

A sonic paradise in the countryside: Pop-rock festivals as drivers of creative tourism development in small cities and rural areas in the post-pandemic era

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1. Entrance

The COVID-19 pandemic has reconfigured live music and tourism business models through technological evolution and new forms of music consumption. The literature on music festivals (McKay & Webster 2016) examines them as spaces promoting the articulation of and experimentation with alternative identities and lifestyles, within a framework of constant metamorphosis and uncertainty, affirming them as a strong theoretical and empirical source for new tourism practices and businesses (Richards & King 2022). This enables new ways to examine emerging contemporary (sub)cultures, with festivals understood as promoting social values and sustainability (Mair 2018; Gursoy *et al.* 2020; O'Sullivan & Jackson 2010). Paredes de Coura Festival,¹⁹ first held in 1993, aggregates transcultural and transnational encounters, pioneering links between tourism, sustainability, and economic, urban, and rural development. This chapter analyses summer festivals, specifically Paredes de Coura Festival, and explores the new challenges facing sustainable tourism.

Using a multidisciplinary approach combining sociology, economics, sustainability and tourism, we analyse Paredes de Coura Festival as a promoter of the creative and

¹⁹ Paredes de Coura is a municipality in the district of Viana do Castelo, Northern Portugal. According to the 2021 Census (INE 2022), it currently has 8636 inhabitants. It has an ageing population, and its main activities are agriculture and live-stock production.

sustainable tourism of small towns and rural areas in the post-pandemic era. Four theoretical axes guide this chapter: economic, musical, touristic and socio-cultural. We analyse the discourse of 40 economic and cultural agents related to the festival²⁰ between 2020 and 2021, and the festival founders. The interviews²¹ were transcribed and analysed using NVivo software. We begin with a systematic, in-depth theoretical review of our three themes – festivals, creative tourism and sustainability – and briefly contextualize the genesis and evolution of Paredes de Coura Festival. We then analyse and discuss the results before listing the main conclusions.

2. Towards a creative and sustainable tourism: new models for greening festivals

The Paredes de Coura Festival appeared in 1993 and has been held annually since.²² The festival was originally intended as a one-off concert, organised by several young people from the town of Alto Minho²³ at a time of emerging garage bands and remarkable radio and television programmes.²⁴ Passionate about music, the youngsters noticed a gap in local cultural offerings and, with local government support, created an event in Paredes de Coura, the Portuguese Modern Music Festival of Paredes de Coura. It can be distinguished by its strong roots in Paredes de Coura and the involvement of the local community in its organisation, production and execution.

Several studies suggest music festivals overcome the duality of rural/urban and local/transnational (Baumann 2001; Perry *et al.* 2019). They also drive tourism and promote sustainable practices. Mair & Laing (2012) maintain that the realisation of large-scale events such as festivals is globally significant, given its touristic potential.

²⁰ Set of social agents belonging to the festival ecosystem, including restaurant owners, rural tourism operators, small entrepreneurs, public and political entities and cultural agents.

²¹ The chapter complied fully with the guidelines included in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000/C364/01), especially with regard to Article 8 'Protection of personal data', including any information, private or professional, concerning an identified or identifiable natural person (Article 2(a) of EU Directive 95/46/EC). The chapter also complied with the guidelines contained in the General Data Protection Regulation No. 2016/679. The collection, processing, management, and exploitation of data were similarly based on the guidelines provided by the Codes of Ethics of the University of Porto, the International Sociological Association and the Oral History Association and International Council on Archives.

²² Except for 2020 and 2021, following the restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

²³ Alto Minho is a Portuguese statistical sub-region that is part of the North Region. It is bordered to the North and East by Galicia (Spain), to the South by Cavado, and to the West by the Atlantic Ocean. It has an area of 2219 km² and a population of 231,488 (2021 Census).

²⁴ The national television programme *Pop Off* was a cult show about bands and trends in Portugal's 1990s indie rock scene.

