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CULTURAL AND FESTIVE EVENTS AS LEISURE AND TOURISM MARKETING STRATEGIES IN NATAL, BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT: This article examines three emblematic events in Natal-Brazil: Auto do Natal, Carnival, and São João, as instruments of tourism promotion, cultural leisure, and identity affirmation. Using qualitative methods, including literature review, document analysis, and participant observation, the study analyses tangible and intangible dimensions such as civic pride, cultural identity, community engagement, tourist flow, leisure practices, and economic impacts. Results show that these events diversify tourism, strengthen the creative economy, expand cultural leisure opportunities, and reinforce local identity. Despite challenges involving funding, public safety, and sustainability, the events emerge as strategic public policies for local development, social interaction, territorial marketing, and tourism enhancement.

KEYWORDS: Cultural events. Leisure. Event tourism. Tourism marketing. Natal-RN-Brazil.

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EVENTOS CULTURAIS E FESTIVOS COMO ESTRATÉGIAS DE LAZER E MARKETING TURÍSTICO EM NATAL, BRASIL

RESUMO: Este artigo examina três eventos emblemáticos de Natal-Brasil: Auto do Natal, Carnaval e São João, como instrumentos de promoção turística, lazer cultural e afirmação identitária. Por meio de métodos qualitativos, incluindo revisão de literatura, análise documental e observação participante, o estudo analisa dimensões tangíveis e intangíveis, tais como orgulho cívico, identidade cultural, engajamento comunitário, fluxo turístico, práticas de lazer e impactos econômicos. Os resultados mostram que esses eventos diversificam o turismo, fortalecem a economia criativa, ampliam as oportunidades de lazer cultural e reforçam a identidade local. Apesar dos desafios relacionados ao financiamento, à segurança pública e à sustentabilidade, os eventos emergem como políticas públicas estratégicas para o desenvolvimento local, a interação social, o marketing territorial e o fomento ao turismo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Eventos culturais. Lazer. Turismo de eventos. Marketing turístico. Natal-RN-Brasil.

Introduction

In recent decades, both companies and event organisers have proliferated. Businesses and cities in general increasingly invest in the organisation and promotion of events. We are learning to live and interact through events and are approaching an "event society." Governments support and promote events as part of their strategies for economic development, growth, and destination marketing. Tourist destinations adopt events as essential elements in their marketing strategies and image promotion (Britto and Fontes, 2002), while also recognizing their role in expanding leisure opportunities and cultural experiences for both residents and visitors.

The enthusiasm of community groups and individuals for their own interests drives the emergence of various types of events (Allen *et al.*, 2003). The recognition of cultural capital embedded in a city's artistic and architectural heritage and traditions, the increased visibility, and the opportunities available—also thanks to new technologies—are some of the observable effects of transformations that favour event organisation, where cities and regions must expand their own social networks. As shown by Hristova,

Aiello, and Quercia (2018), neighbourhoods with high cultural capital—manifested in the cultural preferences of the population and the presence of cultural events—tend to generate economic advantages and urban visibility, especially when combined with economic capital, while also strengthening urban environments that stimulate cultural leisure and collective sociability.

From this perspective, cultural events that celebrate festivities rooted in a people's tradition are, by their nature, occurrences that create particularly intense moments of interaction, often associated with collective leisure practices and shared festive experiences, as they: involve and attract a large number of participants and/or visitors; require infrastructure (facilities, communication routes, transport networks); and demand organisational preparation processes, which entail the commitment of a plurality of stakeholders and mechanisms that can significantly influence the socio-economic system of the host city (Zanella, 2010).

According to Marujo (2018), cultural events represent, in various forms, moments of significant symbolic density and social congregation. They generate different reverberating effects from lived experiences and local knowledge, offering tourists the opportunity to learn about the cultural traditions of the destination visited. Furthermore, they reflect the collective identity of a community and its territory, contributing to its distinctiveness in relation to other destinations, while simultaneously constituting spaces of cultural leisure where social interaction, celebration, and participation take place.

This article starts from the observation that an increasing number of cities compete at different scales to organise and host events in general, but especially those defined in the literature as cultural, festive, and commemorative events of a popular

nature, which occur cyclically and carry a strong social and touristic connotation, as well as representing important opportunities for leisure and cultural enjoyment. The subject is complex, and it raises numerous questions. This research aims to focus attention on some key questions and, through examples and argumentation, seeks to provide possible answers and interpretations. Therefore, the question arises: 1. How do Natal's cultural events contribute to repositioning the city in international tourism, beyond sun and sea? 2. What contradictions emerge between economic development and identity preservation?

The study will focus primarily on the cultural, touristic, and socio-territorial dimensions, considering also their role in the production and experience of urban cultural leisure, analysing both positive and negative, tangible and intangible aspects, in the short and long term. Among the positive aspects are: civic pride among citizens in preserving and reproducing their own traditions authentically, higher levels of citizen satisfaction, increased city notoriety and visibility, improved visitor reception capacity, and enhanced event organisation know-how among local operators and citizens themselves, among others. Conversely, negative aspects include hostility towards the event and tourists, changes or loss of indigenous values and identity, increased city traffic, commercial losses, harmful tourist behaviours, or the lack of valuable and enriching experiences.

Thus, the importance of event tourism, which represents the main focus of this research, is highlighted. At the same time, the study recognises cultural events as relevant arenas for leisure practices, where tourism, culture, and everyday urban life intersect. Other parallel issues encountered, such as effects on territorial systems, the

population, and event policies, will also be addressed. These topics will be discussed throughout the text, aiming to provide possible answers and moments of reflection.

