GRASPING THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF EVENT EXPERIENCES: INTRODUCING THE EVENT SOCIAL INTERACTION SCALE (ESIS)

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Experience has been widely recognized as an essential part of an event’s success, but few studies have analyzed the processes underlying the event as social experience. This article contributes to a better understanding of the social processes that make an event a social interaction platform. The social interaction processes that shape the event’s social experience is examined using a framework that brings together cocreation practices, group socialization, and interaction ritual chains. This exploratory study investigates the social interaction processes that shape the event’s social experience by developing a quantitative tool, the Event Social Interaction Scale (ESIS), which measures different social dimensions of the event experience. The ESIS was applied at a popular culture event, the festivities of São João in Northeast Brazil, and 625 survey responses were collected in 2016 and 2017. Findings suggest that multiple interaction rituals occur. People who are more directly and actively engaged in the event are more likely to be open for contact with unknown others. The event becomes a multidimensional platform where different types of social interaction are not only possible but fostered. The ESIS contributes to charting the footprint of the event as social experience, revealing a similar experience footprint across different years of the study. The ESIS and the implications of its processes for the event can be useful for academics, practitioners, and policymakers interested in understanding and facilitating more engaging event social experiences.

Key words: Social interaction; Experience; Socialization; Platform; Event Social Interaction Scale (ESIS)

Introduction

Events are commonly recognized as moments where people come together and socialize. Literature on events has not only accepted this (Getz, 2012), but it has also revealed different aspects of social interaction among event participants (De Geus et al., 2016; Getz, 2005; Nordvall et al., 2014; Richards, 2015a; Rihova, 2013; Rihova et al., 2015; Simons, 2019, among others). Events are by nature
social gatherings and the social dimension of events has been a stable continuum in the event studies literature, in both leisure- and business-related events (Colombo & Marques, 2019). Networking is particularly important in business-related events, and much research has pointed out the importance of social aspects of leisure-related events, such as festivals. Due to their paramount escapist nature (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), music festivals are a field where social practices and experiences have been a particular object of attention (e.g., De Geus et al., 2016; Rihova et al., 2013, 2015).

Event experiences have been widely recognized in event studies as an essential part of an event’s success, either from a tourism perspective (Getz, 1989, 2008; Mossberg, 2007), or specifically in terms of event management (De Geus et al., 2016; Marques & Borba, 2017; Richards, 2017). Some initiatives, such as the ATLAS event experiences project, have also emerged as event scholars seek to better understand the multiple dimensions of the event experience. With the growing wave of interest and scholarly work on experiences, social interaction has become widely recognized as a major feature of events, but the different dimensions of the social experience of events are still understudied. Events can be considered from different perspectives, for example as nodes in a network where time and space are condensed, or as spaces for gathering people with a shared common goal, but events can also be viewed in a more dynamic manner: as a platform for social interaction.

Recent studies associated with different research areas, such as tourism and cultural economics, have started to explore the idea of events as platforms. The richness of this idea is manifold (Richards & Jarman, 2018) and corresponds to an expansion of the understanding of the scope of events to different fields, which allow more interdisciplinary approaches, as well as a better understanding of processes. This article adopts a dynamic approach to events as platforms in a first exploratory attempt to delve into the social interaction processes that occur in (popular culture) events. Since 2015 the ATLAS Events group has been developing research on popular culture events such as Carnival, São João and other celebrations (Barrera-Fernández et al., 2017; Barrera-Fernández & Hernández-Escampa, 2017; Marques & Borba, 2017; Marques et al., 2018; Richards, 2017; Ruiz Lanuza, 2017).

Cultural (popular or grassroots) events provide a framework in space and in time for people who are driven by a desire to interact with one another. Therefore, the event becomes a multidimensional platform for different types of social interaction (e.g., bonding with a known group, or meeting new people, sharing information after the event).

The aim of this article is to investigate which social interaction processes shape the social experience of events. Drawing on previous qualitative research, this exploratory study sets out to establish a quantitative tool, the Event Social Interaction Scale (ESIS), to pinpoint and measure different dimensions of the social interaction. Although in this article a specific cultural popular event is studied, the ESIS has the potential to be applied to any type of event. For the purposes of this article, data on the celebration of São João in the Northeast from Brazil are used. The present study provides an account of the visitor’s social experience of the São João festivities by pinpointing the social processes at the event, which mark it as a social interaction platform.

The Event Experience

Experience studies are not new and they are widely used, particularly in marketing. The work of Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999) on the experience economy marked an important turning point in the acknowledgement and description of the experiential dimension of human consumption. In the last two decades, with the increase of studies of events, the concept of experience has also pervaded the events professional and academic discourses. The work of Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999) was pivotal in the realization of the power of experiences. This power was also recognized in the events field, primarily in events marketing and later in studies of different types of events, like music festivals or conferences.