Yet festivals such as Paredes de Coura counteract omission of the social, political and cultural decline of such territories by putting towns with no previous tourism interest on the map. For Getz (1997), music festivals boost the growth of business and promote alternative forms of leisure. Recently, several festivals in Portugal – and globally – have adopted sustainable practices to preserve natural heritage and the environment.²⁵

Yet we are also in a revolution of tastes. Andjelic (2021) argues that we are in a new post-Veblen aspirational economy in which the forms of distinction are changing. Bennett *et al.* (2009) and Prieur & Savage (2013) have shown that more omnivorous and cosmopolitan forms of cultural consumption are increasingly being valued. However, the moral dimension of these new cultural forms still needs analysis. To analyse current cultural consumption patterns, factors such as the ‘moral signalling’ inherent in certain cultural choices (Baumann *et al.* 2022), such as appreciation of the sustainable, the traditional and the local, need to be considered.

This reveals a theoretical-empirical connection between festivals, tourism, sustainability and creative tourism. The Paredes de Coura Festival is known globally for its forest location, promoting the biosphere and the fauna of the region inside a green amphitheatre. These aspects demonstrate that contemporary tourism has become associated with the logics of preservation and valorisation of material and immaterial heritage²⁶ in the countryside. This ethos permeates Paredes de Coura Festival (Guerra 2020a), reflected in several practices and initiatives of sustainable tourism and development. Mair & Laing (2012) call this ‘greening’ – the promotion of ‘green’ credentials such as environmentally friendly facilities, recycling, minimizing energy use, and use of public transport or cycling. We can thus frame the festival within the processes of summer festivals greening (Park & Boo 2010), which have been encouraged by digital technologies and the COVID-19 pandemic, and have altered and enlarged what can be considered heritage. The notion of heritage, once limited to institutional elements such as museums (Baker *et al.* 2016), has changed substantially. Kwiatkowski *et al.* (2019) talk about a *conservation* effect of rural festivals, which contribute to preserving (cultural) traditions, myths and local habits. In relation to the *conservation* effect, we could add a *reinvention* of the same traditions, myths and local habits into contemporary forms.

The intersection between tourism, sustainability and summer festivals is seen as another materialisation of the concept of the ‘festivalisation of culture’ (Bennett *et al.*

²⁵ In Portugal, other festivals such as Boom Festival and NOS Alive have followed this type of practice.

²⁶ Paredes de Coura Festival is currently attempting to be classified as intangible cultural heritage.

2014). With reference to sustainability, tourism and festivals, this is a new response to the needs of festival-goers and audiences. Although sustainable and creative tourism are on the agenda, a massification has also occurred. In fact, sustainability, ecology and the environment have been transversal to a diverse array of cultural and artistic consumption. Moreover, this festivalisation process is associated with the promotion of other forms of leisure, decoupled from a material and immaterial perspective. So, do we face a new materialisation of festivalisation processes – is the phenomenon of a festival of sustainable culture emerging?

In parallel to the festivalisation of culture, Duxbury (2020) argues that we are witnessing a 'cultural turn', emphasizing the role of culture in constructing identities and futures related to the countryside. Duxbury suggests the analysis of cultural and creative work in the countryside has three analytical axes: cultural vitality, with culture seen as a resource for community development; the 'rural creative class', recently linked to rural innovation; and rural creative economies and creative entrepreneurship in rural and remote areas.

3. Paredes de Coura Festival

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism was a major driver of the Portuguese economy. In 2017, Portugal was one of the world's 20 most visited tourist destinations, attracting 27 million visitors in 2019 and experiencing economic growth of 7.3 per cent over 2018. This intense growth of tourism activity has led to concerns about negative environmental impacts, particularly in Lisbon and Porto and the main tourism regions, such as the Algarve and Madeira Island. This relates to the widespread use of hotels and Airbnb, and the sustainability of urban, rural and semi-peripheral physical spaces. Following worldwide *touristification* trends (Freytag & Bauder 2018), in recent years multiple initiatives related to creative tourism have emerged in rural contexts and small towns such as Paredes de Coura. The Paredes de Coura Festival is transversal to all three axes postulated by Duxbury (2020). With reference to the first axis, the promoters and organisers of the festival have a distinct or alternative understanding of the value of art, culture and heritage in promoting wellbeing and improving quality of life.

