



# RELIGIOUS EVENTS AND DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS; INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF LOCAL CULTURE AND PLACE IDENTITY – STUDY OF THRISSUR POORAM IN INDIA

Priyanka Singh\*,  
P.J. Shyju,  
Adarsh Priyan

Banaras Hindu University,  
Varanasi, India

## Abstract:

Religious events play a vital role in retaining the cultural values of a place. It further leads to establishing a distinct identity of the place. Previous research emphasizes the significant contribution of local culture in developing tourism competitiveness and determines the opportunities and future scope of tourism development in a region. While several constructs involve ascribing a unique identity to the place, it is important to probe the constituents of the religious events' heritage value and their role in shaping place identity. The present research examines the role of religious festivals in preserving the heritage value of the place and sustaining its distinct identity by taking note of Thrissur Pooram, a mega-religious event conducted in a temple in Thrissur, a state of Kerala in India, in the month of May every year. The study employed a qualitative research framework and used a multi-method. Data collected from personal experience, photographs, and images from different sources and in-depth interviews with the organizing body members were analyzed. The findings emphasize the importance of religious events in triggering emotional attachments to cultural values in the local community, which further leads to the development of place identity and destination competitiveness.

## Keywords:

religious events, temple festival, destination image, place identity, heritage value.

## INTRODUCTION

Festivals represent a multifaceted cultural phenomenon that combines traditional cultural practices with artistic innovation (Getz & Page, 2016; Rossetti & Quinn, 2021). Due to the experiential significance, festivals have emerged as a cultural process that often reflects the transformation according to time at one end and the acceptance of people at the other. In the course of time, many places have been known for the festival held. From mere celebrations, festivals emerged as a significant player in the local economy, adding a commercial dimension to it, and festivals became consumable products (Del Barrio *et al.*, 2012). Jordan (2016) refers to this process as 'Festivalisation' to highlight the cultural consumption happening through intendedly designed festivals to pull attendees.

Festivals are, by and large, perceived as cultural (Rossetti & Quinn, 2021) and social (Kuo *et al.*, 2021) resources. The manifold advantages of festivals have been widely acknowledged in festival tourism literature.

Correspondence:  
Priyanka Singh

e-mail:  
priyanka.singh4@bhu.ac.in



The perspective brought by such authors includes festivals support the local economy to a great extent (Felsenstein & Fleischer, 2003), establish the cultural identity (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013), serve as an effective tool for marketing and branding (Dimmock & Tiyce, 2001), generate social well-being (Mair & Duffy, 2018) and promote sustainable development (Perry *et al.*, 2020).

A substantial amount of literature examines visitor experience in various types of festivals stemming from cultural and heritage backgrounds, such as food festivals, music festivals, ethnic festivals, cultural festivals, etc. (Laing, 2018). However, religious festivals, in this regard, still remain under-represented events, if not completely ignored, despite sharing a close affinity with cultural and heritage tourism (Rinschede, 1992). Religious events form one of the major attractions of religious tourism (Chen *et al.*, 2019), which has been recognized as one of the fastest-growing tourism segments in recent years (Raj & Griffin, 2015). Religious events are considered an important part of the daily life of people in the countries that have strong roots in religions. Such events are embedded in the consciousness of people and strictly follow local conventions and traditions. It often reflects the shared values, traditions followed by generations that have a deep emotional association with time, space, nature, and other objects considered auspicious. Therefore, it is worth to examine the constituents of religious festivals, their heritage value and role in making place identity that further may have influence on destination competitiveness.

India being a country with a legacy of rich cultural heritage where the concept of the festival is deeply attached to nature, seasons, legends, and folk traditions over thousands of years. According to the widely followed beliefs, religious shrines (every religion) conduct celebrations marking the importance attached to the deity. Special arrangements made for such celebrations temporarily convert the place into a confluence of pilgrims, performing artists, traders, facilitators, and tourists. Situating the present study in the context of the Thrissur Vadakkumnathan Temple festival, known as Pooram in the southern state of Kerala in India, this research is an attempt to study the significant role of the religious festival as a means of transmitting heritage value in the regional context, its role in developing place identity and contribution to the destination competitiveness.

