how long the situation would last. Added to this was the uncertainty of the future, of knowing under what conditions they would return, because countries will recover at different paces and, certainly, venues and suppliers will not be enough to respond to rescheduling in the last quarter of the year in question. At the same time there will be no public available to participate in events every day. In addition, all economic sectors have been affected, which means that the budget of companies for the organization of events will be limited in the short and medium term (Sousa, 2020a; 2020c).

Meanwhile, international and national industry associations rushed to provide information dedicated to Covid-19, scheduled webinars, held online trainings and promoted debates to understand the impacts, opportunities and future of events (Event Point, 2020a; 2020b). However, Dan Welsh, CEO of *Destinations International*, believes that new forms of virtual meeting have emerged, something that is likely to remain, at least in the MICE segment, but will also highlight the need to be together. Opportunities and new ways of planning events have arisen, as from now on companies are likely to establish plans B and C, being more precarious in case of sudden change of scenery (Salameh, 2020a). Craig McGee, founder of Panoptic Events, shares the same opinion on technology and believes that it is time to stop and rethink companies, bet on qualification and strengthen relationships between suppliers and customers (Salameh, 2020b).

June 1 marked the reopening of a few venues, concert halls, naturally adapted to a new normal (Event Point, 2020c). In order to understand consumers' future intentions regarding festivals, Festicket conducted a European survey of 110,000 consumers. The main results note that 82% of respondents intended to go to a festival in the next six months and only 11% estimated that they would do so between seven and twelve months, and even a smaller percentage (1%) would do so within a year. The majority of respondents (60%) would be willing to attend national and international music events in 2021. Regarding the duration of the event, 83% were available to

attend a one-day festival and 68% a weekend. The concern with the hygiene, cleaning and disinfection conditions became very important factors for consumers, as well as the guarantee of social distancing and the possibility of having the ticket price refunded when the event is cancelled. During the confinement period, 60% said they had attended a live event online and 58% would be willing to pay for it (Festicket, 2020).

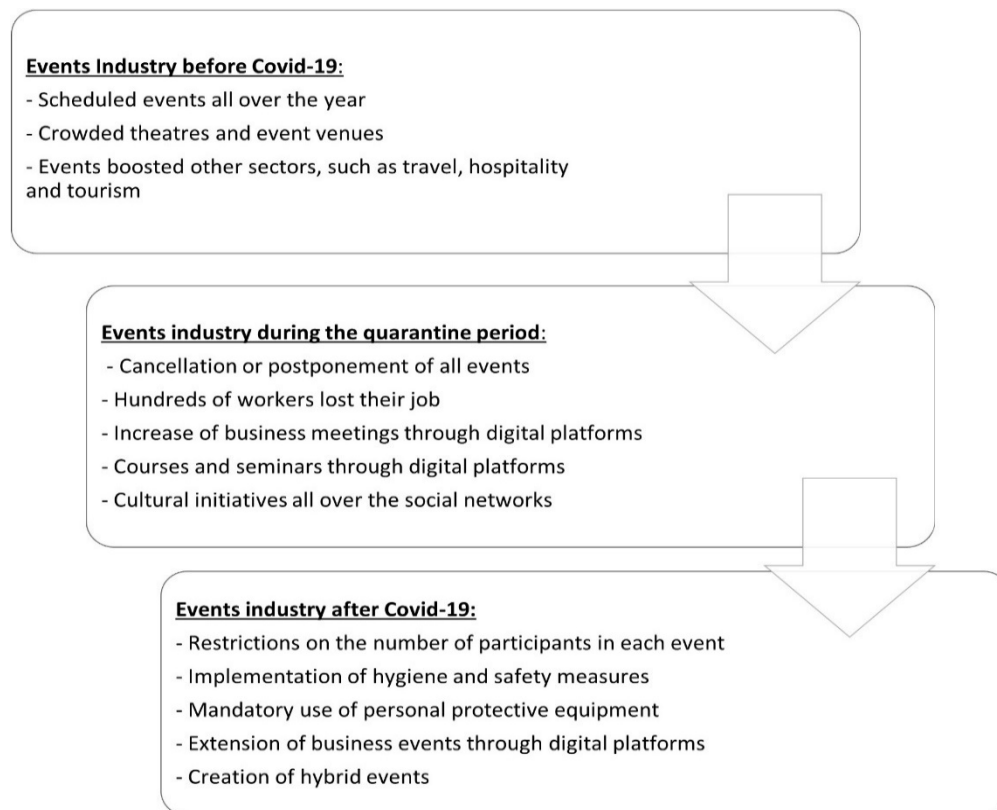


Figure 1: Covid-19 Impacts overview: Elaborated by authors

In order to better understand the evolution of the events industry before, during and after the first confinement, we built a scheme (Figure 1) that can synthesise and clarify the impact of the pandemic on Covid-19.