According to the Municipal Secretariat for Environment and Urbanism (Natal, 2008), tourism in Rio Grande do Norte has gained significant emphasis as an economic activity, especially since 1978, when Embratur – the Brazilian Tourism Company – began selling tourist packages to the Northeast, viewing this region of Brazil as a promising tourist destination, both nationally and internationally. Since then, the city of Natal has developed this activity more vigorously, exhibiting the characteristics of a tourist destination, making it essential for public and private entities to invest in the various activities that comprise the tourism sector. For a long time, the emphasis on promoting the capital of Rio Grande do Norte focused on its natural attractions, particularly "sun and sea." However, nowadays, other aspects of the city are increasingly highlighted to attract tourist flows, such as its history, culture, identity, and traditions, including through cultural events, which also function as important spaces for leisure, social interaction, and cultural enjoyment for both residents and visitors.

Regarding the research scope, the analysis was limited to a specific category of events (see Table I), indicating the types of cultural and celebratory events, both religious and secular, that occur cyclically and specifying their geographical coverage. After thorough analysis, the following three events were selected for being the most expressive, representative of Northeastern and Potiguar identity (of the state of Rio Grande do Norte), and for having experienced exponential growth in participation and tourist flows in recent years: Auto do Natal (Christmas celebrations), Carnival, and São João (June festivities), all of which represent significant moments of collective leisure and festive sociability within the urban context.

Table I: Cyclical cultural and celebratory events and their geographic scope

	EVENT	DATE / PERIOD	STUDY AREA	DESCRIPTION
1	*Auto do Natal*	December 22	Historic Centre of the City	A street performance featuring the city's cultural expressions. The festival consists of staging a play that depicts the birth of Jesus and the story of his antecedents. The performance has been held since 1998, consistently attracting thousands of people from various parts of the world. The event is promoted by the Municipality of Natal, through FUNCART, with the support of other Municipal Secretariats.
2	Carnival	Mobile date / February or March	Redinha Hub; Nélio Dias Hub (North Zone); Ponta Negra Hub (South Zone)	A popular and secular festival. On the Thursday preceding Carnival, the "*Baile da Cidade*" takes place; during the first week before Carnival, at Praia da Redinha, the "*Ensaio Geral*" is held, along with the "*Baile das Kengas*", featuring the selection of King Momo and the Carnival Queen, the "*Baile de Máscaras*", and the "*Noite de Ouro*". On Saturday night, a parade of street blocks, samba schools, and indigenous tribes takes place in the Ribeira neighbourhood, organised by the Municipality of Natal through SECTUR.
3	June festivities / *São João*	June and July	Arena das Dunas (South Zone), West Zone, and North Zone	The devotion to Saint John has become very popular. In Natal, folkloric traditions surrounding the June festivities have been preserved over time. Bonfires, *quadrilhas* (folk dances), mock rural weddings, traditional foods, and fireworks are all part of the celebrations, alongside the traditional *forró* music. The Municipality organises a large Festival of "*Quadrilhas Juninas*", both traditional and stylised, with the participation of more than one hundred groups from all areas of the city.

Source: Adapted from Natal. Prefeitura Municipal. Secretaria Municipal de Meio Ambiente e Urbanismo. (Natal, 2008).

As a general objective, this article aims to analyse the main cultural, festive, and celebratory events of a social and popular nature in the Municipality of Natal, which represent important instruments of tourism marketing, as well as spaces for cultural leisure and collective festive experiences, assessing their social and territorial impacts. Consequently, based on the results of this analysis, it seeks to present proposals for improvements in the management of these events in order to strengthen both tourism development and the provision of cultural leisure opportunities for residents and visitors.

As a specific objective, the study intends to outline an overview of the current landscape and market of the main cultural, festive, and commemorative events that attract the largest flow of both national and international tourists to the Municipality of Natal, considering their role in promoting leisure practices, social interaction, and cultural participation in the urban context. According to the State Secretariat of Tourism of Rio Grande do Norte (2008), the following events stand out: Christmas festivities, known as "Natal em Natal", which include the Auto do Natal; Carnaval; São João (June festivities), all of which constitute significant moments of leisure, celebration, and cultural expression within the local festive calendar.

Theoretical Base and Literature Review

Events as Competitive Instruments of Tourism Destination Marketing

In recent decades, many researchers and the international scientific community have shown growing interest and increasing attention towards studies related to the phenomenon of events, which have assumed significant importance. Events have become strategic elements of entertainment and tourist attraction, fostering the emergence of a true management field characterised by its complexity and versatility, as it involves analysing issues related to tourism destination management, marketing, leisure and recreation activities, as well as sociocultural, economic, and historical variables. Events are increasingly essential to the image and economic life of tourist destinations, while also contributing to the expansion of cultural leisure opportunities in urban environments.

As noted by Getz & Page (2020), events play a central role in the development of tourist destinations, serving as strategic instruments for territorial marketing and the

strengthening of local identity. According to Kotler and Keller (2007), events of all kinds—cultural, artistic, or sporting—represent major opportunities for local socio-economic development, contributing to job creation as well as the creation and improvement of infrastructure (roads, facilities, hotels, restaurants, commerce, etc.), benefiting not only tourists but also the local population, who experience these occasions as moments of leisure, celebration, and social interaction.

