

## Social sustainability on European food festival websites: A multimodal discourse analysis

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### ABSTRACT

Food festival websites often showcase the commitment of events towards a socially relevant issue. However, it is challenging to communicate how events contribute to the well-being of communities. This paper analyses European food festival websites to explore to what extent events' social benefits are represented in their online communication. The research is based on a multimodal discourse concerned with the interaction between visual, textual, and design elements. Findings show that intergenerational connections, awareness of physical and mental health, and the preservation of local food heritage are the most salient discourses related to social sustainability when these are represented on the websites. In most cases, sustainability initiatives to assure access and inclusion of diverse community members stay hidden. Food festival organizers are advised to use inclusive online communication to foster a sense of community, inclusivity, and social equity.

### 1. Introduction

Food festivals, whether local or major events, have been growing in popularity among different audiences (Getz et al., 2015; Hall & Sharples, 2008; Yang et al., 2020). From the tourist point of view, culinary festivals often represent the primary or secondary motivation to visit a destination for authentic food and beverage offerings (Lefrid & Torres, 2022), ethnic restaurants (Aybek & Özdemir, 2022), locally sourced and seasonally available ingredients (Fustè-Fornè, 2022), or to experience foodscapes (Park et al., 2008; Park & Widyanta, 2022). These experiential products can position a tourism destination on the food aficionado's map. Festivalgoers can learn about food preparation methods, taste local products, and socialize both with guests and hosts. Festival organizers, exhibitors, and vendors can interact with a wide target market and raise economic capital (Getz, 2005; Getz & Robinson, 2014). While the economic feasibility and impact of events are relevant, their social sustainability benefits should also be considered and communicated (Pernecky, 2013). Some recent studies explored the perspectives of local communities and noticed that the social sustainability of events is embedded in human dimensions and social relations (Fustè-Fornè & Pont-Llagostera, 2021; McClinchey, 2021) and that festivals might enhance community participation, local pride, and place attachment (De

Jong & Varley, 2018; Frost & Laing, 2013; McClinchey, 2008, 2021; Pizzichini et al., 2021). Regarding these concepts of social sustainability, Laing (2018) pointed out that more research is needed to explore whether events are committed towards host communities, and how they communicate diversity and inclusiveness. In response to this special issue's call on 'Food tourism events and social sustainability', we explore the social dimensions of food festivals by analysing their website communication.

Food festival websites are persuasive promotional platforms and often represent a statement of what the festival is about and the values it embraces (Frost & Laing, 2013; Jackson, 2013). These marketing channels are usually operated by or on behalf of event organizers and local/regional/national tourism authorities (Boyne & Hall, 2004). While festival websites are promotional tools to engage potential audiences, they also showcase the events' commitment towards hosting communities (Boyne et al., 2003) and can deliver socio-political messages (De Jong & Varley, 2018; Frost & Laing, 2011). The online presentation and communication of the local culture and place-specific traditions is a distinguishing feature of food festivals, though practical concerns about how social sustainability principles should be referred to are less evident. Positioning food festivals as socially sustainable, and communicating the initiatives and efforts put in practice to enhance community

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well-being are highly relevant to gaining local stakeholders and residents' long-term support for the event (Carnegie & McCabe, 2008; Clark & Rice, 2019).

Therefore, this research undertakes a multimodal analysis of the websites of renowned European culinary festivals advertised as 'Europe's best summer food festivals' by CNN (Cable News Network, <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/europes-best-food-festivals/index.html>). We explore the events' online communication to investigate the visual and textual modes of discourse on socially sustainable practices. Our main research question is 'How do food festival websites represent and communicate the event's commitment towards social sustainability?' Thus, this paper aims to do the following: (1) better understand the interplay between visual and verbal signifiers within a website's communication, (2) identify the themes in organizing food festivals related to social sustainability, and (3) provide a methodological framework for analysis. Section 2 offers a short overview of the relationship between food festivals and social sustainability; it then delves into the nexus of food festivals and local food culture. Section 3 presents our multimodal discourse analysis and the nine websites studied. This method offers a comprehensive approach to decoding the explicit and implicit meanings embedded in visuals, texts, and design elements by applying the framework developed by Pauwels (2012). Section 4 unveils the three themes identified during our analysis of the food festival websites. Based on our results, we suggest some practical implications to represent and communicate festivals' social sustainability efforts.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Food festivals and local foodscape