The second axis concerns the concepts of 'creative city' and 'creative class', addressing how rural communities seek to attract a 'creative class' of people aiming to create different lifestyles. This creative class has fostered *other* forms of fruition in line with the genesis of creative tourism, since their principle is the transformation of the social and geographical context, giving rise to different manifestations of intangible heritage. Summer festivals such as Paredes de Coura have brought new experiences and new understandings to the rural world, emphasizing the *other* side

of heritage, which had been dismissed by political actors and societies.

Regarding the third axis, the Paredes de Coura Festival has been an important promoter of the creative economies of the region and a driver of the work of individual creators and of cultural/creative based entrepreneurs in this area. Music and summer festivals have come to enhance *other* forms of heritage, *other* academic research and *other* forms of public policies, leading to studies about music festivals, tourism, sustainability, heritage and geographic territories (McKay 2021). In contemporary Portuguese society, the Paredes de Coura Festival has opened different forms of knowledge and ways of planning and acting by unfolding into a plurality of proposals and cultural, economic, political and social involvements, embodying cultural identities and polysemic lifestyles and going beyond the mainstream and dominant narratives. Because it is socially circumscribed to the countryside, this festival is a standpoint for creative, sustainable and creative tourism by promoting different logics of cultural fruition and enhancing social specificities (Bakas & Duxbury 2018). Cultural festivals – especially small-scale festivals – thereby provide a framework for the development of creative tourism activities.

The Paredes de Coura Festival has grown progressively, motivating the appearance of other festivals and becoming a national and international reference point. A festival originally imbued with do-it-yourself (DIY) logic, based on the efforts of a group of young people, has been transformed. Since 1996, the Paredes de Coura Festival has been organised by a national event producer, *Ritmos*.

4. Welcome to a Sonic Paradise: The Paredes de Coura Festival as a catalyst for *communitas*

To analyse creative and sustainable tourism in relation to the Paredes de Coura Festival, we start with Kwiatkowski *et al.* (2019), who identify four main effects of rural festivals. First, this festival generates a *conservation* effect, contributing to preserving traditions, myths, habits and cultural manifestations. It also has a *transformative* effect by contradicting rural decline and is a source of creative empowerment for the town and festival-goers. A third effect is *reinvention*, in relation to the festival's capacity to convert ancestral traditions, symbols and habits into contemporary formats as part of the festivalisation of culture (Guerra 2016). Finally, regarding the *consolidation* effect, the Paredes de Coura Festival has contributed to the social cohesion of its home territories. This is another characteristic of creative tourism, as it shapes forms of active participation, learning, creative self-expression and community engagement (Bakas *et al.* 2019).

In the case of the Paredes de Coura Festival, the effects of conservation and reinvention emerge in close articulation. While the festival preserves local traditions, it is also seen as the 'party of the future'. The interviewees attribute common characteristics to the festival, generating similar behaviours and mobilising the same energies felt in the popular festivals and religious events of the Alto Minho region, generating moments of joint celebration. The Paredes de Coura Festival enhances other forms and different aspects of creative tourism associated with the rural context and the material and immaterial heritage:

'The festival replicates, in the way it is celebrated, in the way the population participates, an identity. The relationship between Alto Minho and the Paredes de Coura Festival has numerous things in common. The way the festival started to have actions in the town and how it mixes with the municipality's festivities creates that opportunity'. (Musician and composer, male, 45 years, Porto).

The local population is involved in the organisation and management of the festival, through local companies and volunteers, and the continuous development of close relations between the community and organisers. This demonstrates active participation (Bakas *et al.* 2019) in creative tourism. Festival organisers, locals and shopkeepers are involved in many activities and in promotion of the festival.

Festival organisers know community engagement is essential for the event's success and sustainability (Qu & Cheer 2020). As Mair & Duffy (2018) state, benefits for locals, such as free admission, generate greater community engagement and contribute to more acceptance, while mitigating social inequalities in access. Organising free local events – the Festival Sobe à Vila²⁷ and the Music Sessions²⁸ – also promotes articulation between the festival, festival-goers and the local community, contributing to a feeling of belonging. Through this initiative, the festival's organisation does not just showcase places rarely visited by festival-goers, but provides opportunities for the local community to attend festival events. This aligns with the principles and opportunities of local co-creation, impacting both local tourism and sustainability by fostering the development of expertise and strengthening the bonds between outsiders and residents.

