

# STRATEGIES OF FILM FESTIVALS IN A PANDEMIC CONTEXT: SPANISH ADAPTATION IN ALICANTE REGION

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## **Abstract**

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has led to major transformations on the world scene at all levels. Culture has not escaped this situation either. One year later, it is still trying to adapt to the circumstances. In 2020, many cultural events had to be cancelled, but in 2021 there is a new option: to evolve. Is offering a cultural product adapted to the new circumstances fostering innovative and creative proposals? The first objective of this study is to find out what strategies film festivals have implemented as a result of the pandemic and, as a secondary objective, whether these can be considered creative and innovative. The initiatives and trends of the different festivals are analysed using a qualitative methodology and the semi-structured in-depth interview technique. We will be focusing on film festivals in the region of Alicante (located in the south east of Spain), and the techniques put into practice, their results and their potential for continuity are observed. The first results show that the strategies adopted have a temporary character. As a consequence, we can conclude that they are not effective in lasting over time.

## **Keywords:**

Film festivals, cultural industries, COVID, audiences, aids, sponsors

## 1. Film festivals in times of COVID

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has led to major transformations on the world scene. Gemünden (2021) describes the context:

“While Venice was able to squeeze in a small-scale live festival, most others have experimented with a mixture of online offerings and reduced in-person events (relying on drive-in theaters in New York, for example); the Berlinale, in turn, decided last November to split the format into two tracks: an online virtual festival, which just wrapped, with access reserved to industry representatives and journalists; and a live event for local audiences scheduled for June.” (Gemünden 2021).

Culture has not escaped this situation and it is still adapting to it. Nhamo, Dube and Chikodzi (2020) describe that “the outbreak of COVID-19 disrupted the social interactions between people due to the demand for social distancing to limit the spread of the disease”. They add that “there were fears of contracting the disease, which led people to limit travelling as this could risk infection. These measures came at a considerable cost to the leisure and entertainment sectors”. Their study found that a number of scheduled events had been cancelled across the world (data obtained from IndieWire). “Most of the events had been postponed, while about 24 international festivals had been cancelled altogether. [...] The postponement of such events came at a high cost to the organisers and those hosting events” (Nhamo *et al*, 2020).

In 2020, many cultural events had to be cancelled, but in 2021 there is a new option: to evolve. Are innovative and creative proposals being fostered? Have the initiatives arisen out of desperation for continuity, regardless of the consequences, or were they carefully considered? Has the pandemic stimulated new actions which otherwise would not have been implemented or would have taken longer to implement? Will some of them be maintained in the future? Has a product adapted to the new circumstances been offered?

We come from a background where festivals are associated with two types of components, the cultural and the festive, what De Valck (2020, p. 127) calls *film-driven* and *festival-driven* events, where “it is the festival form that appeared most vulnerable in pandemic times”. Whereas online showing is possible, the same does not apply to the rest of the activities. “Many festivals provide forum space for interpersonal encounters and negotiations between companies and creatives, or hold special events (pitching sessions, development fund awards, sessions for additional financing rounds) that foster production-related activities as part of their festivals” (Iordanova, 2015, p. 8).

All festivals are facing many challenges to try to maintain their status and continuity, except for those with unconditional institutional support, such as the San Sebastian Film Festival. Vogel (2016) explain:

“Researchers observing this population have found festivals to cluster on two poles: the first pole is the relatively well funded event with international programs and a variety of movie types on display, as well as a capacity to attract celebrities and crowds. The other type is the smaller, often specialized and community rather than cultural-policy related program of a festival event, which caters mainly to the artist and the cinema-loving public”. (Vogel, 2016)

Traditionally, Spanish film festivals depend on public and private subsidies and face a higher risk of disappearing if they lose their sponsors or contributors, since they lack their own income. Therefore, they are forced to satisfy their sponsors and, “this is where cultural, political and industrially biased decisions intertwine with the new ones derived from COVID.” (Jurado-Martín and Martínez-Cano, 2020, p. 4). Damiens (2020) describes “the need to ‘pay attention to festivals’ role as producers of knowledge because festivals are not more objects of research but also actors already shaping academic, industrial, and popular cinematic knowledge”.

