

Extended Abstract for ERSA, 2026

G15 Tourism and Culture in the Transition Era, Carrying Capacity, Creative Industries, Wellbeing and Quality of Life

Ethical and sustainability issues coming with large inner city festivals: a residents' perspective. case 'Gentse Feesten', historical center of Ghent, Belgium

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1. Introduction

In festival research, one of Europe's largest cultural events, the *Gentse Feesten* in the heart of Belgium, has remained underexamined in international contexts (Carvalho, 2025; VRT NWS, 2025). Probably this results from the fact that the festival started as a neighborhood event and grew almost unnoticed beyond the neighborhood scale, gaining regional, national and international attention gradually. What began as some scattered fairs has evolved into a 10-day cultural music festival situated in the city's historic center (Devriese & Brusse, 2016; Stad Gent, n.d.) and it is recognized at present as one of Europe's largest 'International Street Festivals', attracting over 1.7 million visitors in 10 days in 2024 (Devriese & Brusse, 2016; Stad Gent, n.d.). It is said that its historical significance and resilience highlight its cultural importance, remaining central to Ghent's social life for nearly two centuries (Stad Gent, n.d.). Nevertheless some questions arise concerning this evolution, more specifically about local identity and ownership by residents.

Its international recognition and scale brought both, development and challenges. Intensified tourism, environmental impacts, and nuisances for residents, particularly in the city center, have become pressing issues that influenced its organization and management. Nevertheless, large-scale festivals often involve noise, waste, and overcrowding (Andereck et al., 2005; Derret, 2003), raising questions about how sustainable and ethical such growth is for the city and its inhabitants in terms of wellbeing. In light of these findings, the *Gentse Feesten* have been analyzed as well as the visions, perceptions and experiences of different stakeholder groups with a primary focus on local residents. A mixed-methods approach is employed, combining survey and interview data which offer a platform to share personal experiences and

reflections. In turn, the questions of the survey and the protocol for the interviews are inspired by the Social Exchange Theory (SET).

Therefore, guiding this research is the question: *How do the Gentse Feesten impact the residents living in Ghent, and can a discrepancy in perception regarding residential well-being be detected among different stakeholders?*

2. Methodology

This research is primarily based on primary data, complemented by secondary sources. Secondary data include official evaluations of the Gentse Feesten (2023–2024), municipal documents (e.g., police regulations, square guidelines), news articles, and reports from similar European festivals such as the Palio in Siena. These documents helped shape the survey and interview protocols, and provided insights into festival organisation, resident well-being, and communication strategies. The combination of surveys and interviews allowed for both breadth and depth, capturing general perceptions as well as more nuanced insights into motivations, experiences, and well-being.

2.1 Surveys

To explore the attitudes of residents and festival visitors, a survey was conducted during the 2024 Gentse Feesten. The 30-question survey was informed by literature on residential well-being and festival sustainability (Sirgy, 2021; Soini & Dessein, 2016). It addressed connections to the festival, nuisances (with some items specific to residents), community and cultural impacts (e.g., inclusivity, internationalisation), and practical experiences of attendees and inhabitants. Most questions used a 5-point Likert scale, accompanied by yes/no and multiple-choice items.

In total, 150 questionnaires were collected: 100 in person at various festival locations (e.g., Baudelopark, De Krook, St. Jacobskerk) and 50 online via QR codes and social media platforms. The filling out of questionnaires in the street lasted for 3 to 15 minutes, either self-administered or with help of the researcher. Efforts were made to diversify the sample through different times and sites, though randomness was limited by attendee willingness. All participants were asked to give their informed consent orally.

2.2 Interviews

To complement survey data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two key stakeholder groups: organisational actors (organisers, municipal staff, police, and service providers) and residents of the city center of Ghent. Protocols were based on the SET framework, focusing on well-being, sustainability, and inclusion.

Organisational stakeholders were contacted via email, with 12 interviews conducted online or in person. For residents, 15 interviews were obtained through open calls on social media, outreach via neighbourhood associations ("Dekenijen"), and street-sampling. While this enabled a range of perspectives, volunteer bias may have favoured participants with stronger opinions. Interviews were conducted mainly in Dutch, with verbal consent for recording and academic use (only).

3 Main findings

An ethical understanding of festivals is closely intertwined with their sustainability, particularly their social sustainability. In this context, being 'ethical' refers to the fair distribution of benefits and costs, respect for residential well-being, and the responsible governance of social, cultural, and environmental impacts. Linking back to the research question: *How do the Gentse Feesten impact residents living in Ghent, and can discrepancies in perceptions of residential well-being be detected among different stakeholders?*

Our research shows that the *Gentse Feesten* predominantly succeeds in achieving its ethical responsibilities in terms of cultural community creation, social cohesion, and local pride for now. Strong sense of place, community connection, and the festival's historical significance contribute to positive resident perceptions, particularly among younger and long-term inhabitants. These socio-cultural benefits often increase residents' tolerance toward nuisances, suggesting that, for many, the perceived benefits continue to outweigh the costs.

However, ethical tensions remain. Environmental nuisances such as noise, waste, pollution, and overcrowding significantly affect residential well-being, especially among older residents and newer inhabitants of the city center. Continuous shifts in population in the city center means that each year new residents encounter the festival for the first time, often resulting in increased complaints and reduced acceptance. Not all residents experience the festival equally, raising concerns about fairness and inclusivity within the festival's governance.

Nevertheless the festival seems to be at a tipping point. The growth and internationalization of the *Gentse Feesten* start to create ethical tensions. While some residents accept the festival's evolution, others fear the loss of local traditions and the increased strain on the festival's resources. The city's limits appear to have been reached, with overcrowding sometimes leading to feelings of unsafety. These findings highlight the need for improved communication with all resident groups, to more equally balance the negative impacts of the festival. This is not an easy task. No one suggested drastic changes to prevent the festival from growing except for limiting its spatial impact to the present limits of the festival zone. Ideas of limiting the festival already result in protest by some stakeholders. The introduction of technical interventions such as reusable cups might be expensive but fairly easy as well

as dB limitations; the question is of a different and far more ethical order if one starts asking visitors to show empathy with the residents and adapt their behavior. Yet, this is what residents deserve and expect.

Finally, this research reveals that many festival concerns are found year-round in Ghent's events and nightlife, challenging the idea of the *Gentse Feesten* as a temporary nuisance. Under the Social Exchange Theory, continued residential support for the *Gentse Feesten* can only be maintained if ethical costs and benefits are carefully managed. This asks for ethical thinking by local authorities in that respect which implies resisting the pressure from the tourism and event sector that prefer a full agenda all year round for the sake of business earning and occupancy rates .

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