Returning to Kwiatkowski *et al.* 2019, effects evident in the case of the Paredes de Coura Festival include the *attraction effect* of other events and the *manifestation*

²⁷ A set of free concerts in the town of Paredes de Coura in the days preceding the festival.

²⁸ Small intimate concerts (also free) in unusual and unexpected places (an abandoned church, a windmill) spread throughout the municipality of Paredes de Coura.

effect. Interviewees stated that the festival exposed Paredes de Coura to the country and the world. The festival contributes to the affirmation and projection of the municipality and the Alto Minho region, but is also the main driver of tourism and economic development in the area, which is now a year-long tourist destination. Festivals such as Paredes de Coura contribute to the construction of shared meanings of their territories, which attracts people to places they may not visit otherwise. They also result in more people being sensitive to and aware of rural realities and their specificities, highlighting local traditions and cultural assets while revitalising them in contemporary settings and giving them an economic, political, social and cultural purpose (Bakas & Duxbury 2018). Therefore, the Paredes de Coura Festival is a mechanism of identification and affirmation of the town and the region; while attracting other events, initiatives and cultural offerings rooted in contemporary society. Examples are the creation of the School of Rock²⁹ in 2014, the theatre company Comédias do Minho (see chapter 8), the Paredes de Coura Fan Weekend – LEGO® Fan Event,³⁰ the Realizar: poesia³¹ and the International Vegetarian Congress.

The festival ... should be studied in territorial marketing, in a completely forgotten area of the country, because although it is one hour away from Porto, the interior of Alto Minho has not had any kind of investment ... uncovering a hidden area ... whose attractiveness used to reside only in tradition, in traditional festivities, in the food and the environment, in the landscape, etc'. (Journalist, male, 51 years, Porto)

Both the festival and these events have helped the host communities to create and promote a positive image. The festival encouraged new ways of looking at the relationship between communities and their locations, and it is possible to find axes of action related to cultural and social sustainability. This festival has increasingly become a synonym for charisma and authenticity, in contrast to other festivals based on mass tourism. At the level of territorial impacts, the interviewees identified improved access and communication, which has also boosted forms of creative tourism (Marques & Borba 2017).

²⁹ An initiative of the City Hall of Paredes de Coura, with the collaboration of the Space Ensemble; it aims to provide a complete and diversified musical education to young people from different social backgrounds and music education paths. It takes place over short periods, in an artistic residence and holiday camp format.

³⁰ An international initiative supported by LEGO® that brings together fans from across the world.

³¹ An annual event that promotes artistic exchange among participating authors and artists, and with the public. Dozens of national and international guests present proposals in areas ranging from conversation to performance, lectures, theatre, poetry readings, music, cinema and exhibitions.

From a cultural perspective, the interviewees highlighted the festival's contribution to the creation of cultural habits in terms of consumption, fruition and creativity. They pointed out that the festival promotes a willingness among residents to take risks. It has also influenced ways of listening to music, dress and lifestyles, and introduced new cultural offerings. Another impact is the promotion of greater openness and availability of residents for arts and culture. The interviewees also underlined that the festival has created a cultural dynamic in the town that translates into multiple events that go far beyond the festival period:

'There is always a cultural exchange ... There is always some learning and something positive. People don't come here just for the festival and then leave. They talk to someone, leave some experience, take experiences with them ... And many people come back'. (Businesswoman in festival hospitality, female, 35 years, Paredes de Coura)

'In social terms, the festival is a colourful thing in the life of Paredes de Coura. It's a mixture of generations, it's a mixture of cultures, it's a totally different panorama. The people from Paredes de Coura have the particularity of being very warm ... There is a community sense in Paredes de Coura'. (Nurse, male, 61 years, Paredes de Coura)

The impact of the festival is far from just economic, which is particularly important in low-density territories. Interviewees mentioned the impact on job creation – jobs directly related to the festival as well as more permanent jobs.³² The festival also contributes to the growth of the local economy, in terms of accommodation, commerce and restaurants. It is seen as the main economic lever of the town and municipality, also significantly impacting the region of Alto Minho. While these impacts are more intense during the festival, there are also broader impacts through people returning to Paredes de Coura to explore the region. It is common for residents to rent their houses during the festival, or to rent fields for camping and car parking. A large part of the community thereby benefits from the festival. Besides this direct return, the festival also works to attract other investments to the town, the municipality and the region:

³² This is so in the hospitality area for which one of our interviewees is responsible. The group started informally in the context of the Paredes de Coura Festival but is currently one of the most recognized companies in the area, working with other festivals, such as Primavera Sound and NOS Alive.