This situation leads them to be constantly alert to everything around them: new cultural events in their area of influence, new trends deriving from their sponsors interests, as the environment once was, including topics such as gender and equality, social integration, immigration and refugees, and so forth, or the latest topics such as corporate social responsibility; media or scientific impact that supports and proves its cultural, social, tourist or geopolitical function and value. Nhamo, Dube and Chikodzi (2020) specify:

“Festivals contribute millions and billions to host countries and communities and offer multiple benefits to societies. Due to the large crowds drawn by international film festivals, these often benefit other segments of the tourism industry such as accommodation, restaurants, cruise ships, airlines and road transport. International events temporarily raise demand for additional labour providing access to short- and long-term employment as companies try to cater to demands for goods and services in the host community” [...]. (Nhamo *et al*, 2020)

In this changing reality where “possibilities to distribute media content and aggregate films have exponentially increased” (De Valck, 2020, p. 7, citing Iordanova and Cunningham, 2012), distribution platforms and pay-per-view and live platforms have also contributed to the organisation of these events and their relationship with the environment, audience, sponsors, tourism, and culture, among others. For some people, they have become the competition and, for others, they are complementary resources. This is because, “today, it has become the norm that film festivals not only show films but also engage with film production and distribution” (Iordanova, 2015).

“Some festivals have created their own distribution labels, while others have teamed up with TV channels or with specific streaming platforms. These developments have resulted in a situation where the film festival is no longer mainly an exhibition operation, but becomes a participant in many other aspects of the creative cycle—such as production financing, networking, and distribution—and thus turns into a key player in the film industry, as well as society at large [...]

In a globalized context, it is the film festivals' inherent transnationalism that counterbalances nationalist tendencies, thus facilitating exchanges in production and circulation". (Iordanova, 2015, p. 7)

Wong (2011, p. 129) adds that "since their origins film festivals have been associated intensely with national film industries, visibility, and distribution. Festivals mean pre-mieres, screenings, and prizes, but many now offer film markets, coproduction fora, funding competitions, producer platforms, and master classes".

The registration possibilities offered by platforms such as Vimeo, Withoutabox, Filmfest, or FilmFreeWay have streamlined and facilitated the process. However, many events with questionable quality indeed use the same platform to organise events with little or no transparency in the selection process, the panel of judges, or even the showing. Here, we find different profiles such as contests with no registration fee, in-person contests offering cash prizes, and others with registration fees where success is practically guaranteed by fee payment, and where showing has been reduced to the virtual platform without further expense. That is to say, there are free registration festivals that are expected to have large expenditures, and contests with registration fees and low spending.

Nevertheless, in many cases, producers and filmmakers have been attracted by these types of online events which facilitate their participation. In 2020, many in-person festivals chose to switch to an online version, based on innovation and necessity arguments. "While migrating the content of the festival to YouTube is not extremely innovative or unique [...] this spotlighted the question of using such digital platforms as an easy substitute or alternative for physical gatherings" (Ozgen-Tuncer, 2020). The researcher describes the migration of the content of the International Labor Film Festival to YouTube, explaining that it may be seen as a direct way to reach a wider audience without having to rely on agreements with theatres or exhibitors.

In the Internet age, Jenkins (2006) suggested that "audiences are gaining great power and autonomy as they enter into the new knowledge culture". Lobo and Antunes (2018, p. 10) consider that the technological advances and the emergence of new roles for social actors, as users of the cyberspace, have promoted new perspectives and approaches in the field of information. The authors have become in content producers by the change on the position from passive to active actors. "This is happening especially because of the easy access to digital resources, free display and distribution channels, and intuitive software". Baez y Devesa (2014) research film festival spectators on the basis of their motives for attending and focus on the Valdivia International Film Festival that reveals three motivation factors (discovery, entertainment and cinema) and three groups of spectators, film lovers and enthusiasts. Moses (2013) suggests three distinct publics operate:

"Occupying the most rarefied position the inner circle of the mediated center—are what I call media publics (talent, organizers, officials, sponsors), who both operate within, and thereby advertise the glamour of, proximity to what is most extraordinary about the event (...). Se-

condly, what I would call attending publics (journalists, bloggers, badge-holders, and single-ticket buyers) hold an intermediary position, partaking in a variety of activities, largely but not totally. (...) Third group, what I call absent publics, is a significant driver of future festival attendance. Absent publics, who do not achieve the spatial and temporal access to the festival event through the practice of actual attendance, but rather experience the event either synchronously or asynchronously via mediation, constitute a ready reserve of future attendees". (Moses, 2013, p. 822-823).