5. Findings

As mentioned above, the survey form was developed in Google search management application called Google Forms. It was organized in two parts: the first one related to the socio-demographic framework and the second one with multiple-answer questions, aimed at the perceptions of the Portuguese regarding the scheduled events that were changed due to the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) and the respondents' future perspectives.

Since the survey was made public, people from different locations in Portugal responded, although our focus was on the Northern region, which in fact accounted for 91.2% of respondents.

Of the 181 questionnaires that we considered valid, 56.9% were answered by females and 43.1% were male.

The majority of respondents (37.6%) were between the ages of 20 and 29, followed by the age group between 40 and 49 years (22.1%), 50-59 (18%), 30-39 (13%), equal or over 60 (7%) and only 2% for those under 20.

Regarding the area of residence, 91.2% of the respondents were residents in the Porto and North region. The rest was divided among the remaining geographical regions, with at least one valid questionnaire being obtained in each, except in Madeira, where no questionnaire was answered.

Most Portuguese who answered the questionnaire (87.8%) had planned to attend an event that changed due to the pandemic: 51.9% related to festivals, concerts and/or shows; 44.8% to social events, such as weddings, birthdays and/or parties; 24.3% to congresses, seminars and workshops; 23.8% to sport events and 18.8% to fairs and exhibitions. Only 3.3% of respondents mentioned other events, mainly religious events (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution by type of events that have changed. Elaborated by authors.

Event Type	Frequency	%
Congresses/seminars/workshops	44	24,3%
Sports events	43	23,8%
Social events (weddings, birthdays, parties)	81	44,8%
Fairs/exhibitions	34	18,8%
Festivals/concerts/shows	94	51,9%
Others	6	3,3%

Most of the events would take place in Porto and North region (61.3%), followed by the region of Lisbon and Tagus Valley (11.0%) and only Alentejo region did not registered any event compromised by the pandemic (Figure 2).

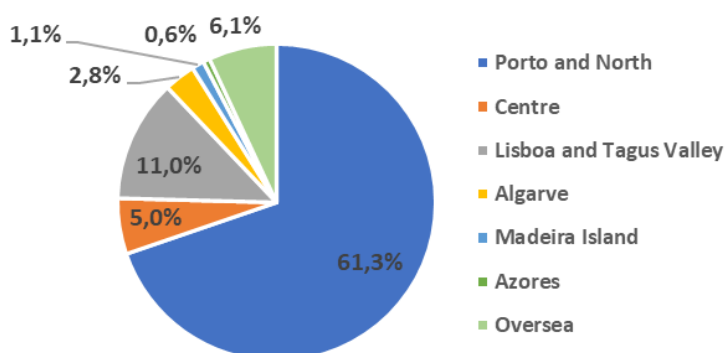


Figure 2: Distribution of planned events by geographical location. Elaborated by authors.

The percentage of cancelled events was the same as that of postponed events (41.4%) and 2.2% were replaced with an online version. Some respondents (2.8%), however, stated that they still did not know what the decision of the promoter would be regarding the event or, that the event took place without an audience.

84.5% of respondents who saw events changed considered the decision to be right. Most respondents had not yet paid for the events (61.3%), but those who had already done so saw the events postponed without a refund (14.4%), or postponed but with the choice, between accepting the new date or being refunded (8.3%). However, only 2.8% were effectively reimbursed.

During the period of confinement and up to the date of the survey, 47% of individuals had participated in online events (Table 2), as opposed to 53% who said they had not.

Table 2: Typology of online events in which participants took part. Elaborated by authors.

Event Type	Frequency	%
Congresses/seminars/workshops	28	15,5%
Sports events	8	4,4%
Social events (weddings, birthdays, parties)	15	8,3%
Fairs/exhibitions	4	2,2%
Festivals/concerts/shows	33	18,2%
Courses	41	22,7%
Webinar	40	22,1%
Others	2	1,1%

Of the 181 respondents, 112 considered that online events are viable (61.9%); 21 did not agree (11.6%) and 48 were unsure (26.5%).