'We employ a lot of people from Coura during the festival. We have an economy that depends a lot on the success of the festival, whether it is restaurants or multi-sale shops. So, 2020 has not been an easy year for local businesses'. (Promoter, businessman and festival founder, male, 49 years, Braga)

Finally, we focus on Kwiatkowski *et al.*'s (2019) *consolidation effect*, which frames the social impacts of festivals. In the case of the Paredes de Coura Festival, the interviewees highlight that the festival facilitates exchanges and learnings between people of different generations, habits, lifestyles and cultures, due to the proximity to the town and the ease of fitting into the local community. The festival generates a universe of proximity, where music becomes a subject for meetings, conversations and exchange of experiences, fostering a greater 'opening of mentalities' and a certain cosmopolitanism. The festival is seen as a healthy change from the rural and relatively isolated context of Paredes de Coura.

At the same time, the interviewees' discourses highlight the festival as a source of pride and motivation for the resident population. The concept initially seemed like a kind of utopia, but it had transformative impacts on Paredes de Coura and Alto Minho. The festival is therefore understood as generating the capacity to believe that, even in a small, isolated place, it is possible to carry out successful initiatives and projects. In other words, it became a source of self-esteem, emerging as a heritage of resilience. The festival has revealed itself as a way to mitigate isolation, ageing and desertification, due to its dynamism and the contacts with younger visitors, as well as through the idea of modernity with which it is associated – the capacity to believe it is possible to do something that may initially have seemed impossible:

'It's not a factory, it's a cultural event and you get a return, in a municipality with 9,000 inhabitants, deserted, aged. The festival helped to counteract this trend. How does something that is part of culture and heritage end up being important in keeping people in the area? The festival brings the idea of modernity, of hope, that it is possible, even in unlikely places, to do impossible and different things. That is then transported to the industry, to the desire that foreigners must live here, to buy the houses'. (Mayor of Paredes de Coura, festival founder, male, 51 years, Paredes de Coura)

Functioning as a meeting point for a diverse group of people, the Paredes de Coura Festival has an enormous capacity to generate feelings of *communitas* (Bakas & Duxbury 2018). Events such as this are liminal spaces that promote significant and intense social interaction between people, capable of breaking down (or temporarily suspending) social, age, cultural or other boundaries, circumventing the restrictions

and divisions of everyday life. The concepts of 'social utility' and 'social capital' have been used to analyse the sociocultural and psychological effects generated by festivals and other events in a community (Moscardo 2007; Qu & Cheer 2020; Ziakas 2016). These effects translate into stronger ties within the community by creating common knowledge, building trust, encouraging collaboration, facilitating network formation and increasing social cohesion (Coleman 1988). This process of local and creative investment has cemented a differentiated regional identity.

Inevitably, the COVID-19 pandemic tested the Paredes de Coura Festival and its sustainability. With no festival, tourism and the resulting economic benefits were deeply affected. However, seeking to minimise these effects, organisers developed a series of strategies aimed at both maintaining festival-goers' interest, nurturing their emotional relationship with the festival, and attracting visitors to the town. In 2020 and 2021, on the festival dates, the natural amphitheatre on the banks of the Taboão River saw the usual stage set up, with a giant screen displaying footage of previous festivals. Many people attended, staying in local accommodation, thus mitigating negative economic impacts:

'[In 2021] when there was no festival, a stage was set up where songs and images from [previous] festivals were played. People could still go to the venue to watch ... for the companies that work and depend on culture it was a very difficult year ... We saw places closing that, maybe, if there had been Paredes de Coura Festival ... wouldn't have closed'. (Businesswoman in festival hospitality, female, 35 years, Paredes de Coura)