The concept of experience has been defined in different ways. Carù and Cova (2003), following Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), understand an experience as a “personal occurrence, often with important emotional significance, founded on the interaction with stimuli which are the products and services” (p. 270). The focus on consumption has also evolved and other fields of study
have meanwhile gained in theoretical reflections, such as the conceptualization of the experience realms by Pine and Gilmore (1999). Framed by two axes, one of participation (passive–active) and another of the consumer’s relation to the context (absorption–immersion), Pine and Gilmore (1999) suggested four realms of the experience: entertainment, education, aesthetics, and escapism. Pine and Gilmore’s approach has been widely used, although it has also been criticized for their instrumental perspective of the experience and their marketing approach, which is arguably harder to apply in social and cultural contexts.

Boswijk et al.’s (2007) work provided potential solutions to some of the pitfalls of Pine and Gilmore’s approach, introducing a more European perspective, which focused on the principles of an experience as a means of engaging consumers in a more meaningful way. Experiences should arguably be perceived as unique and have intrinsic value (Boswijk et al., 2007). Due to their powerful engagement potential, (event) experiences can also provide human, cultural, and social value, although these are still understudied. In our view, events can be seen as platforms where these different forms of value come together.

In the events literature, Getz (2012) took an individual psychological perspective, referring to the event experience as being composed of cognitive, conative, and emotional dimensions. In a complementary way, Morgan (2008) focused on contextual factors, aggregating motivations into three clusters: personal benefits of hedonic enjoyment; social interaction (leading to a sense of communitas), and symbolic meanings. Morgan’s work explored Turner’s (1995) theory of communitas and can also be linked to a line of studies that investigates symbolic relations in an event. Among these, the studies based on Bakthin’s ideas on the carnivalesque (e.g., Harcup, 2000; Islam et al., 2008; Kates & Belk, 2001; Matheson & Tinsley, 2016; Ravenscroft & Matteucci, 2003) are relevant as they refer to different aspects of events, such as, for example, countercultures (Anderton, 2008).

More recent studies have provided a more structured and holistic approach to the event experience. In their research on music festivals De Geus et al. (2016) applied the event experience scale (EES) to reveal four experience dimensions: cognitive, conative, emotional, and novelty. The quantitative instrument, the EES, was developed and has been widely applied in the ATLAS event experience project and in other studies (Barrera-Fernández et al., 2017; Barrera-Fernández & Hernández-Escampa, 2017; Coetzee et al., 2019; Colombo & Marques, 2019; Marques et al., 2018; Richards, 2017; Ruiz Lanuza, 2017). Although the EES refers indirectly to a social context in the sense that the social dimension will affect the personal, subjective experience, it only partially addresses the importance of the social context.

The leisure, tourism, and events fields have reiterated the importance of the social dimension as a motivational factor for certain practices, actions, activities, and experiences. Iso-Ahola (1980) described a motive as “an internal factor that arouses, directs, and integrates a person’s behavior” (p. 230). These can be push factors (internal sphere, forces related to the individual) or pull factors (external attributes of the offer) (Crompton & McKay, 1997). In events, several studies have pointed to social issues (social contact, socializing, spending time with friends and family, etc.) as extremely important in the motivation to attend events (e.g., Bowen & Daniels, 2005; Chang & Yuan, 2011; Crompton & McKay, 1997; Dodd et al., 2006; Gelder & Robinson, 2009; G. Holt, n.d.; Lee et al., 2004; McMorland & MacTaggart, 2007; Morgan, 2008; Nicholson & Pearce, 2001; Nordvall et al., 2014; Uysal & Li, 2008).

Even though motivations might be dependent on the type of event (Colombo & Marques, 2019), elements relating to forms of social interaction are of utmost importance in the role they play in attracting visitors (consumer’s perspective), as well as for the management of the event itself (event organizer’s perspective). Although many studies have looked into the motivations for attending events, the relationship of motivations to different elements of the event experience still needs to be further explored, particularly in a quantitative manner. This can help us to understand how events become platforms where social experiences take place.

Events as Engagement Platforms

During events, social interactions occur in a specific delimited geographical space in a particular
timeframe (Getz, 1989). Event visitors have a shared goal (Richards, 2015a), for example, celebrating a public holiday, which is also expressed and motivates social interaction in the time leading to the event itself, virtually and/or physically copresent (Simons, 2019). The pre-event experience is shaped by the social interactions in the moments leading up to the event, in particular in those events where visitors shape their own social experience, cocreating values and meanings (Peñaloza & Venkatesh, 2006). This seems to be emphasized in bottom-up events where high levels of involvement contribute to a heightened experience (Boswijk et al., 2007), as previous research, including studies of popular culture events, has demonstrated (Barrera-Fernández et al., 2017; Barrera-Fernández & Hernández-Escampa, 2017; Marques et al., 2018; Richards, 2017; Richards et al., 2015).