Food festivals are 'themed, public celebrations' (Getz, 2005:21) and require collective actions to exhibit tangible and intangible values inherent in local food heritage (Getz & Robinson, 2014; Lugosi et al., 2020; Orea-Giner & Fustè-Fornè, 2022). The interaction between food festivals and the promotion of local foodscapes has received some attention in academia. Kim (2015) argued that food festivals are associated with cultural capital, which necessitates the revival of local food traditions through the sharing of experiences among various stakeholders. Food heritage and food festivals, grounded in their historical and geographical contexts, play a significant role in fostering community development, offering the possibility of economic, social, and cultural benefits. Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2019:473) identified generic types of foodscapes, where food festivals fall within either 'destination service encounter (an organized environment staged for tourists)' or 'local service encounter (an organized environment staged for locals)' contingent upon the food festival's connectedness to local communities. According to Cheng (2023:14), slow foodscapes serve to revitalize food heritage practices which undergo continual reinvention, thus reinforcing 'social and cultural survival'. Dishes that respect culinary traditions may contribute to the promotion of place images and the transformation of perceptions of rural spaces. Through the convergence of local food culture and community engagement, food festivals enhance a shared sense of belonging, influencing the formation of the foodscape.

Food festivals provide platforms for producers, consumers, exhibitors, and vendors linked to specific socio-spatial contexts (Hjalager & Kwiatkowski, 2023; Pizzichini et al., 2021). The 'spatial interlinking' between the festival and the destination foodscape reinforces the hosting territory's authentic offerings which are linked to a sense of place. These events play an active role in the promotion and preservation of local culinary heritage and contribute to rebuilding and rediscovering food cultural traditions (Laing, 2018; Stevenson, 2016). According to Hjalager and Kwiatkowski (2023:129), these events possess distinct abilities, such as 'creative crowding, attentive focus, and centripetal and centrifugal energy' linked to social sustainability. The symbolic forms of capital build on various approaches to strengthen social networks within the community (Lugosi et al., 2020). Pizzichini et al. (2021) revealed

that traditional knowledge of food production, cultivation, and preparation is part of the social capital of Italian food festivals, while in Sweden food festivals build on innovation linked to New Nordic Cuisine. Through these events, the rich tapestry of local food heritage is showcased. The dissemination and celebration of local food traditions, producers, and chefs are linked to social sustainability because these may enhance local pride and place attachment.

### 2.2. Social sustainability and food festivals

Social sustainability, building on the concept of Bourdieu's social capital, refers to the conditions in and of societies that support human well-being, social interactions, and a sense of community (De Jong & Varley, 2018; Jepson & Clarke, 2014; Pernecky & Lueck, 2013). As Bourdieu (1986) stated, there exist three discrete yet interrelated types of capital: economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital is quantifiable, and convertible into monetary value; it serves as the foundation for acquiring other forms of capital. Cultural capital encompasses various symbolic elements such as skills, knowledge, tastes, and tangible objects. Social capital is linked to the networks of relationships built through individuals' socialization and reflects the group's norms and values. The nexus of these three types of capital sets different scenarios according to the socio-spatial features of a place. Putnam (1995:67) delineated social capital as 'features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefits.' Since then, the concept of social capital has been involved in discussions related to social sustainability as inequality and social exclusion are understood to stem from 'mechanisms that act to detach groups of people from the social mainstream' (Giddens, 1991:103). Social sustainability encompasses a continuous effort within communities to support individuals' well-being and it extends beyond the scope of social impacts (Stevenson, 2016).