Events have become an indispensable marketing tool, as they are capable of encouraging tourist arrivals to the destination, enhancing its image and notoriety, and offering the host city an occasion to restructure its urban fabric, transport and mobility services, reception structures, and other facilities (Vico, Gustavo & Uvinha, 2020). For this reason, events represent a strategic opportunity, particularly for cities and regions with low visibility, that wish to reconfigure their image, both nationally and internationally, while simultaneously enriching the city's cultural leisure offer.

As Richards and de Brito (2017) show, events play crucial roles in placemaking processes, contributing not only to external visibility but also to the strengthening of local networks of cultural and social identities, as well as to the creation of spaces of collective leisure and cultural participation.

Cities are compelled to compete to attract consumers and investors, creating a veritable "war of places" (Santos, 2005; 2012), with external investments being more closely related to the image that a city is able to communicate (Whitson & Horne, 2006). From this perspective, events are mainly used as accelerators of consensus-building processes and territorial regeneration, enabling the city to equip itself with the structures and infrastructures necessary for national and international competition (Essex & Chalkley, 2003). In short, events represent a strategic tool in tourism

destination marketing, and an important mechanism for structuring urban cultural leisure dynamics.

The sphere of competence is shaped as a network of connections and opportunities related to the intrinsic characteristics of the place, its physical configuration, the infrastructure available, as well as the political and administrative climate, levels of collaboration, and territorial efficiency (García-Hernández, De la Calle-Vaquero & Yubero, 2017).

In synthesis, tourist destinations are called upon to respond to the multiple demands of the different actors who inhabit, reside in, experience, absorb, use, and visit them (Bramwell & Lane, 2011), including demands related to leisure, cultural experiences, and quality of urban life. It is therefore evident that competition among tourist destinations occurs on various geographical scales. To meet the needs of the actors involved and maintain competitiveness, cities often need to restructure themselves, finding new urban solutions to face future challenges (Mossberger, 2014). Thus, concepts such as accessibility, sustainability, efficiency, and innovation become strategic. Competition among cities occurs not only in attracting financial capital (Santos, 2005; 2012), but also, and above all, human capital and know-how. This type of human capital—composed of researchers, scientists, artists, and professionals—finds in cities opportunities for knowledge exchange, informal technological transfer, and space to express its innovative potential (Florida, 2019).

In the definition of an event, authors frequently highlight its touristic importance, namely the ability of an event to attract tourist flows to host locations (Getz, 2017; Yeoman, Robertson, Ali-Knight, Drummond & McMahon-Beattie, 2014). This type of research, and the events of this typology, refer to what in Anglo-Saxon

literature is termed "event tourism" (Ritchie & Hudson, 2009). The difference, or peculiarity, of event tourism lies in the function and objectives to which a tourist event responds, namely "the creation of attractions capable of generating tourism demand or satisfying visitor needs" (Getz, 1991, p. 44). Other roles with touristic purposes that events develop include their capacity to act as "image creators," "development catalysts," and "control mechanisms." (Getz, 1991, pp.44-45). The literature therefore shows that many of the event typologies analysed generate visitor demand, enhancing the prestige of a locality and consequently increasing tourism. According to Guala (2007), events, as well as itineraries and activities, represent crucial factors for the development of city marketing, being capable of attracting visitors, contributing to the promotion of the city's image, and ultimately producing long-lasting effects. Moreover, according to Matias (2013), events involve a large number of socio-economic agents, which stimulates and boosts economic activities, resulting in: increased revenues; growth in formal and informal employment; creation of new professions; higher tax revenues; improvement in the skills of the workforce employed in the sector; and redistribution of income at the individual, local, and regional levels. According to Tenan (2002), event tourism is one of the fastest growing socio-economic activities in the globalised world, providing unique opportunities for cultural exchange, professional growth, and the development of new interests. In addition, event tourism facilitates demand forecasting and contributes to balancing the quality of supply; enriches and enhances the cultural life of the city, expands opportunities for leisure and entertainment in urban spaces; and fosters longer visitor stays in the locality. According to Getz (2018), event tourism plays a crucial role in the sustainable development of destinations, promoting economic, social, and cultural benefits that go beyond the

simple attraction of tourists. For its development, event tourism requires not only spaces that make events possible, but also accommodation facilities, which are the foundation of the tourism activity (Giacaglia, 2008; 2011).

We can conclude that event tourism is a highly important economic activity, as it ensures the survival of many localities that depend on its occurrence, while also contributing to the strengthening of cultural leisure experiences and social interaction within the host destination.

The Planning and Organisation of Cultural Festive Events

For the organisation of a festive event that celebrates important moments belonging to the cultural and folkloric identity of a people, and which carries a strong social and touristic connotation, it is necessary to mobilise event management capacities, identify competitive advantages, and clearly define the objectives of event tourism (Getz, 2017), while also recognising events as spaces for collective leisure, cultural participation, and social interaction. A simple financial analysis is not sufficient to assess the success of an event, as numerous non-quantifiable variables are involved, such as urban restructuring, improvement of the city's image, increased attractiveness, visibility, and also the degree of resident satisfaction (Bowdin *et al*., 2011). Event organisation demands considerable investment and, consequently, the involvement of various economic agents, both public and private. Collaboration among different stakeholders and actors involved in the process is often fundamental to the success of the event, without neglecting the perspective of residents and the local population (Freeman, 2010), who experience these events not only as spectators but also as participants in shared leisure experiences.

