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Tourism of cultural events and festivals. Contrast of experiences between two film festivals in different phases of consolidation: San Sebastián (Spain) and Fajr (Iran)

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Tourism is a rapidly growing industry that contributes to job creation in many countries, including Spain. It is not only an economic phenomenon but also a social phenomenon that promotes cultural diversity and global peace. Despite restrictions and problems caused by the pandemic and post-pandemic global inflation, the interest in traveling has not diminished. Events have become increasingly popular globally, from small-scale work reunions and private or public ceremonies to significant cultural events and musical festivals.

Event tourism has a worldwide presence due to the high desire of agents and companies to exploit a specific and unique market segment. This type of tourism attracts tourists and has an extreme impact on the competitiveness of tourist destinations. Events can help market a tourist destination, create and improve its image, regenerate low-temporal tourism periods, or create a new peak season (deseasonalization). Tourist destinations can promote cultural and sports events, exhibitions, and cultural festivals like musical events to promote local culture, foster local pride, and sustainable development.

Iran, with its rich history and culture, has the potential to improve its global situation through tourism and cultural events like film festivals. This research aims to analyze the main differences and similarities between two festival experiences, San Sebastián (Spain) and Fajr (Iran), from a tourism perspective.

This article explores the concept of “events tourism” as a part of international tourism, starting from the more general term of “events tourism” and progressing to more specific aspects like cultural events and film festivals. The concept of “events tourism” emerged in 1987 as a significant part of international tourism, and its study has been ongoing for over thirty years. Events refer to unique occurrences that happen once or annually, attracting people with similar interests to celebrate or share a specific topic. From a tourist perspective, tourism events are considered a “product” that animates and revives a destination, promotes its attractions, and completes them. The term “special” in “special events” means that they are unique or limited in duration, and we don’t expect them in our daily routine. Events can be linked to the destination, human efforts, touristic destination image, or for raising awareness of a region. Events and festivals in tourism can promote local culture and spread a national and sustainable feeling in the destination. Promoting the



destination with cultural events, sporting events, festivals, and concerts can improve the image, increase awareness, and complement other tourism products.

Cultural events are significant cultural phenomena that represent people in different socio-cultural contexts. They have become an instrument for tourism development, deseasonalization, city image enhancement, and boosting regional and local economies. Cultural tourism involves transforming culture as a process into a product. Cultural events can take various forms, such as music festivals, art fairs, and professional congresses.

Film festivals are a rapidly growing form of event tourism aimed at increasing tourism demand, showcasing a destination's uniqueness, and extending peak travel seasons. They have a significant social impact, disseminating cultural expression, providing educational opportunities, and focusing on minority or disadvantaged segments of society. Film festivals attract a wide variety of visitors, serving as a cultural experience for the local community and a tourist attraction. They also serve the film industry by providing a forum for filmmakers to showcase their films and for buyers and distributors to view them. Hosting a film festival can generate revenue, produce economic benefits, promote the host city's image as a cultural center, and create a sense of community among locals.

Iran's tourism sector has faced challenges due to a lack of management, a negative international image, global sanctions, and Middle East conflicts. However, Iran can create unique products for the event industry through innovative approaches. The government promotes festivals and cultural events, with various agencies organizing and supervising events. However, better coordination between organizations is needed for sustainable and local benefits. Iran's cultural events and festivals can benefit locals and the country's history and culture.

This article compares the Spanish San Sebastian Film Festival and the Iranian Fajr Film Festival, focusing on their approaches, objectives, and results after conducting a literature review on cultural events and film festivals. The literature review highlights the importance of these events in establishing social cohesion and fostering cultural exchange. It also provides an overview of the tourism situation in Iran, highlighting the opportunities from a social, economic, and tourism perspective.

The comparative methodology is used to analyze similarities, differences, and reasons for the success of the model festival. The San Sebastian Film Festival is chosen as a model because it is considered a pioneering cultural event in Spain, born during a time of international openness and part of an authoritarian regime's initiative to prolong the tourist season and promote national culture and cinematography. The Fajr Film Festival in Iran is chosen due to its potential future opening to tourism, to obtain economic income, diversify its tourism sector, improve its international image, and promote understanding between peoples and cultures.

The study examines general aspects of festivals, such as origin, number of attendees, journalists, guests, finance and budgets, media coverage, festival context, overall event planning, advertising and marketing, infrastructure, tourism value, and cultural benefits. Data is gathered through a rigorous search of academic literature and updated materials from both festivals, as well as direct observation. Although the topic's novelty may lead to unprecedented opportunities for analysis within the Iranian cultural sector and its possible future development, the limitations have been highlighted and prompted a critical review of the data.

The San Sebastian International Film Festival (SSIFF) in Spain attracts over 1,000 journalists from over 40 countries and has a significant economic and socio-cultural impact on the host city. Its 70th edition, held in September 2022 with 152,730 spectators, again showed that the festival has hosted prominent events in cinema history, including the international premieres of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and *Star Wars*. However, it also has negative environmental impacts, notably due to mobility. SSIFF is working to reduce its carbon footprint.

Iran's film industry has gained international recognition, but few film festivals with greater national and international attention are held within the country. The Fajr International Film Festival (FIFF), held every February in Tehran since 1982, is Iran's senior international film festival. The festival celebrates cultural exchange, showcases creative achievements, and pays special attention to films that seek justice and highlight human and moral values. Despite being open to the public and hosting specialized workshops, the festival



faces challenges in attracting tourists and maintaining its international promotion due to its poor international image and negative publicity. The Fajr Film Festival in Iran has seen a decrease in ticket sales each year due to discontent among moviegoers with the quality of films. Over half of the 24 nominated films in the last edition were produced by government institutions, and there is no expert in the tourism sector to promote the festival internationally. The festival's budget is unclear, and the few visitors are official guests, resulting in no benefit to the local economy. Therefore, the festival's cultural importance is reduced due to its lack of economic importance.

To conclude, events have become a rapidly growing form of tourism, influencing destinations and showcasing cultural traditions. Film festivals are a trend in the tourism industry, attracting a specific market niche and providing socio-economic benefits. San Sebastián, a Basque city known for its picturesque coastline and Michelin-starred restaurants, has a prosperous film festival that attracts world-renowned figures and promotes Basque culture. Both festivals are part of the FIAPF International Film Festivals, drawing the attention of foreign visitors and filmmakers. Government efforts to position them as showcases abroad are mutual at both festivals, aiming to attract world-renowned visitors and avoid isolation. The Fajr Film Festival, over 40 years old, should have a stable number of participants and professional venues. However, Iran's external image and inner shortcomings have hindered its potential as a cultural event destination. A well-planned strategy to promote tourism development, including renowned actors and filmmakers, could increase socio-economic benefits for Tehran. The festival could also attract more global attention and improve the quality of films. The festival could also be accompanied by an exhibition showcasing Iran's cultural elements. Sustainable planning and separating politics from art and tourism are crucial for the festival's success. However, the short-term implementation of these changes is uncertain due to the country's political decisions.