In the case of community festivals, social benefits are often understood in relation to economic benefits such as increased tourism arrivals, domestic attendance at events, a boost of the local economy, and job opportunities (Getz, 2005; Getz & Page, 2016). According to Pernecky and Lueck (2013), while dimensions of economic and environmental sustainability related to events have been widely studied, social sustainability aspects of events and festivals have been neglected. Food festivals are often perceived as active contributors to the attainment of broader societal and developmental objectives (De Jong & Varley, 2018; Haynes, 2015). These events generate a wide range of effects on communities' well-being (Jepson & Walters, 2021). De Jong and Varley (2018) claimed that there is a need to first scrutinize expansive definitions of 'community,' or, failing to do so, it becomes challenging to formulate an inclusive approach facilitating the integration of diverse segments. Derrett (2003) portrayed festivals as cooperative, fair, and harmonious contexts that bridge social and cultural divides. Stevenson (2016) showed that festivals can enhance existing social connections within the community and can efficiently involve people in collective actions and decision-making within their community. Hjalager and Kwiatkowski (2023:130) see food festivals as 'game changers' within local communities for the transformative forces they can put into action. The interplay between social capital and inclusion may generate social benefits.

However, concepts such as social justice, accessibility, and social inclusion should be more actively embraced to create social benefits for communities in the long term (Mair et al., 2023; Mair & Duffy, 2015; McClinchey, 2008). Accessibility is a broad concept which includes physical and financial accessibility of festivals where attendees of all abilities, ages, social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds feel welcomed (Finkel et al., 2019). Whether events and festivals are accessible to all members of a community depends on the social practices performed in space and time. De Jong and Varley (2018) showed that the ability of food festivals to reinforce connections relies on existing social capital and power dynamics, which can somewhat hinder the integration of all

community members. Similarly, [Moufakkir and Kelly \(2013\)](#) argued that festivals in general target their audiences based on their financial capacities and this mechanism reproduces class relations and inequalities.

### 2.3. Websites and event communication

Websites are multimodal ‘content delivery systems’ ([Herring, 2010:233](#)) comprising texts, visuals, links, design elements, sound, animation, and videos. Website composition creates meaning and delivers messages. Festival websites, for practical reasons, need to provide specific information to potential festivalgoers such as date, venue, scheduled program, and admission fee ([Boyne et al., 2003](#); [Boyne & Hall, 2004](#)). These online platforms also communicate what the festival is about, how local communities and businesses are involved, the values the festival aims to represent, and the sustainability practices it implements ([Kim et al., 2009](#); [Laing & Frost, 2010](#)). In fact, event websites are often used as channels for delivering persuasive social, political and/or pro-environmental messages ([Dodds et al., 2020](#); [Frost & Laing, 2013](#)). The visuals – photographs, short videos, reels, etc. – that appear on an event’s webpage construct meaning and, as [Rose \(2016\)](#) observed, can represent or contribute to the creation of social difference. [Frost and Laing \(2013\)](#) analysed the online communication of five, slow food festivals and investigated their food-related social and ideological messages. The authors refer to the websites’ multimodality as ‘multi-storied and multi-storied communication’ to evidence their complexity, and explored the interplay between imagery, metaphors, and texts that should ‘convert’ potential festivalgoers to embrace the idea of slow food as ideologically positioned as healthy and better than non-slow food ([Frost & Laing, 2013:72](#)). Their findings showed how discourses on local food heritage, cooking, and dining culture along with the farming, fishing, and horticulture traditions of a region convey a persuasive marketing message of food. Recently, concerns for social sustainability in events have been also raised. [Dodds et al. \(2020\)](#) explored 303 Canadian festival websites to uncover how events communicated their efforts towards the three pillars of sustainability. Issues such as sustainable transportation and waste management related to environmental sustainability were addressed, while only a few websites made references to community development, charity organizations, NGOs, and locally and ethically produced food and goods. Surprisingly, only 36% of the festivals conveyed sustainability-related messages and when they did so, the information was hidden on the websites’ subpages. This demonstrates that the topic was not a priority of festival organizers.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research paradigm and multimodal discourse analysis

In this study, we employed a qualitative research method following the interpretivist paradigm. The goal was to generate a more nuanced understanding of the ways food festivals promote their events online and to explore whether they are committed to social sustainability.