A tourism event is programmed as an interconnected sequence of phases. According to Paiva and Neves (2008), in relation to the organisation of the work programme, one can identify a conception and feasibility phase, which concludes with the approval of the event. The subsequent planning and execution phase includes an operational plan defining the resources to be used (people, equipment, materials). In the closing phase, lessons learned should be drawn from an analysis of the project's efficiency and possible revision, should the experience be applied to another event (Fortes & Silva, 2011). The system should be continuously monitored through the evaluation of policy effectiveness and ongoing control and adjustment.

As for the actors involved, it is crucial to understand who the different stakeholders are, that is, those engaged in the process, with particular interest in the organisation and delivery of a tourism event (Cesca, 2008). Chief among them are government institutions at all levels (federal, state, and municipal), either consulted as institutional entities or acting as promoters of the event itself. To organise a tourism event, adequate infrastructure and facilities are required, bringing management companies into play. Residents, unfortunately, in many cases play the role of observers without a decision-making function. They are indirectly involved in the conception and pre-event stages, often only to provide information on consent for the event to take place (Gursoy, 2017). As Cashman (2010) also points out, agreement and approval of events often stem from a constructed process, with residents being addressed only indirectly when expressing their acceptance—or otherwise.

Tourism events also mobilise public and private representatives (who are often called upon to invest or act as promoters), environmental associations, and consumers, the latter being able to adopt supportive or opposing positions towards the event. This

active participation and the potential conflicts are part of the complexity of multi-stakeholder management in tourism events (Dionísio, Brochado & Leal, 2022). Other actors who intervene, though not directly in execution, are the media. The media play an important role at different stages of the event life cycle, especially in the preparation phase, as they can foster consensus or, conversely, highlight problems in the organisation and predisposition of the event (Robertson & Rogers, 2009). Throughout all stages of the event, the media also contribute to attracting national or international attention to the host territory, whether in preparation, development, or post-conclusion, generating potential positive or negative consequences. These consequences may include the enhancement or deterioration of the destination's image, greater visibility, and variations in revenues from broadcasting rights, among others (Bazzanella, Peters & Schnitzer, 2019).

In post-event management, a tourism event should be incorporated into general development plans, with research and evaluation of planning measures carried out both before and after its implementation (Pedro *et al.,* 2005). An event should be the object of deep involvement from all social and economic actors, requiring the establishment of long-term programming, both in terms of strategic planning and evaluation. However, many events lack ex post evaluations, which hinders the measurement of their real impacts on the territory. Recent history shows that tourism events, in addition to generating benefits, also produce adverse effects, which may be environmental, economic, and socio-territorial in nature. As highlighted by Tomino, Perić & Wise (2020), these often-overlooked negative impacts include pressure on natural resources, displacement of residents, rising local prices, and changes in the urban landscape.

These considerations call for careful reflection on the delicate phase of post-event management, particularly when evaluating how such events affect local leisure dynamics, social participation, and the long-term sustainability of cultural festivities in the urban context.

Methods

The research was qualitative in nature and sought to provide, in addition to a set of data and information on the main cultural and festive events in the Municipality of Natal, an overview of opportunities and risks, limits and disadvantages concerning the possibilities of hosting and organising such events, considering their role in tourism development and in the provision of cultural leisure experiences. Therefore, as this was a predominantly social investigation, a qualitative methodology was adopted, mainly drawing on the work of Veal (2011) and Meksenas (2002).

From a theoretical perspective, the reference literature was based on event management as well as on tourism destination marketing. The study also considered tourism as a transdisciplinary field, incorporating sociocultural dimensions such as leisure, cultural participation, and social interaction.

In addition to the literature review, document analysis was also employed, consisting of documents, statistics, and official data derived from various institutional sources such as the Municipality of Natal, the Tourism Secretariat (SECTUR), the Education Secretariat (SME), the Culture Secretariat (SECULT), among others. Information from some local media sources such as newspapers and magazines was also used. According to Bardin (2011), to extract important insights from these explorations, the technique of content analysis was applied.

The research developed in phases or stages in line with the methodology proposed by Quivy and Campenhoudt (1995). In the first stage, the main question of this project was raised: How do Natal's cultural events contribute to repositioning the city in international tourism beyond sun and sea? Additionally, the study sought to understand the touristic, social, territorial, and leisure-related impacts associated with these events. In the second stage, bibliographic sources and official documents from key local institutions such as the Municipality of Natal and the Tourism Secretariat, among others, were examined. The focus was on events considered festive, celebratory, social in nature, and on event tourism, as well as on the analysis of impacts, particularly at the touristic, social, and territorial levels and their implications for leisure experiences within the urban context. The third and fourth stages involved structuring the analytical model, examining concepts, and presenting hypotheses. The fifth stage consisted of the implementation of research tools. As this was a form of research of an eminently social nature, a qualitative approach was chosen, employing ethnography through direct and participant observation, as a way to achieve a deeper understanding of human relations. Specifically, fieldwork was carried out *in loco* in the city of Natal and in the previously described and identified neighbourhoods, during the 2024 and 2025 editions of the three reference events. A matrix of criteria and parameters was applied to sociocultural, territorial, and touristic aspects most relevant to the research objectives, such as: event and city infrastructure; transport and access routes; food and beverages; entertainment; safety; tourism; tangible and intangible legacy, among others. These criteria also allowed the identification of how events contribute to the production of temporary spaces of leisure, sociability, and cultural enjoyment. Subsequently, content analysis was conducted following the principles of Bardin (2011). In the sixth stage, through an

ex-post analysis, the social, touristic, and territorial impacts of Natal's main cultural and festive events were defined. The data and information collected at all preceding stages were analysed and compared with previously formed expectations. In the seventh and final stage, the research was concluded on the basis of the results obtained. The results and conclusions were then presented, highlighting the contributions of the study to the understanding of cultural events as instruments of tourism development and as spaces for leisure and social interaction.