Cultural industries adapted to the pandemic and even to lockdown. In this context, the Internet makes cultural activities easier. "The digital mode prevails over the analogue one and the business model of cultural industries is being transformed." (Paz, 2010). Many major cultural, sporting, or tourist events were cancelled, such as the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, the tourism fairs in Berlin or Shanghai, or the Wire Fair in Dusseldorf (Juárez, 2020), and they are now slowly restarting.

Pay-per-view and live platforms can be seen as friends or foes of traditional festivals. They can be complementary to ensure the broadcasting of films. Atamara-Rojas, Guerrero-Pérez and Gerbolini (2020, p. 3.614) say that "producers increasingly leverage digital tools to enable audience participation by promoting user-generated content". And they add cited to García-Escrivá (2018): "Therefore, the audiovisual industry must adapt to changes in media and adjust its business models and product features". According to this, Zambardino and Berni (2018) specify:

"The system of distribution of cinematographic works has always needed a 'window' to enhance films, and so far, this system has allowed the overall development of the entire value chain. Today it is no longer possible to deny the changes induced by technological transformations: video streaming platforms have now become part of our lives and contribute to the creation and distribution of content. Perhaps we should stop considering them as an enemy to fight, and watch them as an opportunity, provided they respect the existing rules on copyright, production, distribution, taxation". (Zambardino and Berni, 2018)

Consequently, in some cases, the platforms offer films, typical of film festivals, as an innovative product in their offerings and with an added value to commercial productions. They keep the exploitation rights and create value for themselves, but to some extent, they restrict the possibilities that filmmakers can provide for the film. Then, it shows that "the impact new technologies have on communication highlight a profound change in audiovisual consumption motivated by the convergence of television and the Internet" Atamara-Rojas, Guerrero-Pérez and Gerbolini (2020, p. 3.615).

In this regard, platforms such as Amazon or Netflix seem to be gaining ground on festivals with completely online versions, with which they can hardly compete quantitatively in terms of a potential audience. This reinforces the role of the contest as a live meeting event, since it satisfies other types of activities beyond the exhibition. Whitaker (2020) highlighted the damage Netflix was causing to the industry and emphasised that the festival experience goes beyond the screening of the film.

Hobbins-White and Limov (2020) analyse the case of Amazon Prime as an online exhibitor of the SXSW festival and question the relationship between potential audience and actual audience, as well as its film profile.

Nhamo, Dube and Chikodzi (2020) explain that: “Amazon recorded a positive share price movement, while Netflix recorded a marginal loss of -1%. [...] As theatres closed due to the lockdowns, people were likely to switch over to VOD, streaming and online gaming. As a result, Netflix reported aggressive growth as more people subscribed to the online streaming platform”. They describe that:

“Countries that had national lockdowns (namely, Spain, France and Italy) had a more pronounced growth rate compared to the countries that had strict and fewer. Netflix feared a drag of the pandemic would adversely affect new productions. Due to delayed production, Netflix reported that it had incurred US\$218 million in incremental content costs. This was, however, offset by a record increase in subscribers which saw the company gaining about 16 million subscribers”. (Nhamo *et al.*, 2020)

Nevertheless, virtual versions of cultural events seem to have soared when, shortly before, this option hardly inspired confidence or seemed to be at an initial stage (Jurado, 2018, p. 190). The pandemic has caused many events to change, also encouraged by the demand of an audience that would otherwise no longer have access to culture. “This emerging economic/virtual environment is dictating new logics of consumption and artistic dissemination, as well as public interaction.” (Maggioni, 2021, p. 85). The online offer develops a feeling of belonging to a community and sharing an identity that leads fans to go beyond just consuming content (Atamara-Rojas *et al.* 2020, p. 3.627).

