

# Opinion of the Spectators of a Grand Tour In Spain: A Qualitative Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The objective of this study is to carry out a qualitative analysis of the ratings of tourists and residents attending the road cycling sporting event “La Vuelta” held in Spain in 2019, 2020 and 2021 editions. **Methods:** The sample consisted of 1,203 comments/observations from tourists and residents in the in situ and post-event phase of each edition. For this qualitative analysis, an open question was used at the end of a quantitative questionnaire on social and tourism impact. Once each comment had been categorised, a summary was made of the responses and frequencies of each idea according to each category, positive and negative comments and the words most used in each type of comment. Nvivo v.10 software (QSR International, Burlington, MA 01803, USA) was used to analyse the comments and frequencies of each idea. **Results:** Most of the positive comments focus on the positive feelings and emotions generated by attending the event (emotion or enjoyment; 12.4%), great experience (14.8%), atmosphere of the event (10.4%), good organisation of the event (12.1%) and future intentions to return and recommend the event (7.4%). Negative comments mainly refer to the COVID-19 pandemic (11.8%), the advertising caravan (7.4%) and traffic and parking problems (5.9% of comments). Among the words associated with negative comments, the word “advertising caravan” stands out, while the most used words in positive reviews were “experience” and “emotion”. **Conclusion:** Most of the positive comments focus on positive feelings and emotions generated by attending the event (emotion or enjoyment) and the great experience and atmosphere surrounding the sporting event. In the 2020 edition, the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the event, although parking problems and traffic congestion are the worst-rated categories.

**Keywords:** residents; tourists; impacts; perception; sport event

## INTRODUCTION

The celebration of sporting events is a strategy widely used by local communities to generate positive impacts and benefits. Holding an event is an opportunity for communities seeking to promote their tourist attractions, attract visitors, gain international recognition, or improve their media coverage, regenerating the locality and revaluing the community (Balduck et al., 2011).

In recent years, the number of sporting events has increased considerably, and it is difficult to find a day of the year when a sporting event is not held, even if several sporting events coincide on the same day. This growth in the number of sporting events has led to an increase in scientific studies analysing their impact, especially research related to the analysis of social, cultural, and economic impacts of events (Getz, 2008).

Social impact assessment has become one of the fields within sport management that has become more relevant in recent years (Parra-Camacho et al., 2016). In most studies considering social impact of sporting events a quantitative methodology, mainly through questionnaires, was employed.

*La Vuelta a España* is one of the most important annual sporting events held in Spain, and it is the country's top cycling event as well as one of the most important road cycling events in the world along with the Tour de France and Giro d'Italia. *La Vuelta* is a distinctive and singular stage event held in different areas of the country with different routes (Kettner-Høeberg & Lopez, 2015).

The objective of this study was to conduct a qualitative analysis of the ratings made by tourists and residents attending the road cycling sporting event *La Vuelta* held in Spain in 2019, 2020 and 2021.

## METHOD

The qualitative analysis was based on the opinions of both residents and tourists attending *La Vuelta*. A total of 1,203 comments/observations from tourists (64.4%) and residents (36.6%) in the *in situ* and post-event phase in all three years were analysed (2019–2020–2021). The mean age of the respondents was  $45.6 \pm 11.4$  years. The majority of the respondents (56.9%) were male, and 43.1% were female. In all years the highest percentage of educational level was high school/vocational training (about 40.7%). As many as 70.1% were married or living with a partner, and 22.7% were single.

A group of eight to four researchers (depending on the stage and year in question) travelled with the caravan of *La Vuelta* in the selected stages. The type of sampling used was non-probabilistic convenience sampling. A tent with fixed tablets was set up at the start and finish areas where those attending the event (residents and tourists/excursionists) could approach and complete the survey.

In addition, the members of the group of surveyors were positioned in the start and finish areas, and randomly interviewed the attendees personally. The flyers with a QR code containing a link to a web page giving access to the questionnaires were also handed out, so that the attendees could access the survey from their own mobile phones.

An open-ended question was used at the end of a larger questionnaire researching into social impact of sporting events. Responses were categorized following the recommendations of Rincón-Gómez (2014). First, following Strauss and Corbin's (2002) advice, an inductive descriptive coding

of each comment was performed, identifying and describing the material in free categories (*in vivo*). Then, the total of 16 boxes were created according to the main theme of the comment.

