



## Festival and event tourism research: Current and future perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

This opinion piece considers the future of research into festival and event tourism based on current gaps in the literature and the author's view of key directions that this research is likely to take. Six key areas are highlighted: (1) overcoming the tendency for non-tourism related research on festivals and events to be under-researched, or their links with tourism exaggerated; (2) the need to extend the theoretical foundations of management to festival and event tourism; (3) gaps in sustainability research connected to festivals and events tourism; (4) examining the ongoing relevance of and challenges for traditional festivals and events in a modern, digital age; (5) the importance of understanding sub-cultures, social worlds and serious leisure; and (6) the potential to go beyond disciplinary boundaries and even transcend them, through interdisciplinary and postdisciplinary approaches, as well as the need to explore new methodologies.

### 1. Introduction

There have been a number of articles written on the current state of festival and event tourism research over the past few years, notably [Getz and Page \(2016\)](#) and [Wilson, Arshed, Shaw, and Pret \(2017\)](#), which provide an agenda or suggestions for future studies. It is not my intention to duplicate the breadth of these articles. Instead, I wish to highlight particular deficiencies or gaps in the literature that I feel represent opportunities for researchers and point the way towards the future of festival and event tourism research.

### 2. Key directions for future research

#### 2.1. Festivals and events (beyond) tourism?

Festival and events tourism research is still in a relatively nascent stage, with research specifically about this context only appearing in tourism-related journals around the late 1980s and early 1990s. The first dedicated journal in the area, *Event Management* (previously *Festival Management and Event Tourism*), began publishing articles in 1993, while in contrast, dedicated tourism journals commenced in the early 1970s, giving them a 20 year head-start on those journals solely focused on events. This opens up a great swathe of areas of research for those working in the festivals and events field, but also potentially helps to explain some of the gaps in the literature that still linger.

Many of the current crop of researchers in festivals and events graduated from tourism schools or saw themselves primarily as tourism academics, while the journals available to them, particularly the high-

ranking ones or those with high impact scores, have, until relatively recently, been largely tourism-focused. For example, based on the Australian Business Deans' Council list of journal rankings, the highest ranked journal in events, *Events Management*, is ranked an A and there are no A\* ranked events journals, unlike their equivalents in tourism such as *Tourism Management*, *Journal of Travel Research* or *Annals of Tourism Research*. This may have contributed to a skewing of festivals and events research towards a tourism focus or context.

Although not all festivals and events have a tourism connection or tourism outcomes, researchers have often either concentrated on those that had, or forced their research in some cases to make it fit a tourism mould. This has led to potentially interesting forms of events being under-researched because their links with tourism are tenuous or non-existent. This is a contentious point to make in a tourism journal, but my point is that while festivals and events *may* be a subset of tourism, that is not the *whole* picture. All festivals and events are worthy of study as a phenomenon, even those of a more prosaic nature, but their tourism connections should not be exaggerated if they are not present.

One case in point is the product launch, a useful tool in marketing that received worldwide press coverage recently in the form of the unveiling of the new iPhone X. Apple's senior vice-president of software engineering struggled in front of a live audience to get the face recognition software to work – its stated point of competitive advantage. They are an example of an industrial event, 'staged with the primary objective of selling goods and services' ([Frost & Laing, 2018, p. 2](#)). They have little connection to tourism in most instances. Vast sums are sometimes spent on their staging, yet researchers, even in the marketing sphere, seemingly have little interest in studying what these events aim

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to do and whether they achieve their strategic objectives, particularly in a world where face-to-face activities are increasingly under threat by their online equivalents. As events journals become more highly ranked, and events researchers feel more at liberty to move beyond tourism-related research, we may see a reduction in the quantum of festival and event tourism research in favour of studies that examine a broad spectrum of different events.

## 2.2. The management of festivals and events

The common view about research into festival and event tourism, often advanced in review articles and textbooks, is that it has focused on operational issues to the exclusion of considerations of their social dimension. Yet a review of the literature suggests that empirical research on the management, operation and governance of festivals and events has been somewhat limited to date. A number of important theoretical foundations of management have not found their way into the festival and event tourism literature or have only been applied in a limited way. One cogent example is the work on *emotional labour* – involving the management by a service provider of their interactions with service receivers in line with the expectations of their organisation and their customers. This management of emotional display, which can lead to emotions being faked and an emotional toll being exerted, appears to be highly relevant in the festivals and events context, given the high-pressure environment, the preponderance of volunteer staff, and the fact that encounters between staff and attendees form a vital part of the quality of the festival or event-going experience. It is therefore curious that emotional labour has not been used as a lens in order to better understand the delivery and staging of events, as well as the experience of being a volunteer or attending an event. Allied examples of theoretical developments in the human resources management field that could be usefully applied to festival and event tourism are the concepts of burnout; workplace stress; conservation of resources; and workplace commitment. There have been some recent studies that have sought to explore some of these issues, but there is scope for more in-depth studies across a variety of festivals and events of different sizes and in diverse locations.