The pandemic is a watershed in the organisation of film festivals. Although it is too early to determine how things will develop after this situation, in a very short time, researchers and experts in the field have dared to develop studies and descriptions of local cases that have certain actions in common. All cultural events have been affected by COVID. This fact is generating a virtual cultural market that still needs to be described and standardised (Maggioni 2021, p. 85). A new cultural crisis is expected with restrictions and disappearances of cultural events, as economy is considered a priority. “We are confronting an unprecedented crisis and witnessing what will likely be a major moment in the history of film festivals” (De Valck & Damiens, 2020b). “As such, there is a need for support to be extended to this fragile sector. There is also a need for the sector to take measures to protect artists and employees who are at the receiving end of the COVID-19 crisis”, Nhamo, Dube and Chikodzi (2020).

This paper discloses the initiatives taken in 2020 and those that will have continuity in the film festivals of the region of Alicante (located in the south east of Spain). The object is to answer the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, as well as to find new uncertainties that may have occurred and that provide further clarification as to the actions carried out by film festivals. The aim is to contribute to the study of these events and the knowledge surrounding the cultural industries. This study on film festivals will help to understand their management, values and objectives in the

crucial context of the COVID pandemic.

## 2. Objectives and Methodology

The first objective of this study is to find out what strategies film festivals have implemented as a result of the pandemic and, as a secondary objective, whether these can be considered creative and innovative. These are quick actions through which we will be able to discover the priorities of the events and, consequently, the traditional functions to which more prominence has been given. These events cover more functions in addition to the exhibition but, which ones have been maintained in 2020? Although they are different for each festival, we want to know about the existence of trends and, in the case of their absence, whether there is any particular peculiarity in the event(s) in which this is the case. To this end, the changes carried out by the festivals are analysed and the areas posing the greatest challenges are observed: exhibition, participation, audience, physical gathering, market, among others.

The monograph *Festival Reviews. Special Dossier: Covid-19* (De Valck & Damiens, 2021a) is taken as a starting point, given that it can be considered one of the first papers related to festival celebration in the pandemic context. As described by the authors, “These contributions thus testify to the resourcefulness, adaptability, and creativity of festival organisers who had to, very quickly, find local solutions to a global calamity”. The monograph analyses measures adopted by festivals that have been taken as a reference for the application of the methodology. The semi-structured in-depth interview has been used so that the interviewee feels free to talk about the proposed topic.

The article by Jurado-Martín and Martínez-Cano (2020) *Beyond a shadow of a doubt: For the Elche International Independent Film Festival dying is not an option* laid the groundwork for the study being now presented. At that time, the focus was on the Elche Film Festival, FICIE, through the application of the case study method. This paper applies the same method and extends its scope to all the festivals in the region of Alicante (located in the south east of Spain). Therefore, the study encompasses these 20 competitions and, by means of the case study, a comparison is developed and trends are specified.

The case study as a valid method for the analysis of film festivals is verified and validated by references such as Peirano (2020), Vallejo (2018), or Campos (2012), among others, and it is included in the contributions by the Contours Conference 2020 organised by Tamara Falicov and Dorota Ostrowska, (2). Moses (2013, p. 816) based his research *Media Conduction: Festivals, Networks, and Boundaries Spaces* in this method argued in a work in progress study: “As a product of ongoing research, this study represents work in progress based on nine festival experiences and a battery of in-depth interviews”.

The Festimapp Report of the IVAC 2020 has been taken as a reference for the festival database, (3).