Results and Discussion

Auto do Natal: Culture, Faith, and Tourism in a Popular Northeastern Spectacle

History and origin of the "Auto do Natal"

The *Auto do Natal* is a popular cultural spectacle held annually in the city of Natal, the capital of Rio Grande do Norte. It is an open-air performance that combines elements of Christian faith, popular tradition, and contemporary artistic expressions such as theatre, music, and dance. The narrative dramatizes the birth of Jesus Christ, situating it within a context that links traditional religious symbols to the *Potiguar* cultural identity. Established in 1998, the event has become one of the main attractions in the city's Christmas calendar, forming part of the "*Natal em Natal*" project promoted by the Municipal Government, aimed at fostering local culture and boosting tourism during the high season (Prefeitura do Natal, 2024). The event also serves as a recurring space for public leisure and collective cultural engagement, drawing thousands of residents and tourists to shared festive experiences. More than a religious celebration, the spectacle represents an artistic and social event of great significance. By occupying public space and attracting visitors from different regions of the country, the event

reinforces the prominence of local culture in the tourism scene and contributes significantly to the city's creative economy. The recognition of *Potiguar* artists, encouragement of cultural production, and increased visibility of Natal as a cultural destination demonstrate the potential of the *Auto do Natal* as a public policy tool for socio-cultural development and for promoting accessible leisure opportunities for diverse audiences (Getz & Page, 2020; Allen *et al*., 2003).

Artistic Programming and Attractions

The *Auto do Natal* is part of a broader cultural program called "*Natal em Natal*," promoted annually by the City Hall as a strategy to promote local culture, tourism and community leisure during December. The main show is an outdoor musical, with professional artistic direction and the participation of a cast of actors, musicians, dancers, and singers, who represent the birth of Jesus Christ in a dramatized, accessible, and engaging narrative. The production's distinctive feature lies in the incorporation of elements of Northeastern culture and the *Potiguar* identity, such as regional rhythms, traditional costumes, local accents, and traditional body language. This approach helps to reframe Christian themes within a regional context, giving the show its own authenticity and symbolic appeal (Getz, 2017). These complementary events expand leisure opportunities, encouraging public participation and social interaction in multiple city spaces. Also noteworthy is the traditional "*Christmas Cantata*," which brings together orchestras, vocal groups, and symphonic performances in public spaces. Another notable attraction is the city's Christmas lights, especially the Mirassol Tree, considered one of the largest in Brazil. The themed decorations of squares, avenues, and

cultural spaces contribute to the city's festive atmosphere, creating a visitor center that boosts commerce, tourism, and community leisure activities (Natal, 2023).

Cultural and Tourist Impact

The *Auto do Natal* represents a synthesis of Christian faith, popular tradition, and performing arts. Its performance offers the public an aesthetic and spiritual experience that transcends entertainment, promoting identity and strengthening collective memory. From a tourism perspective, the event has established itself as one of the city's main attractions during the Christmas season. The show attracts visitors seeking authentic cultural and leisure experiences, distinguishing itself from other destinations by its symbolic and regionalized approach. The show attracts visitors seeking authentic cultural experiences, distinguishing itself from other destinations by its symbolic and regionalized approach. By offering free, high-quality programming, the Auto do Natal contributes to the democratization of access to culture, fostering inclusive leisure opportunities and the repositioning of Natal as a cultural and religious tourist destination, in addition to its traditional appeal to sun and sea tourism.

Event Structure and Production

The *Auto do Natal* is a mid-sized show, whose execution requires a complex articulation of artistic, technical, logistical, and financial planning. The production involves a multidisciplinary network of professionals, including theatre directors, musicians, dancers, actors, costume designers, set designers, lighting and sound technicians, as well as cultural managers and administrative teams. The event's infrastructure includes stage construction, lighting and sound systems, as well as the

creation of costumes, props, and sets. These elements are developed to enhance regional aesthetics, promoting an immersive and accessible sensory experience for the audience. The set design is designed to engage with the symbolic references to the birth of Christ, while incorporating visual elements of Rio Grande do Norte culture, lending originality to the production (Natal, 2023; SECULT/Natal, 2025). The event's financial planning involves raising funds through sponsorships, public notices, institutional partnerships, and government support. This multi-pronged financing strategy highlights the event's dependence on both the public and private sectors, which demands effective management and long-term sustainability strategies (Allen *et al.,* 2003). Beyond the artistic aspect, the production includes essential support services such as security, crowd control, accessibility, and urban mobility. Holding the event in an open space with free admission poses specific logistical challenges, requiring detailed planning to ensure the comfort and safety of spectators (Getz, 2017).