Among the studies of popular culture events, preliminary findings using the EES and piloting the creation of the Events Social Interaction Scale (ESIS) (Marques et al., 2018), point to interesting avenues of research. This research suggested that visitors who participated in the popular culture event in organized groups had an enhanced experience.

The few studies that relate engagement and the experience seem to suggest that more than simply being a platform for contact, events can be envisaged “as nodes or transformational spaces in networks that can have much wider and more profound social impacts than the immediate context of the event itself” (Richards & Brito, 2013, p. 231). Therefore, it is important to consider that “as experiences in socially dense consumption contexts are often shared with friends, family and unfamiliar strangers,” cocreation practices “need to be considered as a dynamic and holistic phenomenon that is embedded in customers’ social sphere” (Rihova, 2013, p. 561). The event can become a platform where different social networks meet and social interactions are facilitated in different ways.

Social Interaction and Ritualistic Experiences

Social interaction can take different forms such as family togetherness, spending time with friends and family, meeting new people, making new friends, or networking. Social interaction is not just part of the event experience, but it also forms the context of a subjective experience. The different types of people that are object of interaction, as well as the ways in which that interaction occurs, play a fundamental role. By integrating directly the realm of the subjective experience, this study seeks to understand in a more specific way the event consumer experience in a social context (i.e., understanding the subjective personal experience as a social experience).

Socialization has been largely considered in the events literature from a motivational perspective. In this body of literature, the terms socialization and social interaction are used interchangeably. Often, for instance in Nordvall et al. (2014) and Morgan (2008), socialization refers more to the process of socializing, as in an “activity of mixing socially with others” (Oxford Dictionary), and less to the process by which individuals learn and acquire social skills or become socialized, which would be the theoretical sociological approach. Although both are connected, one can argue that the event space and time are also a preferred platform for group socialization in their own right, because visitors are expected to behave in a certain way. As Morgan (2008) pointed out:

The event can be both a rite of intensification . . ., subjecting the attendee to extremes of emotional or physical experience leading to greater self-knowledge, and a rite of integration, where interaction with the others present consolidates shared cultural values and instills a “temporary sense of closeness” or communitas (Turner, 1974). Both stress the importance of the shared nature of the experience, the interaction with others, as a source of personal satisfaction. (p. 38)

In the events field, this shared nature of the experience means that the emphasis of group socialization lies mainly on social interaction practices (F. Holt & Lapenta, 2013; Nordvall et al., 2014; Richards, 2015b; Simons, 2019). Nordvall et al. (2014) proposed a framework for designing social interaction based on three types of socialization practices: known-group socialization, which corresponds to interactions with friends and family; external socialization, which relates to making new acquaintances, friends; and audience socialization, which consists of interactions with the
broaden (mass) audience. If Nordvall et al.’s (2014) study was aimed at providing event designers with the tools to improve the experience, as Simons (2019) pointed out, “the visitor interactions that are outside the scope of event organizers should be included as well” (p. 146) (e.g., a chat in the bus on the way to the event). Therefore, it is also important to understand different layers of meanings behind these (social) practices that contribute to making the event experience.

Throughout history, religious events have been among the most powerful in terms of their experience and impact. However, with the increased laicization of Western society, nonreligious events are also providing extraordinary experiences and appear to create similar effects for individuals. This can be explained by the ritualized nature of these events (Anderton, 2008; Arnould & Price, 1993; Morgan, 2008; Shone & Parry, 2004) and performances (Schechner, 1988). Richards (2015b) and Simons (2019) examined the ritualistic aspect of events, using Collins’ (2004) work on interaction ritual chains. Building on the work of Emile Durkheim on religious rituals, Collins (2004) highlighted how shared, ritualized experiences can produce a sense of collective effervescence, a (perceived) strong collective energy resulting from the gathering of a large group.

This energy was first identified by Durkheim in the context of religious rituals in tribes, yet Collins (2004) and many others after him have applied the idea of interaction rituals to other events with the capacity to generate collective effervescence (e.g., Richards, 2015b; Simons, 2019). Collins (2004) outlined four essential ingredients for a successful interaction ritual chain: bodily copresence, boundaries to outsiders, mutual focus of attention, and a shared common mood or emotional experience. The outcomes of the experience of collective effervescence include participants feeling they are a) part of something larger than themselves, a collective, which creates a sense of solidarity among them; and b) sense a heightened emotional energy. Strong rituals further produce c) symbols of the group or social relationships, sacred objects; and d), shared group norms and morality. These outcomes explain how the power of a strong interaction ritual can be sustained for a long time during “profane” everyday life and maintain a sense of group solidarity and belonging for a long time.