Regarding the amount they would be willing to pay to attend or participate in online initiatives, 46.4% would not be willing to pay, 19.3% would be willing to pay between €6 and €10, 18.2% would pay up to €5, 9.4% between €11 and €6.6% and 6.6% would pay more than €20 (Figure 3).

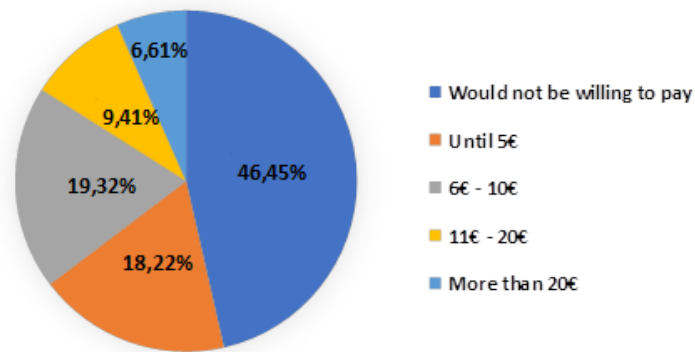


Figure 3: Respondents would be willing to pay for virtual events: Elaborated by authors

As for the future, only 47.5% of the respondents intend to attend some type of event until the end of 2020, including festivals, concerts, concerts (29.8%), social events (23.2%), congresses, seminars and/or workshops (14.4%), sport events (16.0%), fairs and exhibitions (9.9%) and other events, especially religious (1.7%).

Among the reasons pointed out by the 97 respondents for not participating in any event during the year 2020, we can summarise: fear of contaminating and/or being contaminated (52.5%), considered as the main reason (31.5%), social distancing (23.8%), fear that the venue does not comply with the necessary safety measures (16.0%), mandatory use of protective equipment (2.8%) and other reasons (5.0%), mainly the absence of habit of going to events or because they had not planned it regardless of the pandemic.

6. Discussion

The results of this research highlight the impact that the pandemic and the confinement imposed by it had on the events sector in Portugal, especially in the North region. Through the survey it was possible to collect data on how the Portuguese were affected by the cancellation and postponement of almost all events scheduled for 2020 and beyond, as well as their expectations regarding alternatives and the return to face-to-face events.

It should be noted, however, that this study only collected 181 responses, using snowball sampling, that has several limitations in sample selection. Furthermore, the number of responses is not representative of the Portuguese population in the north of the country, so generalizing is risky, especially for the whole country. However, the study allowed the collection of several valid data that can be the starting point for more detailed or comparative investigations regarding the second confinement after January 2021.

Unsurprisingly, for us, was the fact that respondents reported that many events, postponed or cancelled due to the pandemic, were mostly festivals, music concerts and shows that are preferred by individuals at younger ages. These age groups were also the ones who participated the most as respondents to the survey.

These types of events are characterised by a high concentration of public, so it is understandable that they were also been most affected by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the guidelines and impositions of the State Government (DGS, 2020b; Presidência da República, 2020). Likewise, private events were cancelled and postponed, as the pandemic extended into more favourable times for this particular type of events (in summer), namely weddings, continuing to motivate further postponements.

Economically the damage will be deeper as society adapts to a new model of participation and production of events. Companies need to readjust, something that almost always implies financial burdens that, after a downtime of several months of postponed and cancelled events, becomes more difficult to bear economically. For example, summer festivals, which mostly take place between June and September in Portugal, generated two billion euros in 2019, and by 2020 there was a drop to less than half of the festivals held. For 2019, it represented an 80% drop in turnover, generating only 400 million euros (Lusa, 2020).

In addition to the direct economic impacts generated by the festivals, there are several other economic activities, such as accommodation and catering that benefit from these events

Another nerve point of this crisis in the world of events is the great precariousness of the workers of the sector. Of the 2000 freelancers who would normally be hired, between March and June in Portugal, none were hired (APECATE, 2020).

On the other side of the equation is fear which is, by definition, an emotion triggered by danger, pain or harm (Hoog, Stroebe, and Wit, 2008). A viral outbreak such as Covid-19 naturally provokes fear in people (Mamun and Griffiths, 2020).

Regardless of the field of studies, anxiety and fear are considered two different emotions (Barlow, 2000). Theoretically, fear is a primary emotion that is experienced by all humans, regardless of age, race and culture. Fear is therefore an awareness of danger. Anxiety is the unpleasant feeling and physiological response when a person is frightened (Beck and Emery, 1979).