The interview has been designed with 14 questions organised in three blocks. The information is distributed in the blocks as follows:

1. Festival's profile before COVID
2. Consequences of the 2020 edition
3. General assessments and proposals for the future

The questions for each of the blocks are the following:

- Block 1. Learning about the festival before COVID: Question 1. In one paragraph, please describe the characteristics that best identify the festival; 2. Dates and venues or usual spaces for the celebration. 3. Who are the organisers? Who are the contributors? Who are the sponsors?
- Block 2. How has COVID affected the festival: Question 4. Has the pandemic affected the holding dates? How?; 5. Has the pandemic affected the venues or spaces for celebration? How?; 6: Has it affected the showing modes? How?; 7. How has the audience been managed? What adaptations have been made?; 8. Have side activities been held? The usual ones, others, which ones?; 9. Have there been any changes in relation to participants, participation, number, profile?; 10. Have there been any changes concerning judges?
- Finally, block 3. Positive and negative assessment on this new context. Question 11. How has the audience assessed changes?; 12. And participants?; 13. Have the sponsors been receptive?, Have they stopped being so?, Have they made any proposal? and so forth; and 14. What is the general assessment of the organisers? There are initiatives that will have continuity or new ones derived from the consequences.

This research uses a qualitative methodology and the semi-structured in-depth interview technique. The semi-structured in-depth interview has been used so that the interviewee feels free to talk about the proposed topic. A total of 10 interviews were managed to be carried out, which represents a 50% participation. This percentage is considered appropriate as a preliminary study because it represents half of all festivals in the region.

Finally, for the theoretical framework and the assessment of the discussions, the methodology has also focused on the review of the scientific literature existing at the time of writing.

### 3. Results

The film festivals under examination are: Elche International Independent Film Festival (FICIE), Sant Joan Film Festival, Alicante Film Festival, Sax Film Festival, Fantaelx Film Festival, Santa Pola Regional Short Film Contest, Rural FilmFest, Festival de Cine Pequeño from Aspe and Cortifestival. It is estimated that the most emblematic competitions in the area are represented, with the exception of the Alfás del Pi Film Festival, from which no response was obtained. In virtually all cases, the representatives who have participated in the study are the directors of the competition.

#### 3.1. Profile of the analysed festivals before COVID

The competitions represent a wide range of maturity, from the oldest active one in the Valencian Community, FICIE, holding its 44th edition in 2021, to the most recent one, Cortifestival, which was cancelled in the 2020 edition. They have an average of 14.2 completed editions, but with a notable difference among them. They are geographically representative: Alicante, Elche, Sant Joan, Sax, Santa Pola, Aspe, and an itinerant festival within the region. Alicante and Elche are represented with 2.5 events each, which would be expected in relation to their population, as shown in table 1.

Considering the holding dates, it can be noted that May, July, and November are the months in which most of the events are held, a total of 8. These dates do not completely match up with national trends, which tend to concentrate mainly in May and September/October. Regarding the event specialty, they are mainly short films, although some of them also admit feature films.

These festivals have a wide variety of content, which ensures coverage of topics for different audience profiles and enriches the region's offering. There are different themes, such as Spanish films, fantasy and horror films, amateur, ecological films, erotic and bizarre art, and finally, educational films. Almost all festivals offer side events, such as talks, workshops, conferences, meeting points for professionals in the film industry, and so forth. The book presentation in the Sax Festival and the side conference for scientific study in the Fantaelx Festival are particularly remarkable.

Virtually all festivals agree that they have a general audience, although FICIE highlights its family profile and for people of all ages; Alicante Film Festival specifies an audience from 15 to 65 years old; Aspe and Erotic Film Festivals consider that they are aimed at a cinephile audience, and Cortifestival is aimed at students and teachers. Even though Fantaelx is a contest specialising in fantasy films and its subgenres, they state that they have a general audience.

**Table 1. Data from the analysed film festivals**

	Starting year	2021 Edition	Place	Month	Specialty	Other activities	Audience profile
Elche Film Festival, FICIE	1978	44	Elche	July	Short films	Yes	General, family friendly
Sant Joan Film Festival	2001	21	Sant Joan	May	Short films, Spanish	Yes	General
Alicante Film Festival	2004	18	Alicante	May/June	Short and feature films	Yes	General, 15 to 65 years old
Sax Film Festival	2007	15	Sax	July	Short and feature films	Yes	General
Fantaelx Film Festival	2013	9	Elche	November	Fantasy films and subgenres	Yes	General
Santa Pola Regional Short Film Contest	2013	9	Santa Pola	November	Amateur short films		Young people
Rural FilmFest	2013	9	Itinerant	July	Short and feature films, ecological films	Yes	General
Festival de Cine Pequeño from Aspe	2014	8	Aspe	August	Short films	Yes	Film fans
Erotic and Bizarre Art Film Festival	2015	7	Alicante	December	Specialised		Film fans
Cortifestival	2018	2*	Alicante and Elche	May	Short and educational films		Students and teachers

(\*). Cancelled in 2020. Expected not to continue in 2021. Source: Own elaboration

Figure 1: Date from the analysed film festivals. Source: Own elaboration.