Once each comment was categorized, a summary of the responses was made and frequencies of each idea according to each category were calculated, together with positive and negative comments as well as the words most frequently used in each comment. Nvivo v.10 software (QSR International, Burlington, MA 01803, USA) was used to analyse the comments and frequencies. Two researchers analysed the comments separately and selected the categories. Once the categories were determined, all concepts, words and phrases were sorted into their respective categories and quantified.

## RESULTS

The results of the analysis were grouped into 16 boxes according to the main theme of the comment (accessibility; atmosphere at the event; traffic and parking; litter; advertising caravan and La Vuelta Park; COVID-19 pandemic; enjoyment and emotion; unusual experience; socialization; future intentions; promotion of locality; promotion among young people; event organization; event information; promotion of sport and tourism). Table 1 shows the percentage of each of the thematic groupings. *Experience* was the most frequently mentioned theme (14.8% of all answers), followed by *enjoyment and emotion* (12.4%) and *event organization* (12.1%).

**Table 1.** Themes of the comments made by residents and tourists

Order	Theme	%	Order	Theme	%
1	Unusual experience	14.8	10	Promotion among young people	2.4
2	Enjoyment and emotion	12.4	11	Event information	1.8
3	Event organization	12.1	12	Accessibility	1.5
4	COVID-19 pandemic	11.8	13	Litter	1.2
5	Atmosphere at the event	10.4	14	Socialization	0.9
6	Vuelta Park and caravan	7.4	15	Promotion of sport	0.9
7	Future intentions	7.4	16	Tourism	0.9
8	Traffic and parking	5.9	17	Other themes	2.4
9	Promotion of locality	5.9			

Positive comments focused mostly on positive feelings and emotions generated by attending the event (emotion or enjoyment) as well as the great experience and atmosphere of the event. They also referred to the good organization of the event and the future intentions of coming back and recommending the event. The negative comments focused mainly on the COVID-19 pandemic, the publicity caravan, traffic and parking problems and lack of prior information.

Depending on the year in question, there were variations in the main topics discussed. Table 2 shows the main themes of the qualitative analysis in the three editions analysed. In the 2019 the experience was the most commented theme, followed by enjoyment and emotion, and organization. In the 2020 the comments related to the COVID-19 pandemic were the most relevant, and in 2021 enjoyment and emotion, followed by the atmosphere at the event, LaVuelta park and advertising caravan.

**Table 2.** Main themes of the comments made in each year

La Vuelta 2019	La Vuelta 2020	La Vuelta 2021
Experience		Enjoyment and emotion
Enjoyment and emotion	COVID-19 pandemic	Atmosphere at the event
Organization		Vuelta Park and caravan

*Experience* was the most commented theme, and both residents and tourists showed a very positive attitude towards it, particularly in 2019 when this was the most commented theme. A 43-year-old British tourist commented the 2019 race in the following manner: *“I have attended two stages during my holidays, both well organized and with very pleasant experiences.”* A Swedish tourist made this comment to one of the pollsters: *“Tell me a sport where you can be so close to your idols and talk to them? Also, free”*. The residents were also positive about their experience: *“It had been more than 40 years, in times gone by, that this great atmosphere hadn’t been seen in the town. For one day, everyone was seen to be happy and away from each of their problems”* (a 76-years-old female resident of Molina de Aragón (Guadalajara, 2021). *“It was an excellent day for a historic event never experienced in our municipality”* (a 66-years-old male resident of El Burgo de Osma (Soria), 2021 edition).

The theme *enjoyment and emotion* was the second most commented theme, being the most relevant in the 2021. Comments such as the following ones could be observed: *“My mother was moved to tears when the first cyclists arrived”* (a 42-years-old female tourist, 2021); or *“On TV it seems somewhat more boring and live it’s super exciting, it gives you a tremendous adrenaline rush and it was cool”* (a 52-years-old male resident of La Manga del Mar Menor (Murcia), 2021). *“We were all moved to see La Vuelta go by and we were also at the finish line, and it was exciting, it gave us an adrenaline rush to see how they crossed the finish line. I recommend it to everyone, for me it was a unique experience”* (a 32-years-old female resident of Albacete, 2021).