The important point raised by Collins’ analysis is that rituals are capable of developing and enhancing important social ties between those participating by ensuring physical copresence, generating mutual attention and by structuring the field of action in both physical and temporal terms, like in events. Physical copresence “in a ritual setting may provide a basis for bonding between groups of individuals, but the fact that people can move between rituals in search of new sources of emotional energy also implies the ability to forge new ties with other individuals and networks” (Richards, 2015a, p. 559), beneficial for building social capital (Richards, 2015a, 2015b). The sociality at traditional cultural festivals has been termed festive sociability by Costa (2001), which he described as having and artistic and playful nature, grounded in communities that arrange and contribute to festivities.

Within this framework, these interaction processes—interaction ritual chains—occur within the scope of a certain common goal, which can be simply a celebration. However, in events there are many different groups that can each have their own experience. Following studies by Gruen et al. (2007), Levy (2010) and Nordvall et al. (2014) focused their research on consumer-to-consumer interactions, contributing to an understanding of the social context, atmosphere, and dimensions of the event that provide fundamental parts of the experience. Rihova (2013) and Rihova et al. (2013) also focused on this interaction, examining it under the framework of value cocreation within social contexts.

Cocreated Event Experiences

The event experience is also cocreated from consumer-to-consumer (attendee-to-attendee/visitor-to-visitor). This cocreation leads to an increased valued event experience because it is a shared moment, as seen in music festivals (Rihova, 2013; Rihova et al., 2013; Rihova et al., 2018). In the case of family-friendly multiday outdoor festivals, Rihova (2013) proposed a shared social experience framework for value creation based on six cocreation practices: Belonging, Bonding, Detaching, Communing, Connecting, and Amiability. In total 18 different subpractices were identified and placed under these categories. These practices were
For this reason, the role of events as social interaction platforms, as well as their inherent dynamic processes, is a worthy object of study. Thus, events can be considered multidimensional platforms for different types of networks to develop (Jarman, 2018; Jarman et al., 2014). However, little is known about how events, and in particular popular culture events, create a framework in space and in time for people to interact. Therefore, understanding the mechanics of events as platforms for social interaction is important. The aim of this study is to increase our understanding of events as social interaction experiences by analyzing how social interaction processes influence the experience of (popular culture) events. In doing so, a quantitative instrument to measure social interaction at events is developed.

Methodology

In 2011, the Association of Tourism and Leisure Education and Research (ATLAS) Events Special Interest Group was founded, launching a project on monitoring events. Later on, in 2014, the Event Experiences Project was developed, “with the aim of developing measurement tools for event experiences and testing and implementing them in different countries and at different types of events” (Richards, 2017, p. 12). The EES was developed and tested, and it has been used in research on a variety of events. Although very insightful, this instrument gives little consideration to social interactions and how these shape the experience. The Event Social Interaction Scale (ESIS) was developed to meet this need. A substantial part of this

Table 1
Summary of Private and Public Cocreation Practices at Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Private sphere</th>
<th>Public sphere</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Communing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonding</td>
<td>Connecting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detaching</td>
<td>Amiability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It relates to a sense of belonging, group, (neo)tribe; it is about continuing traditions.

Actions reaffirming interpersonal relationships, reenacting rituals within known groups; reinforcing previous social bonds.

Actions leading towards the separation from broader social context; it is about close-knit group actions.

Actions that lead to the dissipation of everyday life barriers and differences (e.g., age, gender, social class).

Collaboration and development of temporary relationships.

It relates to being friendly and cordial, but not developing lasting or more in-depth social relationships.

Note: Adapted From Rihova (2013).
scale is an adaptation of Rihova’s (2013) consumer-to-consumer cocreation practices and aims at being a complementary quantitative instrument to build on her qualitative approach and also includes a direct reference to Collins’ (2004) interaction ritual chains. Both of these works would then be interpreted in the range of known-/unknown-group socialization inspired by Nordvall et al. (2014). The operationalization of these concepts, adapted and transformed into a quantitative tool, resulted in the ESIS, as illustrated in Table 2. The ESIS is composed of 14 items on a 7-point Likert scale and has been applied in a longitudinal study of the celebrations of São João in the Northeast of Brazil. The survey was first conducted in 2016, and consisted of a total of 22 questions, which covered:

- sociodemographics
- motivations
- group composition
- EES (short version with 10 items)
- ESIS (14 items)
- marketing and communication

For 2017, the survey was adjusted and shortened, namely by leaving out the EES items.