The festivals are mainly organised by relatively small cultural and/or audiovisual associations and have great support from a public institution, generally the city council. Then there are competitions directly organised by the city council itself through one of its Youth, Culture or Festivities Departments. There is only one case organised by a foundation, as shown in table 2.

Sponsors mean the financial support that is key to holding the event, and contributors mean minor and in-kind support. In this regard, the festivals in the region that have large public funding, either as organisers or sponsors, represent 50% (Sant Joan, Sax, Santa Pola, Rural and Aspe), compared to 40% having a private nature (Alicante, Erotic, Fantaelx and Cortifestival, (4), and 10% being organised by a foundation (Elche-FICIE).

**Table 2. Organisers, contributors, and sponsors**

	Organiser	Contributor	Sponsor	Director or contact person
<b>Elche Film Festival, FICIE</b>	Fundación Mediterráneo	Cine Club Luis Buñuel	Fundación Mediterráneo	V. Sanchis Ragio
<b>Sant Joan Film Festival</b>	Culture Department of the City Council	Asociación Cultural Audiovisual		T. Cristóbal
<b>Alicante Film Festival</b>	Asociación Futura Films	City Council, Provincial Council	Other companies	V. Seva
<b>Sax Film Festival</b>	Sax Cinem. and Audiovisual Assoc., City Council	City Council, IVAC, UMH, UA, Provincial Council	Other companies	M. Herrero
<b>Fantaelx Film Festival</b>	Unicornio Negro Assoc., MH University Art Department, Grupo Massiva	City Council, MH University, Aljub shopping mall, Cinema Paradiso, and so forth		F. Mateu
<b>Santa Pola Regional Short Film Contest</b>	Youth Department of the City Council			A. López
<b>Rural FilmFest Festival de Cine</b>	Cinema 4 Latas Coop. V.	Green Film Network	Mancomunitat de l'Alcoià and El Comtat, IVAC	J. Quiles, A. Gutiérrez
<b>Pequeño from Aspe Erotic and Bizarre Art Film Festival</b>	Festivities Department of the City Council	Provincial Council	Councillorships City Council	J. Torres
<b>Cortifestival</b>	Cinema 4 Latas Coop. V.		Ocho y medio publishing house El Corte Inglés	A. Gutiérrez, E. Fernández, A. Gutiérrez and J. Quiles

Source: Own elaboration

Figure 2: Organisers, contributors, and sponsors. Source: Own elaboration.

### 3.2. Consequences in the 2020 edition

Holding dates. In general, they remained the same, except in the case of the Alicante and Fantaelx Festivals, which changed, and Cortifestival, which was cancelled. Alicante, instead of being held in May, it was held in October. Fantaelx concentrated the competition on two days.

Venue. The venues remained almost the same as in previous editions, although there were some changes in almost all cases. Only two festivals, Sax and Sant Joan, switched to a fully online version using distribution and viewing platforms for this event. FICIE was only held in one of its venues, both outdoors, but in the case of the second venue, the beach, it was cancelled due to the impossibility of ensuring COVID sanitary measures. It should be noted that the schedule is the same for both venues, which is held in parallel in two locations. Fantaelx combined the virtual and on-site mode. The side conference of experts was held virtually and the showing was on-site. Except for the case of the cancelled festival, all other festivals maintained their venues taking sanitary measures, which meant a reduced capacity. The reduced capacity and the sanitary measures fundamentally affected the holding of the opening and closing ceremonies.

Showing. The context did not interfere with the showing of the films, regardless of their on-site or virtual nature.