Other theoretical lenses drawn from other management sub-disciplines that might illuminate the study of festival and events tourism include management innovation and creativity; social entrepreneurship; diversity management; team building and performance; group dynamics; leadership styles, particularly participative leadership, given the potential application to a volunteer-based structure; conflict management and resource constraints. Working with colleagues from management sub-disciplines such as organisational behaviour, entrepreneurship, human resources management and strategic management might therefore lead to fruitful research partnerships, and the fostering of multidisciplinary and postdisciplinary approaches, which is discussed later in this article.

An example of a useful adaptation of a theory drawn from a business discipline is the *event portfolio*, which borrows the word ‘portfolio’ from finance in the sense of a risk reduction strategy of diversified assets but has its own distinct meaning in an events context, referring to the creation of a suite of festivals and/or events that can appeal to different audiences and serve a variety of purposes (Ziakas, 2013). My sense is that other researchers will start to see these types of approaches as a way to advance events studies and develop its own body of theory, and we may see other examples in the near future.

## 2.3. Sustainability

Research into the sustainability of festivals and events is relatively well advanced, including studies of the impacts of festivals and events on the sustainability of destinations and host communities; the planning of sustainable festivals and events; motivations of attendees at green events; attempts to use festivals and events to deliver sustainability

messages; and strategic objectives of festival and event organisers linked to sustainability outcomes. This body of work encompasses the gamut of environmental, social and economic sustainability, but there are still gaps in research to be filled.

For example, the dearth of studies on the factors behind the *failure* of festivals and events mirrors the situation with respect to tourist attractions, perhaps because examining success is considered to be a sexier topic and easier to sell to funding bodies when grants are being sought. We also need to understand in greater depth whether events play a role in changing behaviour, not just environmental behaviour, but perhaps the way we interact with and embrace difference, including minorities, those with a disability and a variety of cultures, races, religions and sexual orientation. Another important area requiring exploration is the nexus between festival and event tourism and *resilience*, both at an organisational level and from the perspective of attendees and the local community; facilitating adaptation to an increasingly volatile global environment.

## 2.4. Traditional events in a modern (digital) world

The practice of staging festivals and events has a long history, and arguably extends back to prehistoric times. There are many examples of traditional events that have survived into the 21st century, such as the Hogmanay New Year celebrations in Scotland, the Palio horse race in Italy and Japan's Cherry Blossom festivals. Despite this, the festival and event tourism literature has not examined as comprehensively as it might the continued existence of these events in the modern world, including their adaptation to change (or not) and their role in a dynamic world, both as a tourist product and within their local communities (Laing & Frost, 2015). These are important issues to explore, particularly in an emerging digital environment where new media, including social media, holds sway and less activities than before occur face-to-face. There are also issues with respect to the use of indigenous and traditional culture and rituals within festivals and events, such as authenticity, commodification and potential exploitation, as well as their connection to more positive outcomes such as reconciliation and capacity building; all of which require further study and analysis in a variety of contexts.

This research should draw upon bodies of literature from other disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies and psychology, to avoid reinventing the wheel and to deepen our understanding of the genesis of modern events and their evolution over time. There have been a number of valuable studies of events as a social phenomenon, particularly festivals, by the likes of Falassi (1987) on the ritual structure of events and Bakhtin (1965) on the origins of carnivals and the carnivalesque, which few researchers in our field appear to have read, and even fewer have engaged with in an in-depth manner in their studies. A rich repository of knowledge in the social sciences exists about festivals and events, which could help to underpin theory development and form the basis for advances in understanding that transcend disciplines.

More recently, there have been moves to use theories drawn from positive psychology such as happiness and well-being as a lens to examine events in terms of their potential contribution to the *good life* – a life worth living (Filep, Volic, & Lee, 2015). While there are few empirical studies on this topic to date, it is likely that this research will start to proliferate given the number of researchers now working in this space, many of whom have been studying tourism from a positive psychological perspective.