The ESIS was conceptualized as a way to provide a balanced insight on what Nordvall et al. (2014) considered known-group socialization and external/audience socialization (considered in this article as “unknown-group socialization”). The last two items of the scale (“We have our own rituals at the event” and “We see this event as a meaningful meeting moment”) respond directly to Collins’ (2004) theories, in an attempt to measure the importance of rituals and events as symbolic moments.

To understand how different groups perceive the social experience of an event, questions were specifically asked about the visitors’ motivations, their membership of organized (formal) groups (such as a dance group, called “quadrilha”), as well as their relationship to the event throughout their life, and for how long they had been celebrating the event. These elements provide a basis for understanding and comparing groups, as well as understanding the meanings behind the specific social interaction processes. These processes make the event an active and engaging platform for social interaction. For the present exploratory longitudinal study, it was equally important to compare different years, in order to understand, on the one hand, if an outline of the event social experience footprint can be proposed, and, on the other hand, whether the ESIS instrument functions well in longitudinal studies.

After translation into Portuguese and intensive discussion between several researchers with linguistic and thematic expertise, the survey was applied to the São João festivities in the Northeast

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Survey Items (ESIS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cocreation practices</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>I followed my group’s code of behavior (habits, rituals, etc.)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I felt a sense of belonging*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I felt part of a larger group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonding</td>
<td>I shared information with the people in my group*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detaching</td>
<td>I avoided contact with strangers*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I talked only to people in my group*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communing</td>
<td>I did things together with strangers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting</td>
<td>I felt I could trust strangers at the event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I helped anybody who needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amiability</td>
<td>At the event, we shared the same interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I enjoyed meeting new people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I made new acquaintances/friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Known-group interaction rituals</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group rituals</td>
<td>We have our own rituals at the event*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic moment</td>
<td>We see this event as a meaningful meeting moment*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *Items marked reflect the practices of know-group socialization (based on the concepts by Nordvall et al., 2014). The other items can be understood in the light of the unknown-group socialization.
of Brazil. Convenience sampling, associated with snowball sampling, were preferred due to 1) the difficulties of interviewing people on site (as they are having fun, dancing, eating, drinking, with loud music around them); 2) the fact that the study aims to measure social interaction experience in a post-event context in order to embrace all aspects of the experience. Every person could answer the survey, with the first question being selective (“Did you participate in [the event] [specific date]?”).

Data were collected in 2016 and 2017, after the end of the São João celebrations (June 24) until the end of the month of July of each year. The survey, created in Qualtrics software, was distributed online, using mainly snowball sampling through social media handles (with the request to share), such as Facebook, Instagram, and Whatsapp. E-mail was sometimes used additionally. To reduce the risks related to snowball sampling, in particular biased results, the researchers consciously approached a diverse range of people with different networks and levels of engagement with the festivities. Therefore, a wide variety of participants and stakeholders were approached to reach a sample that is as representative as possible. For the open questions, when necessary, translations from Portuguese were made by the authors.

A total of 625 valid responses were collected, of which 463 respondents indicated celebrating the event in the year they answered the survey (either 2016 or 2017). This sample was then used for data analysis in SPSS 26. A Cronbach alpha test was run to test the validity of the scale, which was 0.777. Therefore, the scale is valid and it can be used to assess the social interaction at events. A principal component analysis was run using varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. The sample is characterized by a majority of women (61.1%). The age of the respondents is mainly in the range of 20–29 years old (38.9%) and, when the most relevant age groups are considered together, the categories between 20 and 39 years old represent 67.6% of the respondents. Eighty-three percent were highly educated (graduate and postgraduate studies). The sample is composed by 26% of students, 16.2% of liberal professionals, followed by different types of jobs (16%) and administrative jobs (15.7%). This profile of respondents is unlikely representative of the whole population celebrating the event, as it most likely does not include people who do not use social media. Besides, it is possible that there is a bias in the sense that 26% of the sample is composed of students. Therefore, the results should be considered in the light of these limitations and further research should try to overcome them. Although this sample might not be fully representative of the population, this issue is quite common, considering the self-selection of people participating in research (see, for instance, Korkeila et al., 2001). The researchers were aware of this possible bias when choosing the method and considered doing face-to-face data collection during the event. Yet this was considered less appropriate because the experience would then still be ongoing. The data collection would also have been geographically and temporally more limited, which would have limited our understanding of the event of São João as a platform for social experiences.

The Context: São João Celebrations in the Brazilian Northeast

São João or Festa Junina is the term used to describe the traditional festivities that happen at the beginning of the Brazilian winter in June. After Carnival, it is the second most important popular celebration in Brazilian culture. The São João event has a strong identity especially in the Northeast of Brazil, and like Carnival, it is a celebration for all ages. São João has its origins in the Catholic traditions of the Middle Ages (Campos, 2007), and its presence in Brazil dates back to the 16th century, during the Portuguese colonization (Cascudo, 1956). Over time, this holy day has incorporated Brazilian cultural elements, combining those from indigenous populations, Afro-Brazilians, and European immigrants.