Multimodal discourse analysis ([Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021](#)) is largely founded on social semiotics, which aims to identify signs and interpret different layers of meaning ([Hunter, 2016](#); [Rose, 2016](#); [Van Leeuwen, 2011](#)). As [Rose \(2016:121\)](#) indicated, semiology considers signs as denotive or connotative. The first layer of meaning conveyed by different modes is denotive: who, what, and how are represented on the image or websites. The second layer refers to ideas, values, concepts, and power relations and carries higher-level meanings. Events like food festivals per se are powerful modes of communication and websites are both stages of manifestation and tourism marketing tools ([Frost & Laing, 2013](#)).

Here, we employ [Pauwels \(2012\)](#) multimodal framework which is particularly suitable for exploring cultural websites. This framework is an integrated tool used to decode ‘the cultural information that resides both in the form and the content of websites’ ([Pauwels, 2012:248](#)).

Visual and verbal modes that websites use to speak about and show local communities, tourists, and stakeholders reflect certain views and intentions of communication. This method helps to uncover the ‘hidden meanings’ of website communication. The combination of modes may advertently or inadvertently construct social differences related to age, gender, health, etc. In this analysis, particular attention was given to the representation of ideas and values linked to social sustainability. [Mair and Duffy \(2015\)](#) argued that festivals are socially sustainable when accessible and inclusive. The social impacts and benefits of festivals, however, are intangible ([Mair et al., 2023](#)). Therefore, it is challenging to capture the ways civic pride, a sense of belonging, or the minimization of social isolation – all highly important concepts in social sustainability – are represented.

In food tourism research, multimodal discourse analysis has been employed to study the power relations and social sustainability at a Scottish food festival ([De Jong & Varley, 2018](#)), to explore website communication to market organic candy ([Fernández-Vázquez, 2021](#)), and to analyse ethics and aesthetics in short food-themed videos ([Irimías & Volo, 2023](#)).

### 3.2. Sampling and data collection

For this research, we sampled CNN’s list of ‘Europe’s best summer food festivals in 2023’ which included 10 events. The CNN Travel website and its ‘Culinary Journeys’ subpage are reputable online sources of food tourism content. We started by reading the festivals’ descriptions on the CNN Culinary Journeys website (<https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/europes-best-food-festivals/index.html>). This was followed with a non-linear procedure of searching all the listed festival websites to figure out structures (number of subpages, embedded external links, news feeds, blog posts, etc.) and content. The total sampling consists of the websites of nine European food festivals ([Table 1](#)). Matstreif Festival (Oslo, Norway) was excluded because it had no official website.

For data collection, we took snapshots of the visuals in the main webpages and their subpages. Videos and reels were excluded from data gathering. This allowed us to investigate the organization of the visual, textual, and design elements. To explore the websites’ visual content, we collected 1608 photos between June and September 2023: Abergavenny Food Festival ( $n = 315$ ), Cheese 2023 ( $n = 231$ ), Copenhagen Cooking ( $n = 259$ ), Dorset Seafood Festival ( $n = 127$ ), Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival ( $n = 321$ ), Loch Lomond Food and Drink Festival ( $n = 11$ ), Ludlow Food Festival ( $n = 89$ ), Stragusto ( $n = 217$ ), and Stuttgarter Weindorf ( $n = 38$ ). We discarded portraits of chefs, exhibitors, or restaurateurs and the images that showed only objects because there were no visual interactions between actors to analyse. The final dataset of collected data, suitable to explore connotative meanings linked to social sustainability, included 9 home pages with 18 subpages and 52 visuals.

### 3.3. Data analysis

For the coding criteria, we employed [Pauwels \(2012\)](#) framework for multimodal content analysis and adapted it to explore food festival websites ([Table 2](#)). In choosing to employ the social semiotic approach, we are aware that our interpretation of reading visuals – the interaction of narrative elements reproduced in a photo – is subjective. To minimize bias, each coder – the first and the second author – completed the coding separately in Microsoft Excel, taking about 90 min for each website. After the coding was completed, we checked our data for intercoder reliability. Intercoder reliability was 100% on five variables related to typographic signifiers (font, colour, position, salience, and style) and on layout and design signifiers (logo, templates, frames, text position, and visuals). It was 85% on variables of website narrative visuals (setting, actors, actions, texture, resolution, sharpness, composition, and camera focus and angle). Coders discussed the differences until they reached a consensus. For the analysis, we employed a denotive reading of the