The main objectives of the present research are:

- to study the role of Thrissur Pooram in reinforcing the unique cultural identity of the place,
- to study how the festival transforms the space and communicates the heritage value through tangible and intangible means, and
- to examine the destination competitiveness through the prism of festival events.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Festival and Identity

Festivals are considered the bridges between people and places (Finkel & Platt, 2020). They display innate linkages with personal, social, cultural, and national identity (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013; Zhang *et al.*, 2019). As such, the formation and celebration of identity are recognized as key elements in the creation of the destination identity of the region. In this regard, festivals are identified as an effective tool to promote the identity of the place. Tourism planners and marketers use festivals as a means to promote tourism opportunities in cities (Finkel & Platt, 2020) as well as in rural localities (Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014)

Theme-based festivals, such as food festivals (I. Lee & Arcodia, 2011), music festivals (Duarte *et al.*, 2018), and shopping festivals (Peter *et al.*, 2013) are some of the widely popular events, actively used as avenues to create and promote destination identity and branding and promote a specific form of tourism like culinary tourism (Yang *et al.*, 2020).

Contemporary and traditional forms of cultural festivals promote destination image by featuring the unique elements and attractions of the place. Such as the 'fringe festival of Canada' and 'The Edinburg festival' (Prentice & Andersen, 2003) position the cities as festival destinations by promoting art and creativity. The 'cultural capital of Europe' event in 2001 was an event-led regenerating and positioning strategy to promote Rotterdam as a cultural destination (Richards & Wilson, 2004). Similarly, the untold festival promotes Transylvania's



mythological heritage, Romanian culture, and traditions driving tourism and economic development in the region (Cianga, 2020). This way, festivals are perceived to contribute significantly to developing the sense of place or placemaking (Cianga, 2020; Lau & Li, 2015) by generating meaning and experience of the space.

Another observation from previous research is that festivals influence attendees' experience and perception of the host destination by offering cognitive and affective engagements. Destination managers identify the cognitive and affective components that contribute to unique destination experiences and then make decisions on destination branding and establishing place identity. For instance, based on the study of 12 regional food festivals in Australia, Lee & Arcodia (2011, p.364) emphasize that 'the uniqueness and fun of festival activities' were the main reasons for the impact of festivals on destination branding.

Since the attributes of festival performance are largely embedded in the local belief and values system, engagement in such activities plays a significant role in reinforcing the individual's self-image and the collective identity of the community members in relation to the place identity. The study by Jaeger & Mykletun (2013) demonstrates that various processes related to the festival performance that largely build on or are displayed in a frame of local Sami culture and heritage have a significant influence on individual and social identities and place attachment. Likewise, Ricke (2015) states that the sensorial experience generated during the festival performance conveys social meaning and reinforces the attendee's ethnic and national identity.

The festival environment is recognized to play a significant role in festival consumption. For example, popular music festivals where the sound combined with spectacular visual effects and impressive settings create a unique sensorial experience that facilitates the generation of emotional and authentic experiences, which further contribute positively and significantly to developing festival image (T. H. Lee & Chang, 2017). Such environment and experiences are also largely used in the promotional material of the destination to endorse festival iconicity. In addition, by engaging in cultural traditions, festivals can promote the preservation and re-invention of cultural heritage, as highlighted in the study of (Ascione & Fink, 2021) based on Italian *sagre*. The regional authorities can further use such events as an instrument of local development.

### About the Thrissur Pooram Festival

Pooram in the local language indicates 'a grand celebration' normally associated with temple festivals. Thrissur Pooram is a renowned annual religious festival celebrated in the city of Thrissur, Kerala, located in the southern part of India. It is one of the grandest festivals in the region that attracts thousands of visitors every year from all over the country. According to history, the Poorams of the Thrissur area were denied permission to participate Arattupuzha Pooram for some reasons. To resolve the grievance of the local people, The King of Cochin (Rama Verma Tampuran) granted permission to hold Thrissur Pooram at the premises of the Vadakkumnath Temple at Thrissur and the King himself monitored the celebration in the beginning. The festival is celebrated in the month of Medam on Pooram day (one day before of rising of the Uttramstar on the horizon, as per solar based local calendar) and sets on Makam star when the moon rises with the Pooram star, which falls between April-May.