The biggest celebrations happen in the state of Paraíba, in the city Campina Grande, and in the state of Pernambuco, in the city of Caruaru, each of which are estimated to gather millions of visitors every year (Ministério do Turismo, 2017). Overall, the number of visitors for the 30 days of the event in Caruaru is estimated at 2.5 million; however, according to media reports, a study by EMPTUR indicated 591,679 visitors in the state of Pernambuco for 2017 (Atzingen, 2017). In the years after 2016, there has been an increase in the number of visitors, which corresponds to more investment and more marketing
by the local government. During the festivities, a range of traditional São João symbols are present, such as balloons, bonfires, and fireworks (see Fig. 1). Dance, music, and corn food are the most memorable traditions of the celebration and are part of the socialization process (see Fig. 2). Dance, very often in traditional rural costumes, plays an important role in the celebrations, in particular the “quadrilhas,” traditional dance in pairs (see Fig. 3).

During the month of June, there is a whole agenda of activities and shows related to the São João festivities, focused around the presentations of the “quadrilhas.” Although there are strong traditional elements that have been kept over time, such
event is a catalyst (Richards et al., 2015; Schulpenkorf et al., 2011) that provides the framework for social interaction.

Findings and Discussion

Before delving into the specific social interaction processes, it is important to understand the motivations that attract people to this event, which frames the context in which social interactions occur.

What Motivates People to Attend São João?

In line with previous research focused on motivations of event attendance (Morgan, 2008; Pegg & Patterson, 2010), the results for São João corroborate and strengthen the idea that the event program is secondary, and other factors are more important (see Fig. 4). The general atmosphere of the event is recognized as the first motivation by the majority of the respondents (64.6%). Immediately after that, spending time with family and friends is considered a driver to participate in the event (53.4%). Given the nature of the popular culture event, food and dance also play an important role as attractors (51.4% and 44.1%, respectively). Considering that there are specific traditional foods and dances for São João, it is

as the corn food and the “quadrilhas,” there are other elements that change; for example, the decorations of the streets. Throughout the years some of these organized dancing groups have also changed in many ways. From small and local displays, there are nowadays big shows of vast groups of people from a neighborhood, who join competitions where they present a whole narrative of São João. The basis for their story is always related to the bride and groom, accompanied by other characters, in a piece that has some similarities with a musical. What used to be a religious folk event in small villages turned into a big event full of sponsors and high media attention. Therefore, São João is a platform where different actors interact, reinforcing the event’s role as a significant contributor for the local economy.

This originally grassroots popular culture event presents an interesting background to understand the social interactions that take place during the festivities. However, to some extent, this social interaction starts before the core event and lasts beyond it—for example, by preparing dances in a group or simply sharing pictures in social media channels. The days of the celebrations constitute the core of the experience, or at least, the node where everything seems to come together. The event is a catalyst (Richards et al., 2015; Schulpenkorf et al., 2011) that provides the framework for social interaction.
understandable that these show up as strong motivating factors. Besides, sharing food and dancing together are activities with a strong social dimension. Therefore, spending time with family and friends is experienced together with food and dance.

The general entertainment (41.3%) and the music (34.5%) are relevant, although the importance of specific elements of the program, such as seeing a specific performer or attending a specific activity, are comparatively minimal (11.9%). Interestingly, and in contrast to what De Geus et al. (2016) have found in their research, perceived novelty is not a prominent motivator (8.9%). Although novelty is still present, these results seem to suggest that motivations for attendance differ fundamentally according to the type of event. In this case, given its strong traditional dimension, visitors to São João value the novelty aspect less. In fact, the link to tradition was mentioned several times in the open section of the motivations question. As one respondent wrote: “[my motivation is] to keep the “junina” [from São João] tradition that I’ve learnt from my predecessors and to pass on a bit of what I’ve learnt to my son.”

The strong presence of tradition links well with cocreation practices of belonging and bonding (Rihova, 2013; Rihova et al., 2013), as well as group rituals and symbolic moments (Collins, 2004; Nordvall et al., 2014). Therefore, it is not surprising that only a small percentage (2.3%) of respondents attended the event alone (see Fig. 5). Most respondents were with friends (32.3%), partners (31.3%), or family as evident from the specifications provided under the “other” category (21%).

São João as a Social Interaction Platform

The data support the idea that the festivities of São João in the Brazilian Northeast have a very important social component, also in terms of collective identity. The attendance history of respondents is quite revealing of their high levels of involvement (see Fig. 6), a factor that contributes to a heightened experience (Boswijk et al., 2007; Marques et al., 2018; Richards, 2017; Richards et al., 2015). In fact, the level of habitual visitation is striking, with 78.7% of respondents attending the event every year since they can remember.