**Table 1**  
The nine annually held European food festivals selected for multimodal analysis.

Festival name and website information	Location	Festival short description
<p><b>Abergavenny Food Festival</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>URL: <a href="https://www.abergavennyfoodfestival.com">https://www.abergavennyfoodfestival.com</a></li> <li>Responsible organization: Abergavenny Food Festival EH Accountancy</li> <li>Updated with 19 blog posts/year</li> <li>Available in English</li> </ul>	Abergavenny, Wales, United Kingdom	This annual event taking place in September was arranged for the 25th year in 2023. Abergavenny Castel and the Market Hall are the main locations. The emphasis is on local food stories, Welsh food and beverages, and heritage. As a not-for-profit organization, it is committed to be inclusive.
<p><b>Cheese 2023</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>URL: <a href="https://cheese.slowfood.it/en/">https://cheese.slowfood.it/en/</a></li> <li>Responsible organization: Slow Food Italy and Città di Bra</li> <li>Updated with 72 news post/year</li> <li>Available in Italian and English</li> </ul>	Bra, Italy	Held every September, and for the 15th time in 2023, the festival is organized with the cooperation of Slow Food International, Città di Bra, and Regione Piemonte. Bra is the headquarter of the Slow Food movement which represents a socio-political philosophy. The festival offers programs on local dairy producers, dairy-based food culture and slow-life as synonym of wellbeing.
<p><b>Copenhagen Cooking</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>URL: <a href="https://www.copenhagencooking.com">https://www.copenhagencooking.com</a></li> <li>Responsible organization: The Food Organization of Denmark (FOOD)</li> <li>no info on website updates</li> <li>Available in Danish and English</li> </ul>	Copenhagen, Denmark	Taking place each August since 2004, this is one of Northern Europe's largest food festivals. It showcases Danish food culture and pays tribute to local culinary figures. It's a non-profit organization working to develop Denmark as a healthy food country.
<p><b>Dorset Seafood Festival</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>URL: <a href="https://www.dorsetseafood.co.uk">https://www.dorsetseafood.co.uk</a></li> <li>Responsible organization: Seafood Festivals Limited</li> <li>Updated with 2 news post/year</li> <li>Available in English</li> </ul>	Weymouth, England, United Kingdom	Taking place since 2008, this festival celebrates local fishing communities and food culture linked to seafood. The festival is committed to shed light on fishers and their occupational challenges. Linked to sustainability, importance is given to sustainable fishing methods and environmental impact of seafood production.
<p><b>Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>URL: <a href="https://www.galwayoysterfestival.com">https://www.galwayoysterfestival.com</a></li> <li>Responsible organization: Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival / Milestone Inventive</li> <li>no info on website updates</li> <li>Available in English</li> </ul>	Galway, Ireland	Launched in 1954, the festival positions itself as the 'oldest oyster festival in the world'. Every September, chefs participate at the World Oyster Championship. The festival features the culinary heritage of the West Coast of Ireland and it is linked to local Seafood Trail. The festival organized in partnership with sponsors and national stakeholders.
<p><b>Loch Lomond Food and Drink Festival</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>URL: <a href="https://www.lochlomondfoodanddrinkfestival.co.uk">https://www.lochlomondfoodanddrinkfestival.co.uk</a></li> <li>Responsible organization: Loch Lomond Festivals</li> <li>no info on website updates</li> </ul>	Loch Lomond, Scotland, United Kingdom	Taking place in September, for the 21st time in 2023, the festival provides opportunities for culinary education through cooking demonstrations, and whisky and gin tastings, in partnership with various vendors.