Audience. In all cases, the organizers state that the maximum capacity was reached, either because the capacity was reduced, or because the number of virtual attendants increased, both audience and professionals, who otherwise would not have attended. A reservation system via telephone and email was put in place. Private security was increased in the venues and the necessary hygiene measures before access were adopted. Audience voting was conducted via WhatsApp (FICIE) or QR (Rural).

Participation. In general, the festivals state that there were no changes in the number of participants, but the number of productions received (Fantaelx and Aspe) and the possibility for them to be in the event (FICIE, Alicante, and Rural) did change, since either the invitation was suspended or it was online. The representatives of the virtually held festivals (Sant Joan and Sax) got the impression of an incomplete activity, as they were not able to offer filmmakers and producers a place for meeting and physical exchange, which reflects the importance given to this function.

Side activities. Most of them were cancelled for various reasons, such as change of dates, switch to virtual mode, capacity reduction, and cancellation of professionals' invitations. The Aspe, Alicante, and Fantaelx Festivals maintained these activities, and the latter two of them claim that they registered even more participation by offering the dual mode. As a general trend, the interviewees expressed their dissatisfaction for not being able to offer the side activities, probably the most punished ones as a consequence of the pandemic.

Judges: Most of the judges of the panel evaluated the films virtually, either because it was already a tradition in the competition (Rural, Sant Joan, Aspe), or because they chose this option to avoid risks (Sant Joan, Alicante). In all other cases, the judges attended the festivals taking the necessary security measures (FICIE, Sax).

### **3.3. General assessments and proposals for the future**

The organisers highlight, as their own opinions and aspects to improve or maintain for the future and bearing in mind the setback suffered due to the state of emergency and lockdown derived from COVID, that the audience prefers on-site festivals to virtual versions. Nevertheless, the three organisers who opted completely or partially for online modalities assure that they had more audience and participation through this option and that they reached sectors that otherwise would not have been reached. Vicente Sanchís (FICIE) explains that “at that time it was not about filling the venue, but about winning over the hearts and minds of people and overcoming fear by offering a protected area where people felt safe.”

The interviewees affirm that their participants prefer on-site events because they can network and promote themselves, as well as have the audience's feedback on their films, but they find that a dual

mode is also a good option. On the contrary, we find statements like that of Toni Cristóbal (Sant Joan): “Nowadays, it is more difficult to move ahead with a project and promote a film. The film industry, in general, is in a delicate moment which is not favoured by the saturation of content offered in the online mode”.

In general, they affirm that they continue to work with their sponsors and contributors, although in some cases those were not able to support them during 2020 due to the economic situation they were facing, such furloughs, risk of closure, in anticipation of a crisis, as explained by Vicente Seva (Alicante). They coincide with their great dependence on state aids, but there is more uncertainty for those who depend on income from private entities or have a strong dependence on them, “since funding has been reduced and has generated instability”, Miguel Herrero (Sax). To give just a few examples, on the more optimistic side we find Aspe and Santa Pola and, on the opposite side, Sant Joan, Rural and Cortifestival. The latter is supported exclusively by El Corte Inglés, whose main activity has nothing to do with promoting culture and cinema, and they decided to cancel the festival. In addition, its educational nature depended on teacher and student productions in a period of lockdown.

The organisers’ general assessment is that attendance is necessary for their cultural and geographic area of influence, since festivals are a cultural activity with an audience interested in attending in-person, therefore, physical attendance must have continuity. However, the online mode makes the competition accessible to more participants. Festivals are a meeting place for professionals, regardless of whether they are on-site or virtual, but the challenge now is to offer the same possibilities for meeting, promotion, and feedback in both formats. “The dual mode should be seen as a new aspect to be developed in future editions. Something that has arisen out of necessity, and that otherwise would not have been developed, offers new possibilities”, Fran Mateu (Fantaelx) explains.

Regarding the economic consequences of the pandemic, they deem that it will affect their budget and, in some cases, their continuity. “Sponsors and private contributors in the hotel and restaurant and tourism industries do not expect to have sufficient aid to quickly overcome the crisis and their investment in festivals will suffer.”, Toni Cristóbal (Sant Joan) states.