Community Participation and Local Involvement

The community dimension of the *Auto do Natal* is evident not only in the massive attendance of the audience during the performances, but also in the way the event encourages decentralized cultural initiatives in the city's neighbourhoods. An emblematic example is the performance by the Municipal School *Estudante Emmanuel Bezerra*, in the Planalto neighbourhood, west of Natal, which reproduces, on a local scale, the "Auto do Natal" format as an educational and cultural practice (Secretaria Municipal de Educação-SME, 2025). By taking a leading role in organizing the event, the school reinforces its role as a disseminator of local culture, identity community leisure practices. The initiative involves teachers, students, families, and administrators,

demonstrating the potential of public schools as hubs of sociocultural mobilization. The performance also promotes the development of skills such as artistic expression, teamwork, a sense of responsibility, and community belonging. This practice strengthens the bonds between school and territory, transforming the educational space into a place of celebration, memory, and appreciation of Rio Grande do Norte traditions. In addition to contributing to the students' comprehensive education, the experience provides the community with access to cultural production, reaffirming the right to culture as a fundamental dimension of citizenship (Allen *et al*., 2003).

Logistical and Operational Aspects

The production of *Auto do Natal* involves meticulous logistical planning, especially since it's a medium-scale event held in urban public spaces. Setting up the stage, set design, and technical infrastructure is one of the most complex stages, requiring adaptations to the local terrain and weather conditions (Secretaria Municipal de Cultura-SECULT/Natal, 2025). The sound and lighting system is designed to ensure technical quality and scenic ambiance, using towers, spotlights, and high-performance equipment. The mobilization of costumes and props also involves coordinating transportation, storage, and maintenance. Security management includes crowd control, accessibility for people with disabilities, the presence of specialized teams, and coordination with the Military Police. Technical rehearsals are held in advance on-site, ensuring scene synchronization and narrative flow. The complexity of the event requires contingency plans for situations such as rain, technical failures, and schedule changes, which highlights the importance of professional management in organizing cultural events (Allen *et al.,* 2003). More than a religious celebration, the spectacle represents an

artistic and social event of great significance. By occupying public space and attracting visitors from different regions of the country, the event reinforces the prominence of local culture in the tourism scene and contributes significantly to the city's creative economy. The recognition of *Potiguar* artists, encouragement of cultural production, and increased visibility of Natal as a cultural destination demonstrate the potential of the *Auto do Natal* as a public policy tool for socio-cultural development and as a facilitator of collective leisure and community engagement.

Carnival: Tradition, Culture and Sociocultural Impact in the Contemporary Scenario

Brief History and Context of Carnival in Natal

The Natal Carnival has a centenary trajectory that dates back to the 19th century, when the festivities took place in the form of "*entrudo*", popular street manifestations marked by playful use of water and flour, inherited from Portuguese tradition. Over time, the event evolved with the incorporation of expressions such as the "*papangus*", the "*corso*" (parade of decorated cars, traditionally associated with the elite), street blocks, and carnival balls held in city clubs and halls. These expressions reveal the social plurality of the festival, which has always embraced both popular and more elite manifestations (Souza, 2010). From the 2000s onwards, the work of Professor and cultural activist Edmar Viana stands out. He was responsible for revitalising Carnival in Ponta Negra and, in 2005, for creating the "*Poetas, Carecas, Bruxas e Lobisomens*" block (see Figure I), a free, family-oriented, non-profit group that breaks with the commercial logic of "*abadás*"[4].

[4] The Carnival *abadá* is a personalized t-shirt or tank top that serves as a ticket and identification for the reveler to a *bloco* or box.

Figure I: The "Poetas, Carecas, Bruxas e Lobisomens" block in 2026



Source: the main author, 2026.

The block became notable for valuing *Potiguar* culture, paying homage to local personalities such as Nísia Floresta, and introducing playful elements like giant puppets on the streets of Natal. The block continues to provide spaces for leisure, cultural learning, and intergenerational interaction, fostering participatory community engagement.

Religious and Symbolic Aspects

Carnival is intrinsically linked to Christian tradition, particularly the Catholic Church. Its etymology traces back to the Latin term "*carne vale*" (farewell to meat), referring to the period preceding Lent, a liturgical time of penance, fasting, and reflection that begins on Ash Wednesday and extends for 40 days until Easter (Biblioteca Católica, 2025). Pope Gregory I, in the 6th century, is said to have established the last Sunday before Lent as "*dominica ad carnes levandas*", an expression that later evolved into "Carnival" (Manso, 2024). The celebration also has pagan roots, linked to the Dionysian festivals of Ancient Greece and the Roman

Saturnalia. In these festivities, excess and the subversion of social norms were central to ritual practices. Symbolic elements such as *King Momo*—a figure associated with irreverence and the inversion of social roles—originate both from Greek mythology and Babylonian traditions (Tribuna do Norte, 2025). This coexistence illustrates the dual role of Carnival as both a leisure and cultural-religious event, enriching the sociocultural experience of the city.

Economy and Commerce During Carnival

The Natal Carnival has assumed an increasingly significant role in the local economy. According to a survey by Fecomércio RN (2025), the event generated approximately R\$ 552.8 million across the state, of which R\$ 163.8 million was concentrated solely in the Potiguar capital, representing an increase of 13.2% compared to 2024. Another study by CNC estimated a total of R\$ 107.78 million generated in RN, with the creation of 367 temporary jobs. Meanwhile, the portal OPOTI (2025) reported that the 2025 edition reached R\$ 196 million in economic turnover, marking a 34.5% increase compared to the previous year. The Municipality of Natal, through SEMSUR, organised over 600 street vendors in official zones, enabling economic inclusion while creating leisure spaces for residents and tourists (Natal em Foco, 2025). Mayor Paulinho Freire highlighted that the event integrates culture, tourism, income generation, and community engagement through leisure and public celebration (Natal, 2025).