## 2.5. Sub-cultures, social worlds and serious leisure

There is a sub-genre of tourists who travel to engage in *serious leisure*, involving ‘the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its

special skills and knowledge' (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). A number of these participants achieve this through their attendance at and/or participation in events, where they can meet others sharing their interests and passions, exchange ideas, improve their knowledge, understanding or skills base and reinforce their sense of self. Some of these like-minded individuals form what are known as *sub-cultures* or *social worlds*, both terms that denote a group whose membership derives and reinforces their identity from this association with others and who share common values and norms. This may exclude others from joining and in some cases, represent a form of deviant behaviour.

In a world where a burgeoning number of chat rooms, discussion boards and social media sites connect those who share the same social world or sub-culture, regardless of their geographical location; where terrorism is perpetrated by bands of individuals operating collectively – often facilitated online – by a common purpose; and where people are searching for meaning and feeling isolated in a world that is increasingly replete with virtual encounters and superficial relationships; it is more important than ever that we understand what drives the creation and maintenance of a social world or sub-culture, and the role that events play in this process. There has been some work carried out in this space, particularly in the leisure and marketing literature, but more could be done. Examples of the types of events that could be studied include role-playing events such as cosplay; re-enactments; and events drawing together fans in all their guises. Theoretical lenses that could be useful in exploring these events include social inclusion (and its reverse, social exclusion); social capital; identity and the sense of self; and deviance.

### 2.6. Interdisciplinary/postdisciplinary approaches and methodological advances

Like much tourism research in its early period, festival and events tourism research at the current time does not tend to be interdisciplinary or postdisciplinary in its approach. While researchers may borrow and extend theories and ideas drawn from other disciplines, they mostly continue to operate within their disciplinary boundaries. In contrast, interdisciplinary research is a more holistic or blended process, where disciplinary boundaries are blurred, while postdisciplinary research goes even further, eradicating these disciplinary boundaries entirely (Coles, Hall, & Duval, 2005).

In some countries such as Australia, researchers in festival and event tourism are predominantly from business schools and this move towards disciplinary freedom may therefore be less encouraged or facilitated by the constraints of the environment within which they work. This may help to explain the reluctance to explore other disciplinary underpinnings. In other countries such as the United Kingdom, event studies have their roots in faculties or departments within the social sciences or the humanities. One might assume that research that goes beyond disciplinary boundaries might be more common here, but as yet, this has not broadly been the case. As event studies matures, this might be the direction that it takes, perhaps led by researchers with the confidence and desire to seek out research partners or teams from a wider disciplinary background, or who hail from a less narrow field of study.

This disciplinary emancipation may be accompanied by methodological advances. Similar to early tourism research, much events research thus far has been case-based and relatively descriptive, lacking the theoretical rigour that we would expect from a more established field of study. This is beginning to change, and this evolution will continue as more researchers enter the field from a greater diversity of backgrounds, and competition increases for publication, particularly in the journals in the field. This may lead researchers to adopt less common research paradigms, interpretive frameworks, methodological approaches and methods of data collection and analysis. Examples might include critical studies approaches, where the social, political and cultural contexts are key to understanding; the adoption of a

postmodern paradigm, which does not privilege certain types of knowledge or a pragmatic paradigm, which focuses on what is practical and needed to achieve the research objectives; interpretive frameworks based on feminist, queer, race or disabilities theories; or methodological approaches such as action research or symbolic interactionism. Mixed methods approaches might provide greater flexibility for researchers involved in interdisciplinary or postdisciplinary studies.

An example of a novel methodological approach that has some merit in its application to festival and event tourism is *autoethnography*, where the researcher provides their own personal perspective on phenomena. It is still not widely accepted nor appreciated, with these studies often characterised as personal narratives, heuristic inquiries, autobiographies or life histories. Despite the challenges it presents for a researcher, not least of which is a willingness to be open and honest, and the need for an engaging and evocative writing style, it may potentially provide a deep and rich way to explore the meanings of festival and event tourism experiences from the perspective of those engaging in them, and to examine the sources of those meanings.

### 3. Discussion and conclusion

This article gives some pointers towards future directions in festival and event tourism, as I see it, and reflects my hope that this body of research will develop in ways that will bring theoretical contributions and advances, as well as having practical implications for the planning and staging of festivals and events. The societal importance of festivals and events, chiefly from an economic and cultural standpoint, but also environmental, given their potential as a tool to achieve behaviour change and to deliver environmental messages, demands that research keep pace with industry and community needs, but also that it explores new territories, takes risks, is bold in its conception and execution, and encourages collaboration across disciplines. In this way, we may find new avenues to understand this enduring and widespread social phenomenon more profoundly.

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