As proposals to ensure the continuity of festivals, they consider that it is necessary to “offer side activities that attract the audience and make them loyal to the festival”, Juan Torres (Aspe) explains; “foster the importance of culture and cinema, as an identity and a social expression”, Jaume Quiles (Rural) states, “provide incentives to sponsors and contributors and encourage participation and hybrid viewing”, according to Vicente Sanchís (FICIE); have alternatives both in open and closed venues in case of last-minute changes and so forth.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

Film festivals in the region of Alicante are characterised by their local nature, acting as an exhibitor of alternative productions to commercial films and as a platform for new filmmakers, and also

providing a wide cultural offering in the film industry with showing, film competition, and side activities that meet the needs and tastes of their audience.

These festivals develop several functions proper to film festivals in addition to being an exhibitor and a competition, since they facilitate physical gathering, live experience of audience and participants, promotion of the city, training (lectures, conferences, and workshops), and so forth. The festive character prevails over the market function in these film events. These functions could not be developed during the pandemic, and that is why these festivals were equated to the array of events that only show films and award prizes through distribution platforms or to the array of non-commercial film packages offered by pay-per-view platforms.

As these events are highly dependent on public and private aid, they cannot support themselves. They serve as a stimulus for the city and tourism, and some of them have a training function but they are in general culturally-oriented film festivals (the so-called *film-driven events*).

It can be perceived that festivals are still fighting a battle. They have received a heavy blow and, although they have managed to endure, they are still analysing the consequences. It is too early to talk about proposals in a new context and continuity strategies are still being explored. Survival techniques involve learning from experience to assimilate what has worked and what has always worked. As an example, and considering the COVID measures that are separate from the competition, the conclusions about the strategies developed by film festivals are the following:

- Physical and virtual presence can be a duality that remains in time.
- Reinforcement of what makes the festivals different: physical gathering, live screening, side activities, and so forth.
- Increase of their visibility as a cultural event, for audiences, participants, and sponsors.
- Shared awareness that after the tsunami they will have a lot of work to do and that it will take a few years.
- Recovering lost sponsorships: in a long-standing struggle where economy prevails over culture.
- Audience and participants demand physical presence to be worthwhile and have an added value.
- And conversely, the door should be open to the audience and participants who decide to follow the festivals virtually.

The conclusions reached by this work are relevant because they are the first, that is, there are

no previous studies carried out in this geographical area and one of the few that take as reference a broad sample beyond case studies of specific contests.

As a topic for discussion, it is appreciated that:

- This study shows that the adopted strategies have a temporary character and do not ensure the same effectiveness for subsequent editions. “Once the initial excitement of online experimentation had waned off and screen time fatigue set in, virtual festivals are, simply put, less festive and therefore less effective in achieving some of their purposes” (De Valck, 2020, p. 127). Festivals will have to make every effort to avoid a decline like the one suffered in the financial crisis of 2008, which notoriously reduced their number in Spain and the available budget.
- It is too early to assess which proposals will have continuity in the future without the need to constantly prove the importance of festivals and their cultural value for society. Where there is a need for food -economy-, books -culture- take a back seat, and it is not appreciated that books can indeed be the key to emerge from the financial crisis or to cope with it in a better way.
- Before the pandemic, organisers consistently defended the need for the face-to-face nature of their events. However, in the context of the pandemic, the argument was different: to celebrate the activity by all means, even if they had to give up their face-to-face value. Over time, it has become clear that the virtual proposals were a temporary solution and that outside that context they have been gradually lost.

## 5. End Notes

1. Sincere thanks go to Nereida Sevilla-Torregrosa, official sworn translator. This is an English version of the original text published in Jurado-Martín, M. Resiliencia postpandemia de los certámenes cinematográficos. In López-Agulló, J.M. and Parejo, N. (2021). *Estructura y análisis del audiovisual en España y Latinoamérica*. Fragua.
2. The conference offers its prerecorded contents in an open access mode. Link: <https://bit.ly/3recHbc>
3. Link to the report: <https://ivc.gva.es/es/audiovisuales/promocion/festimapp-cas>
4. In the case of Alicante and Fantaelx, their city councils are the main contributors.



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