The third most commented topic was the organization of the event, with most comments praising good organization of the event: *“Congratulations to the good organization of La Vuelta and the friendliness of the staff”* (a 34-years-old female resident, 2021). *“It seems to me that La Vuelta is very well organized”* (a 42-years-old male tourist, 2019).

The 2020 edition was conditioned by the COVID-19 pandemic and the fear for health and possible increases in infections due to the development of the event, so it is no wonder that the most commented topic by residents was the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, 76% of the comments on this topic were negative. Different residents expressed their concern about the disregard for the measures against COVID-19: *“There were crowds at various points despite the restrictions. They shouldn’t have organized it”* or *“People huddled together, without a mask, without social distance”*. Others referred to the consequences of the pandemic and the effects on the event: *“With the bars closed there was not much impact”* or *“In the circumstances that have been carried out, it has been a huge expense for the City Council, with practically no benefit for anyone”*. Although to a lesser extent, some residents were satisfied with the measures against COVID: *“The COVID measures were exquisite, and it was very well organized.”* Even in the same municipality and place, there were discrepancies regarding this issue. A couple of residents commented: *“It has been very exciting to reach the finish line and people have respected the security measures”* (man) while his partner said: *“It is very hot and there are many people without a mask for the situation we are in”* (both 19-year-old residents).

The atmosphere of the event is the next of the most mentioned topics, representing 10.4% of the comments. *“Excellent event, I enjoyed the atmosphere”* (a 24-years-old female tourist, 2019). In 2021, the atmosphere of the event was the second most relevant theme, following *enjoyment and emotion*. For example: *“I had never seen this up close and it seemed incredible to me and the atmosphere that existed after so long with COVID was great”* or *“The atmosphere that it generated had never been in the locality compared to other events, such as football matches, foot races...”* (residents, 2021).

Another theme that appeared among the most commented ones in the 2021 was the Vuelta Park and the advertising caravan, two of the parallel activities of La Vuelta. Most of these comments were negative, expecting a greater number of advertising activities and products: *“The publicity caravan is quite poor. I was expecting more activities and merchandising for the kids, and they are far away from the finish area.”* (a 42-year-old female resident, 2021).

Finally, some examples of other topics were observed and even though they were less recurrent than the previous topics, they have had relevance for the tourists and residents attending the event. For example, regarding prior information, there were comments such as: *“I missed more information on traffic and road closures, as well as their alternatives”*; *“Little information for young children to participate in the sponsor area”*; or *“A day to remember, the next day my nephew wanted to be a cyclist, and like him, I imagine, almost all the children in the town”* (a 41-years-old male resident 2021).

## DISCUSSION

This paper aimed at the qualitative analysis of the opinions of tourists and residents attending the road cycling sporting event across three years.

Most previous studies that have analysed the social and tourism impact of sporting events have used quantitative methodology. Several of these quantitative studies added a qualitative question to the questionnaire, but on most occasions, the responses to this type of question were not analysed (Rincón-Gómez, 2014).

In this work, an open-ended question in the final section of the questionnaire was used. Open-ended questions used in surveys provide textual information such as opinions, explanations, and justifications. The open-ended question does not require a choice between a set of alternatives. It is a free response, and therefore, depending on the nature of the question and the interest of the person, the answers vary greatly in length and depth.

Despite the difficulty that can be involved in the coding and the analysis of answers (Gómez, 2014), the use of open-ended questions is justified on many occasions due to the advantages they offer. Some of these advantages according to Pope (2002) are: (i) the collection of spontaneous information; (ii) the enrichment of the final report (through the inclusion of real quotas of the responses that are considered significant); (iii) the usefulness to explain and understand the response to a closed question; and (iv) provide information about the opinion of a group of people.