**Table 1 (continued)**

Festival name and website information	Location	Festival short description
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Available in English</li> </ul> <p><b>Ludlow Food Festival</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>URL: <a href="https://www.foodfestival.co.uk">https://www.foodfestival.co.uk</a></li> <li>Responsible organization: Ludlow Marches Food and Drink Festival</li> <li>Updated with 6 posts/year</li> <li>Available in English</li> </ul>	Ludlow, England, United Kingdom	Since 1995, the Ludlow Food Festival has served as a tribute to the local food heritage with exhibitors from Ludlow and the Welsh Marches region. The three-day, not-for-profit event is organized to promote local small-scale food and drink producers.
<p><b>Stragusto</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="https://www.stragusto.it/en/">https://www.stragusto.it/en/</a></li> <li>URL: <a href="https://www.stragusto.it/en/">https://www.stragusto.it/en/</a></li> <li>Responsible organization: Associazione Culturale Trapani Welcome</li> <li>no info on website updates</li> <li>Available in Italian and English</li> </ul>	Trapani, Italy	Hosted in July since 2009, the festival evokes the atmosphere of traditional food markets and showcases typical products from regions including Trapani, Palermo, and Puglia. Local food culture and traditions are showcased with the cooperation of gastronomic-cultural associations.
<p><b>Stuttgarter Weindorf</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>URL: <a href="https://www.stuttgarter-weindorf.de">https://www.stuttgarter-weindorf.de</a></li> <li>Responsible organization: Pro Stuttgart e.V.</li> <li>no info on website updates</li> <li>Available in German and English</li> </ul>	Stuttgart, Germany	Organized since 1976, from late August to early September, this festival focuses on local traditions: restaurants offer specialties from the region, while an assortment of locally produced wines is presented. Regarding social sustainability the festival is dedicated to celebrating diversity and collaborates with Stuttgart Pride.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the festival websites.

visuals with a focus on the explicit content of the photos (e.g. people, food, festival location). For example, under the representation of people we included festivalgoers, entertainers, food producers and vendors, chefs, etc., and categorized the visuals accordingly. For the festival locations, we identified outdoor and indoor settings and explored how these settings facilitated access for various socio-economic groups.

Connotative reading of visuals focused on the representation of values and ideas associated with social sustainability as conceptualized by Mair and Duffy (2015). Visual and textual signifiers that conveyed a meaning associated with social sustainability were divided into four categories: 1) relationships between present and future generations, 2) people's quality of life, 3) community cohesion, and 4) sense of belonging.

On the CNN Travel website, under 'CNN Culinary Journeys' subpage, the 10 best European summer food festivals are listed in an article published on March 5, 2023. The article uses persuasive and emotive language to describe the events and shares four visuals (an image representing the Galway, Matstreif, Stragusto, and Stuttgarter Weindorf food festivals).

#### 4. Findings

The multimodal discourse analysis on food festival websites aimed to uncover to what extent these events communicate their commitment towards social sustainability. Before the food festivals, we present the CNN website communication and its denigrating word register and connotative meanings used in discourse formation. The CNN website introduced the attractiveness of their listed 10 European summer food festivals as follows:

**Table 2**  
Phases in Pauwels (2012) multimodal discourse analysis applied to food festival websites.

Phase	Description
1. Initial phase: Preservation of first impressions and reactions	Assessment on how a website 'looks and feels'. We explored whether the festivals communicated about social inclusion and equity, participation and relationships between present and future generations, local communities' wellbeing. We took notes about our spontaneous and affective reactions.
2. Inventory of salient features and topics	Denotive reading of the websites' content and form. We created an inventory of features, attributes and modes, both present and absent, in website communication. Salient features that dealt with intergenerational connections, physical and mental health, community building and preservation of local food were collected, numbered and coded by using a standardized coding sheet. Some of the food festival websites contained detailed information about local peoples participation, and opportunities to build social inclusion which assisted us in the next step.
3. In-depth analysis of content and intra- and cross-modal interplay	Focus on 'what' is communicated. Intra- and cross-modal analysis were performed. Verbal (opinions, statements, descriptions), typographical (font style, size, style etc.) and websites' narrative visual signifiers (setting, actors, actions, texture, resolution, sharpness, composition, and camera focus and angle) were investigated to explore their denotive and connotive meaning. To frame our multimodal discourse analysis, we built on Mair and Duffy (2015) concepts and guide to assess events' social sustainability. Relations between verbal and narrative visual signifiers were also explored.
4. Embedded point(s) of view or 'voice' and implied audiences and purposes	Focus on 'who' is saying 'what' to 'whom': a result of combination of many features and modes. We tried to uncover the dominant point of view -festival organizers, local stakeholders, community members- expressed in website communication. Exploration of explicitly stated audiences and latent ones.
5. Analysis of information organization and spatial priming strategies	The selected European food festivals run their websites to communicate information about their events. We investigated the architecture (menus, internal links, navigational tools) and design of the website to explore which signifiers take up more space and catch audiences' attention.
6. Contextual analysis, provenance and inference	Finding the most relevant features and modes with their explicit and implicit meaning and whether these reflect values, norms and expectations related to events' social sustainability.