The participant temples are divided into eastern and western sections, and in total, ten temples participate in the Pooram festival. The eastern side is called Paramekkavu (representing the Goddess Parvathi), and the Western side is called Thiruvambadi (Main deities: Sri Krishna, Ayyappa, Goddess Parvati). The Vadakkumnatha (Lord Shiva) Temple is situated in the center of the circle (known as Thekkin Kadu) in Thrissur. The deities from Paramekkavu and Thiruvambadypay respect to the main deity of Vadkkumnathan during the Pooram festival time. The deities are placed on decorated elephants as per strict traditional conventions and are accompanied by musicians playing instruments, and people from that area visit the Vadakkumnatha Temple. The colorful procession, accompanied by musicians playing traditional musical instruments, other events, and the crowd make this festival a unique cultural representation of Kerala.

A number of elements constitute the cultural heritage of the Thrissur Pooram festival - the architectural features of the temple, mural paintings inside the temple walls, materials associated with the temple kept in the premises, legends and myths associated with the main temple, and temples around, traditions associated with the pooram procession, various objects used with specific meaning and purpose, traditional ways of performing the music instruments and the colorful fireworks and the culture deeply associated with the pooram festival



and the local people who are passionate and protective about the festival as it holds a great symbolic value for the people of Thrissur; in both cultural and spiritual ways. It takes months of preparation, and a large number of people from different sections of society put up their skills and efforts to make the Pooram a complete grand success.

**Figure 1.** Images showing the location, main shrine, and the pooram festival



Source: Google map and Google images, 2022

## METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted a qualitative framework and followed a constructivist paradigm. Inductive approach has been adopted to achieve the research objectives. Qualitative research is considered highly useful in examining complex and subjective issues associated with a research problem (Braun & Clarke, 2014) and helps the researcher to gain insights into how individuals create meanings (Patton, 2015; Flick, 2009). Cultural festivals are suggested as a complex phenomenon (Lau & Li, 2015), integrated sites (Perry *et al.*, 2020) which are multifaceted, dynamic in nature, and involve intricate interactions among space, people, and affect (Brownnett & Evans, 2020). Therefore, taking into account the multiple constituents of the context, the study demanded the compilation of different types of data to reach logical conclusions. The data used for the present study include notes made on from participation and observation conducted during the festival in the month of May 2022, different images of the festival (in the form of photographs, newspaper articles, and private collections) collected from different sources, and data collected through semi-structured interview.

In order to identify the major constituents and mechanisms that contribute to creating a unique festivalscape, the landscape approach (Gou & Shibata, 2017) is employed, where festival images are used to identify spatial configurations, content, and experience. As such, images are widely employed tools in various research contexts, for example, to study public images as social indicators (Cherem, 1972), visitor experience (Gou & Shibata, 2017), and destination image. The researchers recognize images as a unique opportunity to explore and unpack the deeper concepts by analyzing the underlying association of the images with the context, intent, meaning, and interpretation (Ardévol, 2012; Drew & Guillemin, 2014; Rose, 2016).

Further, to recognize the local perspective on the importance of the event in ascribing a distinct identity to the place, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the organizing committee members of the Pooram Festival.



## Procedure

Multiple sources were approached to collect the images in order to generate a rich composition, and a selection criterion was developed to screen the images to remain focused on the study objective. The images which show different facets and layers of the festival, such as physical settings, spatial change (temporary and permanent), actors and their roles, activity, time, and feeling of participants, were included. Images that were highly repetitive in nature or not communicating anything new were rejected. Through this procedure, finally, 52 images were selected for the study, which included the researcher's self-clicked photos during the site visit (16), magazines (13), newspapers (17), and album collection of temple administration (06).