It is recommended to involve residents in the active participation of the event as spectators (Bursa and Mailer, 2021). In international literature, few studies use a qualitative methodology for the analysis of perceptions of the impacts of sporting events. Lockstone-Binney et al. (2020) conducted a study on two events held in Australia as a part of the Cricket World Cup by interviewing over 150

tourists and event attendees. Among the short-term social impacts that emerged from the results was a positive feeling about the atmosphere and ambience of the events, as has been the case at La Vuelta as well since the atmosphere of the event was one of the most frequently (and positively) mentioned themes by attendees. Ortiz (2020) conducted a qualitative study with managers of hotel establishments in Cantabria on the passage of La Vuelta through their community, and most of the comments and future intentions were positive.

The emotions attendees felt when cyclists pass them by, and the atmosphere generated in the event has played an essential role in their assessments. The festive nature of sporting events can create a limonoid space, allowing attendees to escape from their daily lives (Chalip, 2006). During the celebration of sporting events, according to the previously mentioned author, *“there is a sense that something more important, something that transcends sport, is happening. It feels as if new energy has been injected into the community atmosphere, energy that everyone can share. Social rules and social distinctions seem less important and sometimes are suspended altogether”* (p. 110).

However, not all qualitatively analysed comments were positive. By using qualitative methodology, Abdullah et al. (2016) explored through semi-structured interviews the perceptions of residents and their engagement in an international regatta in Malaysia. Feedback from the host community suggested that the event organizers should focus on developing better lines of communication and dissemination of event information. These results are in line with our research, as pre-event information was considered one of the problems of La Vuelta.

Parking problems and traffic congestion have been the next most commented topics by the attendees on the negative impacts of La Vuelta. In previous research by Martin and Barth (2013) used quantitative questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with Glasgow residents during the 2014 Commonwealth Games and highlighted the concerns about traffic congestion and parking problems.

The publicity caravan also figured prominently in the comments of the residents and tourists who attended the event. It should be noted that even though the caravan is a complementary activity to the sporting event, the advertising caravan has become a spectacle, a parade with colourful and modified vehicles to entertain the spectators before the passage of the cyclists (Fagnoni & Castoldi, 2018). According to Fine and Speer (1985) who analysed an event very similar to La Vuelta, the advertising caravan has become an attraction, where 47% of fans who attended the event did so mainly to watch the caravan (CNN, 2017).

Finally, comments related to the COVID-19 pandemic were the main theme of the 2020 research. In this edition, there was a higher incidence of the virus, and a number of measures and restrictions was introduced. In summary, 76% of the comments on this theme were negative towards the event. No other qualitative research was found to analyse the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on the perception of a sporting event. Shigemura et al. (2020) explain that fear and perceptions of risk to the unknown can condition negative social behaviours. Fear of a collapse of the healthcare system due to the medical burden of dealing with an outbreak has a negative effect on attitudes toward sporting events (Kato, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

The qualitative analysis of the comments made by spectators, residents, or tourists, who attended in person at least one stage of the Vuelta and participated in the on-site evaluation of the event itself showed interesting results.

On the one hand, the attending spectators opined that the experience of this sports spectacle and the fun derived from it were the aspects most commented on and highlighted by the majority of those who attended the event. The public considered fun and family atmosphere generated by the organization of the event at the start and/or finish line sites as very significant. This fact is marked by the organization's goal of creating a festive atmosphere by having multiple stands and activities aimed at having an entertaining afternoon with one's family. This is why comments of the Vuelta Park are the second most mentioned aspects by spectators. In this park, there are different activities in which people of all ages can participate and receive a gift from the sponsor or collaborating brands.

On the other hand, the negative comments are related to the publicity and information given about the event in the host locations, especially about the COVID-19 pandemic. During 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the ban of all recreational and social activities of the event due to the limitations set by different regional authorities in an attempt to block the spread of the virus. The results indicate that the pandemic had significant influence on mental health of the population, and therefore on their perception of the event in the absence of such a social and touristic purpose.

In addition, the lack of information is a very important aspect that must be considered, both by those responsible for the organization of La Vuelta and by other directors of sporting events. This lack of information to the population produces negative comments from the residents as shown in the results of this study, for example, parking problems or temporary traffic cuts.

Thus, as a practical proposal, sports event organizers and local authorities should pay more attention to informing residents about such events. In this way, they will be able to prevent possible problems arising from organizing such an event, e.g., parking problem. Simultaneously, more people would be informed about the event, and consequently increase local support for it.

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