Considering the statistical data of 12 October 2020 from the SNS we can see that Covid-19 has affected more than 37 million people worldwide. Consequently, people feel fear, panic and anxiety. In the case of Portugal, on the same date mentioned, 87,913 had been infected, with the growing numbers seen as cases increased and the proximity of winter, so the states of fear and anxiety are also a constant and will persist. Thus, although face-to-face events have been held, people continue to adhere very little, with online webinar-type events proliferating more and more online webinar-type events.

The Portuguese's understanding of the changes in the events imposed by the pandemic shows the prudence and concern of individuals about the virus. This factor is reflected in the intention to attend an event in the near future, with values below 50%, according to our research, mainly for fear of being contaminated. These findings are in line with the perspective of APECATE (2020), which estimates the realization of only 284 events, between August and December, a number substantially lower than the 5900, held in 2019, in the same period of time, but contrasts with the European study of Festicket (2020).

Through data analysis it was also possible to observe that, despite the majority of respondents considering existence of online events feasible, the adherence to virtual events up to the date of the survey was surprisingly low (47%), especially since the majority of respondents are young, between 20 and 29 years old. This fact may be explained by the lack of promotion of these events, by their theme not being the respondents' preference or even by the lack of enthusiasm, as the experience of virtual events is not the same as that of the face-to-face. However, almost all those who considered it feasible to have virtual events would be willing to pay for the experience.

It is also important to note that, out of a total of 180 professionals in the events sector, 57% have not been involved in any digital event since the beginning of the pandemic. Rather, it was the technology or audio-visual suppliers that were most involved in this type of initiative. Still, the trend of hybrid events is continuing. According to the opinion of professionals in the sector, and given that only a small part of the professionals was involved in the organization of digital events, it is already possible to think that a new market is being created in the event sector and, on the other hand, that there is, on the part of professionals and companies involved in the creation and organization of events, a technological gap (EventPoint, 2020c) and even innovation.

7. Final considerations

Events research is multidisciplinary and complex, combining social and behavioural sciences, psychology, communication, culture, tourism, hospitality, leisure, entertainment, equipment, art and sports. There is, however, still a lack of studies on the evolution of events and, above all, of virtual events. This task requires that the focus of the academy effort on the applicability of new discoveries, working side by side with professionals.

In a crisis, such as a pandemic, the need for articulation is even more evident, since knowledge is the path to innovation, so necessary for companies to adapt to the new reality, remaining competitive. A proactive and positive attitude towards a time of crisis is essential to be prepared for change, encouraging creativity and problem-solving capacity.

It is too early to see how the hosting of events will evolve. It remains uncertain whether these will be temporary or permanent changes. However, state support has proved essential for many professionals to keep their jobs

and for companies to remain operational, even if, for the most part, in telework and with few or no scheduled events (APECATE, 2020; EventPoint, 2020c).

The unpredictability of the virus makes predictions uncredible, so the general feeling is uncertainty, discouraged and fear that the closing of doors is even the future (EventPoint, 2020c).

The data collected in this study, although on a small scale, show the importance that events have on society and the effects that the Covid-19 pandemic had in the north of the country, and we can extrapolate, in Portugal, from the point of view of the Portuguese who saw the events, which they had planned to watch, postponed or cancelled.

Most of these events were the festivals, which are characterized by the high concentration of people, so it is natural that they have been the most affected. Also, by their cancellation, negative economic impacts resulted for the localities hosting them, for the promoters and for other economic sectors that also benefited from their realization.

The resilience of the professionals and the results of this survey show that Northerners and Portuguese, generally, value events and are willing to embrace online initiatives, at least as long as it is not possible to have this experience live. This will probably be one of the pathways that will lead to the recovery of the sector. However, investment will be needed in digitisation of business and innovation, but certainly, if they do that, they will be better prepared for the future.

This is a new situation and new information will emerge with new knowledge from research, changing attitudes and internalising new behaviours. For example, a study over time will make sense to verify whether the perceptions of the Portuguese change as the pandemic evolves.

From this work, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on events can be explored from other points of view, whether through the various changes it caused in professionals in the sector, in the economy and even in society at national and local levels.

Risk management and the way each country has managed the pandemic are other issues that also deserve the attention of researchers, as other crises will arise, even if this pandemic ends. The recovery process and the future of the industry will also be themes that will surely emerge in future research.

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