Members of the festival organizing committee were approached for conducting semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were found to be quite useful in eliciting information from the respondent as the researcher can use clues and collect detailed information pertaining to a subject (Irvine, 2011). Out of the 12 members who agreed to participate in the interview, we could conduct six successful interviews, each lasting almost 20 minutes. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed into English for analysis purposes. The present study involved a multi-method, and the information received from the respondents was more general. Hence, the different types of collected data, i.e., the notes prepared from observations, codes generated from images, and the transcript of the interviews, were collated and performed thematic analysis to understand the underpinning themes related to the research questions.

## Analysis

Due to the study's thrust and the nature of the present data study used thematic analysis where a constructive approach was employed to interpret the results. In the qualitative research analysis process, the data is viewed and examined by taking cognizance of the importance of the context (Hilton *et al.*, 2020). Thematic analysis is a widely employed tool for investigating subjects that are less understood, complex in nature, intricately intertwined with contextual factors, and thus require discernment and useful interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Hannam & Knox, 2005). According to Braun and Clarke (2016), thematic analysis is a useful tool 'where it is recognized that the meaning or significance of the whole may be more than the sum of its parts. The process of theme development was iterative and included three steps- open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, where constant comparative analysis is used on the basis of similarities and differences to refine the concepts and categories.

## RESULTS

Based on the analysis of the images, eight subcategories and four major themes were identified (see Table 1), which were found to be complexly entangled (see Fig. 2) and leading towards the following interpretation.

### A Dynamic Space

Study findings indicated that the celebration of the Thrissur Pooram festival transcends the spatial territory of Thrissur city into a fluid space with the overtone of sacredness. The performance of festival consists of a range of sacred rituals performed at various temples. These temples are located at different sites in the city, and a huge public procession is conducted to connect these temples. As a result, the festival venue covers a large physical space that includes sacred spaces, i.e., the temple premises, as well as the city's urban space, which consists of various secular features such as commercial buildings, open ground, bus station, etc. In order to facilitate the visitors and conduct the festival smoothly, several kinds of temporary structures come up during the festival celebration to accommodate various cultural and religious activities. These temporary changes induce visible transformation in the city's physical appearance and facilitate the altered usage of the urban space for cultural and religious purposes. Further, the Holy character of the event, religious symbolism, and embodiment of religion in sacred practices performed publicly during the festival transcend the perception of secular spaces of the city to a sacred territory that blurs the dichotomy between urban-traditional and sacred-secular.



## Complex Interaction

The findings recognized multiple constituents of the festivalscape that primarily include humans, objects, and their active interaction in a dynamic space. Various objects related to cultural and religious utility are identified to form a major element of the festival performance. It includes cultural objects like colorful caparisons (*nettippattam*), shields (*aalavattams*), ornament (*venchamarams*), designer umbrellas, traditional instruments, handicrafts, traditional attire, as well as religious objects such as sacred offerings, prayers objects, and worship idols. Elephants, the iconic features and major highlight of this festival, are the only living objects in this category. The elephant holds substantial religious significance in Indian tradition and is considered a sacred vehicle of the deities. In religious symbolism, carrying Holy idols on the elephant's back is the manifestation that God occupies a highly revered space where all the devotees can also see (*darshan*) and get the blessing of God.

## Heritage Value

The interplay between space, people, and objects during the Thrissur Pooram celebration is observed to transmit cultural and religious heritage attributes of the place and its community, which may be of regional, national, or international significance. Predominantly, these attributes are intangible in nature, such as indigenous artistry and skill, local history, religious belief, religious tradition, and religious value manifested during festival performances through visual cues. Nevertheless, many temple structures can be considered tangible heritage assets, particularly the Vadakkunnathan temple dedicated to Lord Shiva, which was recently nominated for inclusion in the World Heritage list for its significant architectural, aesthetic, historical and religious value. In addition, the other ancient temples serving as the venue of different rituals conducted during the event also showcase India's traditional Dravidian style of temple architecture.

People in various roles, such as visitors, performers, devotees, organizers, priests, etc., constitute another core feature of the festival. They are observed to engage actively with the objects in cognitive and affective manners, further, which is innately influenced by the impression of the surrounding space. Performance of ritualistic practices, following the traditions, encourage cognitive engagement of the performers, and the audience (including pilgrims and tourists), while on the other realization of the festivalscape as a sacred territory triggers the affective engagement of people. Public performances of religious rituals and the display of holy icons stir the emotions of spectators and devotees. The expression of reverence, awe, and devotion by a massive crowd of devotees and religious community further intensifies the sacred environment of the festival. This way, people and their engagements are not just affected by the perception of place but also contribute to the co-creation of festivalscape.