Public Safety

In 2025, security was a top priority for public management. According to a survey by Fecomércio RN (2025), 80% of tourists reported feeling safe during the event. This figure corroborates the recent recognition of Natal as the safest capital in Brazil, according to statistics from the Ministry of Justice. The security operation involved integrated actions by the Military, Civil, Federal, and Highway Police, the Fire Department, and the Municipal Guard. With an investment of R$ 7 million, personnel numbers were increased, and officers received advance daily allowances. The *Lei Seca Operation* intensified inspections, resulting in a reduction of traffic accidents, thefts, and violent incidents, according to data released by Colonel Francisco Araújo, Secretary of Public Security of the state (AGORA RN, 2025). Projections for the following year include the recruitment of 400 new military police officers and 70 officials, in addition to opening competitions for the Civil Police and the Fire Department.

Structure of the Poles and Popular Participation

The Natal Carnival is decentralised, with hubs distributed across the North, South, and East zones of the city (see Figure II).

Figure II: Most representative Carnival locations in Natal -RN



Source: the authors, adapted from Google Maps, 2025.

Among the main hubs, the following stand out:

- Redinha Hub (Avenida da Alegria) – the newest and one of the most prominent in the 2025 edition, attracting around 50,000 people in a single night (Natal, 2025).
- Nélio Dias Hub (North Zone) – featured performances by renowned artists such as Xanddy Harmonia and Capilé, gathering over 70,000 people.
- Ponta Negra Hub (South Zone) – known for attracting a diverse audience, especially tourists.

`These figures highlight the Carnival as a central leisure activity, promoting sociocultural inclusion and democratic access to urban celebrations.

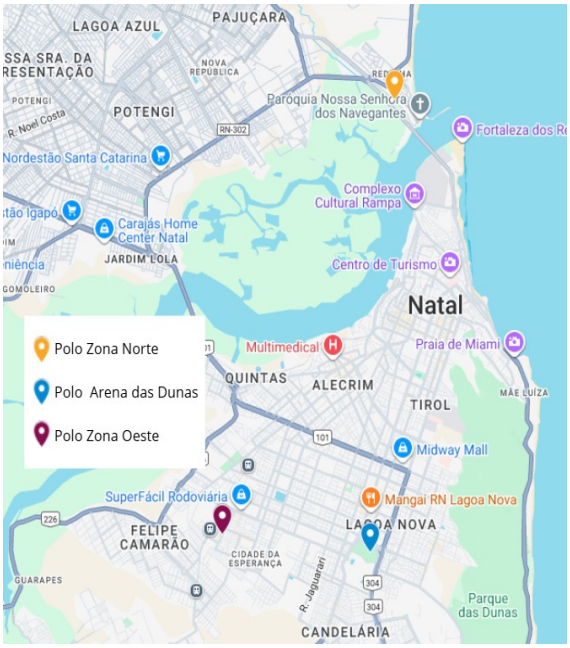
Sociocultural impacts and critical aspects

Carnival drives tourism, the creative economy, the generation of temporary employment, and the promotion of *Potiguar* cultural identity. Beyond economic benefits, the event provides spaces for social interaction, leisure, and cultural education, contributing to community cohesion and collective well-being. The Natal Carnival contributes to the city's prominence in the national circuit of popular festivals, stimulating cultural production and promoting local art. Challenges remain, such as crowd management, noise, public transport overload, and environmental impacts. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure sustainable and safe leisure experiences for residents and visitors.

June Celebrations in Natal: *São João*

The June festivities in Natal have been gaining prominence in recent years and, in 2025, were established as one of the largest June Festivities in the Northeast. Held between 31 May and 29 June, the 2025 São João de Natal featured a diverse programme distributed across three main hubs: Arena das Dunas (South Zone), West Zone, and North Zone, as shown in Figure III. Activities included musical performances by local and national artists, cultural attractions, traditional gastronomy, and a comprehensive logistical and security support structure, ensuring safe and inclusive leisure for the public.

Figure III: Location of the 2025 São João Hubs in Natal /RN



Source: Adapted from Google Maps (2025)

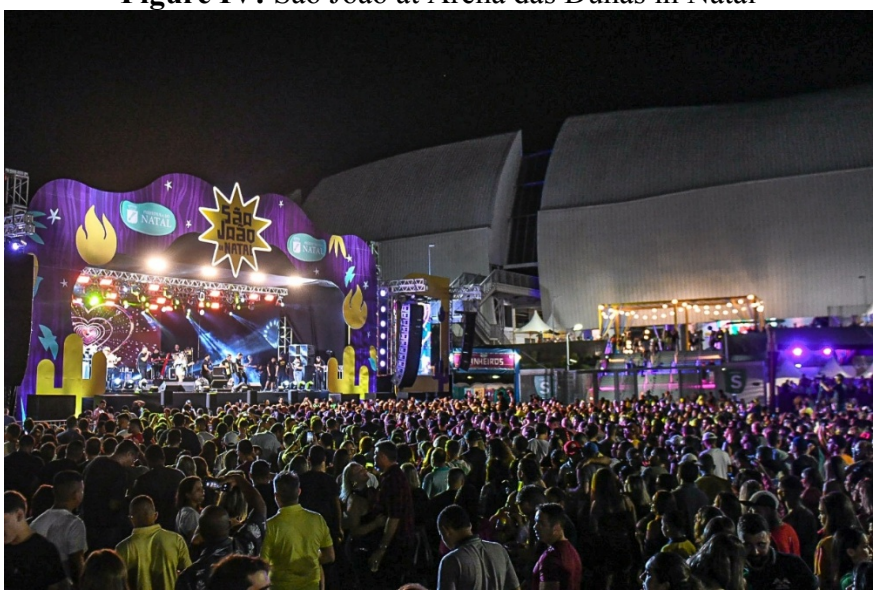
According to data released by the Fecomércio RN Institute (2025), the event attracted around 938,500 people and generated an estimated economic impact of R\$ 188.6 million. The audience was predominantly composed of Natal residents (64.4%),