The fact that repeated visits are this high suggests that these festivities are not only important for the respondents, but they are rooted in and sometimes considered as part of their cultural and social identity. As one respondent commented: “São João is a very celebrated date in [the state of] Pernambuco.
People wish each other a happy São João, like in Christmas.”

Therefore, it is clear that there is a strong background for known-group socialization (Nordvall et al., 2014). Not only do respondents know the event very well because they have celebrated it many times, but they also go in specific groups of different sizes. Known-group activities and behaviors are very strong, which may, to some extent, limit contact with people outside the group. However, our findings seem to suggest that this is not the case, because there is both known-group and unknown-group
interaction. From the different elements that compose the social experience, the known-group social interaction mechanisms are on average rated the highest for both years of 2016 and 2017 (see Fig. 7).

Following the group’s code of behavior (mean of 6.1 in a 7-point Likert scale) and sharing information with people in the group ($M = 5.95$) underline a strong sense of group belonging, which is expressed in private sphere cocreation practices of belonging and bonding as defined by Rihova (2013). However, detaching practices seem to be less relevant, as contacts with “the unknown group” (external socialization) also occur significantly, contributing to “feeling part of a larger group” ($M = 5.53$) or “enjoyed meeting new people” ($M = 5.59$).

These results are supported by the factor analysis (see Table 3), which reveals four factors that explain 55% of the variance. These factors can be related to:

1. Contact with strangers, in particular meeting new people and talking to people outside the known group (unknown-group socialization, public sphere)

2. Sharing the same interest and having some trust in the contact with strangers (unknown-group socialization, public sphere)

3. Sharing information with known-group and following group’s code of behavior (known-group socialization, mainly private sphere)

4. Rituals in the event as a symbolic moment (known-group socialization, private sphere)

These results suggest that Collins’ (2004) interaction ritual chains could be applied in a multilayered interpretation of the social interaction processes. Multiple interaction rituals can occur within the celebrations, creating physical copresence, a shared mood, and focus. On the broader level, the interaction with people having the same objective (i.e., celebrating São João) would leave out not “strangers” but rather people who were not participating in the celebrations. On another level, within the festivities groups are formed that shape their own rituals, either with known-group or with strangers. The event brings people together, becoming a “dynamic and holistic phenomenon” (Rihova, 2013, p. 561).

![Figure 7. Footprint of the Event Social Interaction Scale (ESIS) for São João, Brazil, 2016–2017.](image-url)
in its social practices, where a multitude of interactions occur—for example, dancing together on the street with strangers—coparticipants—seeing how one’s own preparations in the “quadrilhas” play out and stimulate the crowd to then chat, drink, and dance in a smaller group of family or strangers.

These results seem to suggest that São João provides a platform where the visitors’ event experience is defined by its social component, which is composed of meeting new people, as well as sharing important and meaningful moments with people they know. This might be partially explained by the fact that Brazilian culture is open to easy contact with strangers. The fact that there is a shared interest and common feel of belonging and identification with the (traditional) event also seems to play a role.

When using the ESIS to map the footprint of the social experience of the Brazilian São João festivities, a common pattern can be seen in 2016 and 2017 (see Fig. 7). When comparing the data for both years, participant values are very consistent. The only exception relates to “doing things together with strangers,” where a statistically significant difference can be observed ($p = 0.037$).

However, due the lack of any apparent sensible explanation for this difference and the coherence of all the other social interaction mechanisms evaluated in the survey, it seems reasonable to conclude that the results in this study reflect the social interaction footprint of these festivities. A longitudinal study over a longer time span as well as an added qualitative methods approach could contribute to provide better insights into these aspects.

Many activities also take place surrounding São João, with differing levels of active involvement. This is equally represented within one of Pine and Gilmore’s (1999) axes capturing the experience realms. Social interaction occurs also in a passive–active spectrum and different levels of engagement can occur (Richards et al., 2015). In the case of São João, one of the highest levels of engagement occurs through participation in one of the “quadrilhas” (organized groups preparing the event months ahead and performing dances in traditional costumes). To a large extent, these groups encapsulate the behaviors, interactions, and meanings related to this event, also for society at large. As expressed by a respondent in an open comment in the survey:

> Besides being part of the São João festivities, nowadays the “quadrilha junina[s]” are real shows. Anonymous artists get out of the periphery of the big cities to unite dance, theatre and music in a divine and very creative tune. One of the most important things: social inclusion. Because [it] emerges from the periphery of the big cities, [it] plays the role of putting people together and rules out any social vulnerability of the communities.