There was also a strong focus on the festival's digital communication, particularly social networks, alluding to previous festivals and reflecting the festival's affection for musicians, audiences, journalists and the local community. The hashtag #Courentena was created on Instagram, and videos were posted in which musicians who had performed at the festival shared their memories. Especially during the festival's scheduled dates, reports were published on multiple digital communication platforms, recalling key moments. More recently, in December 2021, festival organisers promoted the Courage Club, a series of concerts and DJ sets by several national artists in different places in Paredes de Coura. These strategies have contributed to the sustainability of the festival, which would again be held in August 2022. One day will be dedicated to Portuguese artists, something that may be maintained in the future as a gesture of support in the face of the negative impact of the pandemic on the cultural sector.

5. Remnants of a creative and sustainable approach in the countryside COVID-19 had a huge impact on society, socially, culturally and economically, including in terms of business reconfiguration and innovation, in both urban centres and rural areas. Tourism was among the worst affected, due to restrictions on the movement of people, and Paredes de Coura suffered greatly. The effects of the festival being cancelled were quickly felt, especially through lay-offs. The local economy still managed to achieve some breathing space with increased demand for rural tourism, for renting rooms in towns, but these were individual initiatives without the same impact on Paredes de Coura's economy. While the Portuguese government activated responses to the pandemic, financial aid to the cultural and music industry was slow and scarce.

Only in 2021 was it possible to carry out a kind of plan B, a winter festival, symptomatically dubbed the Courage Club. Although the festival did not take place for two years, many festival-goers continued to visit the venue on the scheduled dates, which corresponds to the argument that there is an established festival lifestyle in contemporary society (Guerra 2018). As the festival occupies a prominent place in the calendar of many people, a concrete fear existed that it could disappear, with all the consequences this would bring. This led to the development of self-help strategies, such as the maintenance of room reservations. Thus, in a very creative way strategies of remembrance of the festival were activated by festival-goers, which can be equated to objectified forms of cultural (or subcultural) capital (Barrière & Finkel 2020).

The Paredes de Coura Festival can be read through the lens of recovery and revitalisation (Bennett & Janssen 2016) as an element of recovery and economic, political, cultural and social revitalisation. Moreover, by being inserted into a small rural environment, it uses local specificities to its advantage – namely the physical environment (e.g. the river), culture and the intangible and tangible heritage (e.g. the natural landscape, architectural heritage and gastronomy). From the point of view of creative tourism, the Paredes de Coura Festival reflects a connection between space, identities and community, becoming a strategic element of the promotion of initiatives with not only local but also national resonance. Moreover, it promotes the cultural sustainability of the territory (Duxbury *et al.* 2019). The festival is thus seen in the light of a territorial image (Juanchich 2007), which is created as shaped by the festival, providing an indispensable symbiosis for local development. From the perspective of the creation of innovative lines of knowledge regarding sustainable and creative tourism, we can affirm the existence of a concern and deep articulation with the community. The strengthening of ties, the promotion of common knowledge and collaboration

are essential elements, along with innovation. These allow the cementing of networks and the promotion of social cohesion (Coleman 1988). This takes us back to the relationships established between the participants in relation to the music and the performance, which have been a key element of the sustainability of the festival since 1993 (Guerra 2020a).

It is not only territorial and financial sustainability that is at stake here, but also the industry's sustainability. The effects of the Paredes de Coura Festival go far beyond its economic, tourism and regional development impacts (Kwiatkowski *et al.* 2019). Conservation and reinvention effects are created that continue to generate interest in the festival, contributing to the maintenance of a performance circuit in Portugal. The festival's success also offers opportunities for building narratives and counter-narratives about the dichotomies between the rural and the urban. The Paredes de Coura Festival opened the doors for other rural festivals to follow the same path and today plays a fundamental role in regional development strategy. It must therefore be analysed in a holistic way, considering its multiple and diverse impacts and its cumulative effects – socio-cultural, psychological, economic and material/infrastructural. Considering its role in the promotion of a differentiated tourism, which aims at social dynamics from the point of view of integration, interaction and encounter, and in terms of understanding notions of place, community, identity and belonging, the Paredes de Coura Festival is a paradigmatic example of how such events can be strategically used to sustain and reinvent the rural areas in which they are located.