while 35.6% were visitors from other cities and states. The average daily expenditure was approximately R\$ 161.57 for residents and R\$ 272.24 for visitors. These figures reflect the event's potential as a driver of the creative economy, cultural tourism, and public leisure activities, strengthening community engagement and social interaction.

Arena das Dunas (South Zone Hub)

As the main hub of the event, the Arena das Dunas (see Figure IV) hosted large-scale attractions, featuring performers such as Pablo, Banda Calcinha Preta, Belo, Xand Avião, and Menos é Mais, among others. The venue accommodated large crowds while prioritising comfort, accessibility, and safe leisure experiences.

Figure IV: São João at Arena das Dunas in Natal



Source: Prefeitura do Natal, 2023

The food area was set up outside the performance space and was predominantly occupied by local vendors. The venue included chemical toilets, a medical post, overt policing, a fire department presence, free public transport, facilities for people with disabilities, and VIP areas in partnership with the PicPay app. The Municipality of Natal

even issued a Special Ordinance (No. 5745/2025) to regulate the activities of street vendors and organise the use of public spaces (Prefeitura do Natal, 2025a). Challenges such as crowd management and comfort require ongoing attention to maintain quality leisure experiences.

West Zone Hub

With a smaller structure and lower-scale attractions, the West Zone Hub focused on the local and regional audience. Despite weather-related adjustments, audience engagement remained high, demonstrating the importance of decentralised leisure and cultural access.

North Zone Hub (Redinha)

Originally scheduled to take place in the parking lot of the Nélio Dias Gymnasium, in the Lagoa Azul neighbourhood, the North Zone Hub was relocated to Avenida da Alegria, in the Redinha neighbourhood. The relocation ensured safety while allowing large-scale public participation. Some criticisms emerged regarding urban mobility and audiovisual quality. Additionally, security checks at the event entrance were considered inadequate by some attendees, with reports of sharp objects and, allegedly, firearms being brought in, heightening perceptions of insecurity. Nevertheless, robust police and fire department operations maintained public safety and enabled leisure participation.

Positive aspects included well-organised food areas, a variety of typical foods, strategically distributed beverages, and free access, facilitating sociocultural inclusion and leisure for all participants. The musical repertoire focused on forró and traditional

rhythms, reaffirming the event's role in promoting Northeastern cultural heritage through entertainment and leisure.

Social Actions and Solidarity

The 2025 São João also promoted social initiatives. Through the "*São João Solidário*" programme, approximately 5 tonnes of food and 1,000 cans of milk were collected and donated to 17 philanthropic institutions in the city (Prefeitura do Natal, 2025b). In addition, the Fecomércio RN System, through the Senac Barreira Roxa School, distributed 300 daily meals to people in vulnerable situations (Natal em Foco, 2025). These initiatives highlight the intersection of leisure, social responsibility, and community engagement, demonstrating how cultural festivals can promote both enjoyment and solidarity.

Conclusion

The three cultural festive events analysed—the Auto do Natal, Natal Carnival, and São João—reinforce their importance as living cultural expressions with economic, social, and leisure significance. However, this study presents notable limitations: the analysis focused predominantly on secondary sources and media reports, without direct empirical data from participants or organisers, which restricts the generalisation of results and a deeper understanding of the social dynamics involved. While the study relied mainly on secondary sources, these provide insights into tourism, cultural, and community impacts.

Their historical trajectory, combined with tourism potential and growing national recognition, highlights the need for public policies ensuring sustainability,

social inclusion, and cultural valorisation. In recent editions, these events have marked a turning point in establishing Natal as a destination for cultural and festive tourism in the Northeast, although more systematic comparisons with other cities (such as Campina Grande, Caruaru, and Mossoró) remain limited due to the lack of quantitative data and consistent social and economic impact indicators. Recent editions demonstrate Natal's growing prominence as a cultural and festive tourism destination, enhancing the city's profile both regionally and nationally.

These initiatives have generated positive effects across multiple dimensions: stimulating the local economy, strengthening cultural identity, increasing visibility for regional artists, promoting leisure and sociability, and integrating the population into public festive spaces.

For future research, it is recommended to implement empirical studies including interviews, surveys, and longitudinal analyses of economic, social, and cultural indicators. Investigating the perceptions of residents and visitors will deepen understanding of how these events shape cultural identity and inform public cultural policies. Although structural and operational challenges persist, particularly regarding security and urban mobility, addressing operational challenges such as security and urban mobility will further enhance their positive impact.

Overall, these events demonstrate that cultural festivals are strategic tools for tourism, leisure, and sociocultural development, highlighting their potential for planned, sustainable, and inclusive integration into Natal's cultural agenda.

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