In the survey (both 2016 and 2017), 14.8% of respondents belonged to one of the “quadrilhas.”
Although it is a relatively small proportion of the total respondents, and a bigger sample would have increased reliability, a comparison can be insightful. When running a one-way ANOVA to compare the ESIS elements “quadrilha” group members and other respondents, it becomes evident that people who celebrate São João as part of such a group are significantly more likely to make new acquaintances \( (p < 0.0001) \), be more helpful to anyone \( (p < 0.005) \), enjoy meeting new people \( (p < 0.0001) \), talk to people outside their own group \( (p < 0.001) \), and feel part of a larger group \( (p < 0.0001) \). These findings again reinforce the idea that at these festivities people reach out to others outside of their own, usual group, more so if they are part of a “quadrilha.” It seems that the fact of being part of a formal group only makes the social experience better, in particular the connection to strangers. This has implications in the way people conceive groups themselves as well as the event, and it can contribute to “designing events for social interactions [which] is to consciously design every part of the event for best possible social experience for its visitors” (Nordvall et al., 2014, p. 138). Therefore, active participation or involvement seems to lead to a heightened social experience of the event, contributing to the overall ultimate “optimal experience” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

Although they are flagships for tradition, popular culture events such as São João become platforms not only for known-group socialization, but, as our findings point out at different moments, to unknown-group socialization. Meeting new people and being open to contact with (strange, unknown) others emerge as fundamental aspects of the social interaction. Although the theory of interaction ritual chains (Collins, 2004) mostly considers the ritual a symbolic moment, occur and shape the social experience. Our findings suggest that popular culture events, such as the São João festivities in the Northeast of Brazil, combine important private and public spheres, in which both known-group and unknown-group socialization play an important role. Cocreation practices, which are effectively enacted through social interaction processes, such as talking to strangers or considering the event a symbolic moment, occur and shape the social experience of the event. Belonging to an organized group (like the “quadrilhas”) relates strongly to a higher level of engagement and heightened social interactions.

Conclusion

This study is part of a broader ongoing research that aims at understanding event experiences in more detail, as well as creating tools to evaluate them. The present article has discussed the need to investigate the social dimensions of the event experience in a more structured manner, so that the role of events as social interaction platforms can be understood holistically. This study proposes a perspective on the social interaction processes that shape the event’s social experience located at the crossings of theories on cocreation practices (Rihova, 2013), social interaction (Nordvall et al., 2014), and interaction ritual chains (Collins, 2004). The importance of social interaction during events is often pointed out in the literature, and yet it is studied mostly within a motivational framework. For this reason, the ESIS was created and applied as a measurement instrument for the event social experience. Our findings suggest that popular culture events, such as the São João festivities in the Northeast of Brazil, combine important private and public spheres, in which both known-group and unknown-group socialization play an important role. Cocreation practices, which are effectively enacted through social interaction processes, such as talking to strangers or considering the event a symbolic moment, occur and shape the social experience of the event.
experience across all experience dimensions. A similar footprint of the social interaction event experience emerges in different years, which confirms that the ESIS can be useful as a tool to analyze and compare events as social interaction platforms. Drawing on Collins’ (2004) theory of interaction ritual chains to understand such platforms, our findings suggest that multiple interaction rituals occur within the same event. This sheds light on the nature of the social event experience, namely that people who are more directly and actively engaged in the event are more likely to be open for contact with unknown others. Therefore, the event becomes a multidimensional platform where different types of social interaction are not only possible but fostered.

Event managers can facilitate and promote different dimensions of social interaction in order to improve social bonding, social value, and ultimately impact of their event. The ESIS can also help managers to understand their events better and compare them with other events, providing insights into strategic directions. In the future, the scale items should be revised to provide further theoretical underpinning.

Collecting more data through longitudinal research would strengthen the conclusions about the social experience footprint of this specific event, with a possibility of extending it to other countries and other events for further comparison. Moreover, amplifying the quantitative approach with qualitative methods would enrich and provide a deeper understanding of the data, for instance, when it comes to the possibly delicate relationship between small-scale interaction rituals in smaller groups in relation to the event as an interaction ritual as a whole. Making the social interaction with known-group as well as unknown-group attendees measurable in a standardized, quantitative way enables us to grasp the relevance of social interaction within the context of different events. Further research should consider the extent to which known-group and unknown-group interactions lead to the establishment of longer lasting social ties and social cohesion of participants beyond the event itself.

For academics, practitioners, and policymakers, this research contributes to envisaging the event’s social power as platform. These social interaction processes can function as a self-reinforcing mechanism for a certain community. Furthermore, event managers can design events as platforms with increased quality of social interaction processes. This understanding of social experience within events is also important for policymakers when constructing an events portfolio and in considering the social interaction landscape they want to promote for the different stakeholders.

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