## The Perspective of the Organizing Committee Members

The outcome of interviews with members of the organizing committee reflects a positive opinion and strong attachment to the Thrissur Pooram festival. The major themes that emerged through the conversation are as follows:

### An authentic ancient Hindu festival

Most of the respondents expressed great faith and confidence in the performance of Thrissur Pooram. They deemed it the most authentic and original religious festival involving a whole lot of traditional Hindu rituals. After so many years of its origin, these rituals have still been intact and performed in the same way as it was started by Sakthan Thampuran, the founder of Thrissur Pooram. According to one of the respondents:

*"All these rituals are conducted in the same way as there were 300 years ago when the Pooram started".*

*"Thrissur Pooram has a rich history to its origin. The rituals and traditions followed during the Pooram have been established by the king Sakthan Thampuran himself".*



## A matter of identity, pride, and a sense of community

The response of the majority of the members indicates their attachment to the festival where it is not considered just an occasion of celebration but a way of connecting people, bringing harmony, and endowing a unique identity to Thrissur and its people.

*“Thrissur Pooram is a matter of pride for the people of Thrissur, and I can say that it is not Just Thrissur...”*

They agreed that Thrissur Pooram is their pride. It is the grandest and one of the widest-recognized festivals in the country. It is one of the unique religious festivals that brought huge recognition to Thrissur, and this festival has the potential to elevate the recognition of Thrissur at the global level.

While respondents expressed an assortment of various emotions during answering, including awe, reverence, pride, and delight, one of the most prominent emotions that the researcher personally felt was the immense love they all have for Thrissur Pooram. In the words of one respondent:

*“Thrissur Pooram is a lifeline for every resident of Thrissur. It is a part of who we are”.*

## A promoter of tourism

Thrissur Pooram is one of the biggest tourist attractions in Kerala. It is considered the largest among all the festivals and is popularly referred to as the ‘Pooram of Poorams’. Respondents perceive the event as a major cultural and religious attraction that draws visitors from different parts.

*“Thrissur Pooram is a grand event and offer many cultural and spiritual attractions that attract many visitors”.*

*“Thrissur Pooram is one of the favourite festivals of foreigners, and in all the Poorams before Covid, there has been a steady presence of international tourists”.*

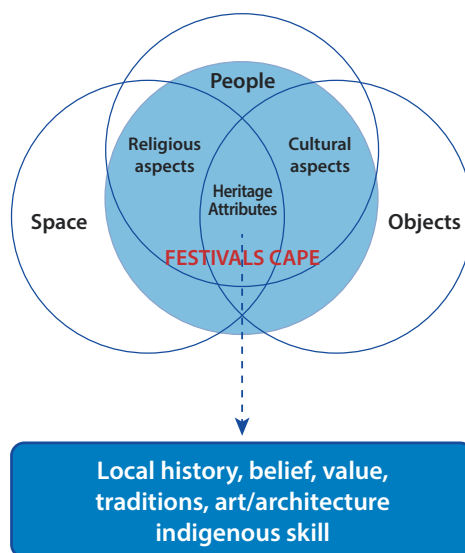
**Table 1.** Major Constituents of Thrissur Pooram Festival

| Open code                                                                                                                                           | Axial code                                                                                                 | Themes                | Actors        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| Security staff, exhibition visitors, customers, sellers, on-lookers, musicians, drummers, dancers, cultural performers, audience, Elephant trainers | Artisans, visitors, performers, audience, management staff                                                 | Cognitive engagement  | People        |
| Group of Priests, crowd of devotees, bowing                                                                                                         | Worshiping, devotion, ecstasy,                                                                             | Affective engagement  |               |
| Idol of God and Goddesses, sacred offerings, prayer objects                                                                                         | Deity, religious objects                                                                                   | Religious             | Objects       |
| Elephant                                                                                                                                            | Sacred animal                                                                                              |                       |               |
| Colorful caparisons (nettipattam), shield (aalavattams) ornament (venchamarams) and designer umbrellas, Exhibition items                            | Musical instruments, decorative crafts, traditional attire, traditional cuisine, handicrafts               | Cultural              |               |
| Temples, procession route, temple premises (gathering ground)                                                                                       | Permanent sacred space, temporary sacred space                                                             | Sacred                | Dynamic Space |
| Exhibition ground, performing art venue, commercial shops, stalls                                                                                   | Permanent utility space, temporary utility space                                                           | Secular               |               |
| Temple structure                                                                                                                                    | Architecture                                                                                               | Tangible attributes   | Value         |
| Traditional religious practices, rituals, cultural traditions                                                                                       | Indigenous workmanship and skill, history, religious belief, religious tradition, religious value, meaning | Intangible attributes |               |

Source: Authors' elaboration



**Figure 2.** Integration of religious festival constituents



Source: Authors' illustration

## DISCUSSION

The study's findings are consistent with the place theory that perceives a place as a dynamic entity that is not limited to its physical existence. According to Relph (1976) and Tuan (1977) notion of place emerges when people begin to ascribe meaning, values, and utility to a geographical location by engaging in sociocultural practices and attaching their emotions to it. The present study recognizes that the realm of sacred space expands beyond the delineated religious boundaries, i.e., temple premises to the entire city. Through the public performance of sacred rituals and engagement in various kinds of religious and cultural practices which bear deep meaning and sentiments for the associated community, the secular character of the urbanscape of Thrissur city transforms into a sacred territory during the celebration of Thrissur Pooram festival. The expression of profound emotions in the festival attendees reflects their transcendent experience of the space and supports the assertion of scholars identifying religious sites as heterotopias (Shackley, 2002), third spaces (Olsen, 2012), and liminal spaces (Turner, 1973) that exist beyond the material form, constantly evolving between the real and the imaginary and shaped by socially and individually constructed meanings (Belhassen *et al.*, 2008). The present findings suggest that religious festivals contribute to transcending the attendees' spatial experience by blurring the impressions of physical territory and its urban nature by producing a fluid space that predominantly bears sacred imprints.

The celebration of the Thrissur Pooram festival includes a range of activities. The festivalscape is observed to accommodate both secular and sacred engagements of the attendees, such as commercial engagements, cultural and learning involvements, and religious performances. This result supports the growing consensus in the academic domain on the diminishing dichotomy between sacred and secular at religious sites (Bond *et al.*, 2015; Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Della Dora, 2012). Present findings recognize multiple constituents of the Thrissur Pooram festival that primarily include objects of religious and cultural significance and human agency. An intricate entanglement between these two elements produces a unique sense of place, reflecting the meaning and values associated with the place, and thus making space itself one of the core constituents of the event. The interplay among objects, people, and space reflects local history, traditions, beliefs, knowledge, and skill. Local people express their great faith and attachment to the festival, for being deeply rooted in their legacy, and consider it a facilitator to promote a sense of identity and community. This outcome corroborates the assertion of Rossetti & Quinn (2021, p.928), considering festivals as public platforms of "shared histories, shared cultural practices, and ideals, as well as creating settings for social interactions. They are arenas where local knowledge is produced and reproduced, where the history, cultural inheritance and social structures that distinguish one place from another, are revised, rejected, or recreated".



As many researchers (Nolan & Nolan, 1992; Rinschede, 1992; Shackley, 2001) point out religious sites are also places of historical and cultural heritage tourism. The present study identifies support for this view in the case of the Thrissur Pooram festival. Despite being a religious event, a range of cultural activities, including music, cuisine, handicrafts, and craft exhibitions, present the significant features of the festival. Therefore, our findings suggest that religious events offer a blend of cultural and religious attractions just as the religious sites do, although many of the cultural elements carry strong religious values.

Further, the findings disclose that various sacred and secular elements associated with the celebration of the Thrissur Pooram festival convey the heritage attributes of the place. Although the material structure that possesses heritage value is limited, in this case, Vedakkunath and other temples, a larger range of elements represents the intangible category of heritage that is primarily conveyed through visual stimuli and material cues. It corroborates with the analysis of cultural festivals by Del Barrio *et al.* (2012), suggesting festivals are primarily an intangible heritage for reflecting the continuity of traditions and values of the past in the form of performances and essentially offering an experience consumption.

In this regard, while considering the role of the Thrissur Pooram festival in enhancing the city's tourism potential, this event offers several competitive advantages and opportunities for tourism marketing and destination promotion. Researchers in previous studies recognized that tourism developers/planners could successfully design a distinct destination image based on the unique features displayed during the celebration of cultural festivals (Prentice & Andersen, 2003; Richards & Wilson, 2004) and indicate the marketing advantages of such events. The unique constituents of the Thrissur Pooram festival identified in the present study exhibit various tangible and intangible heritage aspects of Thrissur city. These features contribute significantly to positioning the cultural-centric tourism potentials in particular. The influential character of this festival ascribes a distinct identity to the city and reinforces its religious and cultural values. Images and glimpses of this festival are extensively employed by the government authorities and tour planners in tourism promotional material, which literally aids in establishing destination attractiveness.

Furthermore, the grand scale and exclusive nature of the festival, encompassing both sacred and secular elements, enable the planners to arrange various engagements for the visitors that can facilitate generating authentic and quality experience consumption. Such experiences are critical for the destinations to achieve competitiveness, particularly given the rising experience of economy of the present day (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Lee & Arcodia (2011) and Yang *et al.* (2020) suggest that various activities designed around the festival significantly influence visitors' experience, and they can be effectively employed in destination branding and image building to gain competitive advantages.

Finally, the current study's outcomes recognize the local population's emotional attachment to the festival. Local people reported experiencing emotions of love, joy, respect, and faith in the celebration of the Thrissur Pooram festival and attaching their sense of pride, community, and belongingness to this festival. It supports the assertions of Singh *et al.* (2020) that religious attractions are primarily emotive in nature and joy and love are the most basic positive emotions generated during festival consumption (Rodríguez-Campo *et al.*, 2022) that further lead to social identification, satisfaction, and positive behavior and attitude in the attendees (J. Lee, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

The present research is undertaken to explore the role of religious festivals in generating a distinct identity of the place by seeking insight into the core constituents of such events and their impact on producing the meaning and values of the place for the associated community and reinforcing its unique identity.

Study outcomes recognized Thrissur Pooram festivals exert notable influence in producing an exclusive cultural landscape that exhibits a unique fusion of vibrant culture and powerful religious emotions. The event transforms the spatial experience by generating a dynamic interaction with the actors, resulting in a fluid space through active and complex entanglement among objects, people, and space. Along with being places of veneration, religious sites are often reported as historical sites. In this regard, religious events must also be considered as the arenas displaying cultural and religious attributes of the place, accumulated over a long time, and reinforcing the socially and culturally ascribed meaning and value to the place.



The exclusivity and influential character of the Thrissur Pooram festival lead the positive attitude and attachment to the local community on the one hand as well as stimulate increased marketing opportunities on the other. The festival is one of the major attractions in the region and attracts an increased number of visitor arrival. It presents a promising prospect to design the unique identity of Thrissur city based on the cultural idiosyncrasy exhibited during this event. In addition, this festival also contributes to generating an enriching experience for the visitors by manifesting local traditions and offering insights into local history, culture, and religious values.

Based on these outcomes, the present study suggests that religious festivals are unique attractions and experiential spaces. These events are effective tools of community-led, folkloric place-making and contribute to assigning an interesting and distinct identity to the place, which marketers and promoters can utilize to enhance the tourism competency of the destination.

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## APPENDIX

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View of starting of *Kudamattom*  
(Displaying colorful umbrella on the elephants facing each other as part of the main Pooram)



The crowd gathered to witness the *Kudamattom*



*Panchavadyam* Performance  
(performance of five traditional musical instruments)



The grandeur in display to honor the deity



Exhibition of pooram chamayam  
(exhibition of materials prepared)

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Source: Authors' archive, 2022