Source: developed by the authors of this study based on Pauwels (2012:255-259) and Mair and Duffy (2015).

For those *sick of the all-inclusive discomfort of Europe's traditional summer music events, there are tastier alternatives* [CNN Culinary Journeys, No. 1].

Discourse on the CNN website disparages food festivals in general, and makes the listed events stand out:

Here's a selection of the best upcoming events where *there'll be no need to eat out of a Styrofoam box or listen to second-rate indie bands* [CNN Culinary Journeys, No. 2].

Food discourse is salient on CNN's website communication with

value statements on the quality of ingredients, foodscapes, and tourism destinations by employing emotive language as a persuasive tool.

[Dorset Seafood Festival is] *the ultimate beacon for foodies in this corner of England* [CNN Culinary Journeys, No. 3].

Ludlow's *independent spirit has helped give rise to one of the UK's most renowned food festivals* [CNN Culinary Journeys, No. 4].

Stuttgarter Weindorf is presented as a food festival where.

*There's way more to it than just the sweet fizzy stuff usually associated with this beer-obsessed country* [CNN Culinary Journeys, No. 6].

While the four visuals are salient on the CNN website, the verbal signifiers in the festival descriptions contribute to the discourse formation of 'tasty' and fun events that are outstanding in the European festivalscapes, therefore, 'worth' inclusion in the CNN list. From here we turn our attention to the nine websites we analysed in terms of references to their social benefits. Drawing on Pauwels (2012) framework, we identified three primary themes linked to the concept of social sustainability: 1) intergenerational connections, 2) awareness of physical and mental health, and 3) local food culture and heritage.

#### 4.1. Festival websites encourage intergenerational connections

Among the social benefits of food festivals, it is often claimed that these events attract a wide range of people – visitors and locals – without any distinction of age (Mair et al., 2023). The first theme emerging from data, intergenerational connections, revolves around the representation of interactions. One rhetorical device used across the selected festival websites is associating conviviality with food consumption, the strength of social networks, and family ties. In all nine websites, intergenerational connections between juniors and seniors are central in the discourse on food festivals. Focusing on the visual analysis, the most remarkable aspect is the central role given to human interactions, especially between different age cohorts. These visuals reflect a spirit of entertainment and fun. However, a deeper analysis reveals that prevalence is given to children and teenagers, while images depicting only seniors are less frequent.

On the Copenhagen Cooking website, we learn that the festival is 'a centre for communal dining and fun food experiences' and the visuals indeed depict the narrative elements that reinforce the idea of community experiences (Fig. 1). Three of the nine visuals on the homepage show Frederiksberg Allé, the principal location. The prominent element of the composition is the long dinner table with intense natural lighting. These visual signifiers represent a culturally significant view of hosts and festivalgoers who appropriate a public realm: the city's avenue. This outdoor location should provide the social benefit of accessibility for a variety of people. Still, it is surprising to find very few photos representing the multiple identities of the Danish capital city. (See Fig. 2.)

The festival also claims that '*events at Copenhagen Cooking have to be unique*' and restaurant owners, food producers, vendors, and cultural institutions should '*consider the guests to have food experiences in a place they don't normally connect with eating.*' Such rhetorical tones suggest elitism, that the festival is for people who are seeking uncommon experiences. Narrative visuals emphasize the actors' hands. Hands symbolize one of the core discourses of social sustainability: the connection between people. Community building is an embodied action in which intimacy and physical touch play a significant role and can mitigate social exclusion. Visuals on the homepage showcase actors of different ages. While these actors are photographed performing various actions together (preparing food, eating, drinking, celebrating, etc.) there is a scarcity of individuals with different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities.

On the website, under program 2023, we find the daily calendar of events. The event's page layout is organized vertically with a narrative visual on the top and the presentation of the menu below. On the right,

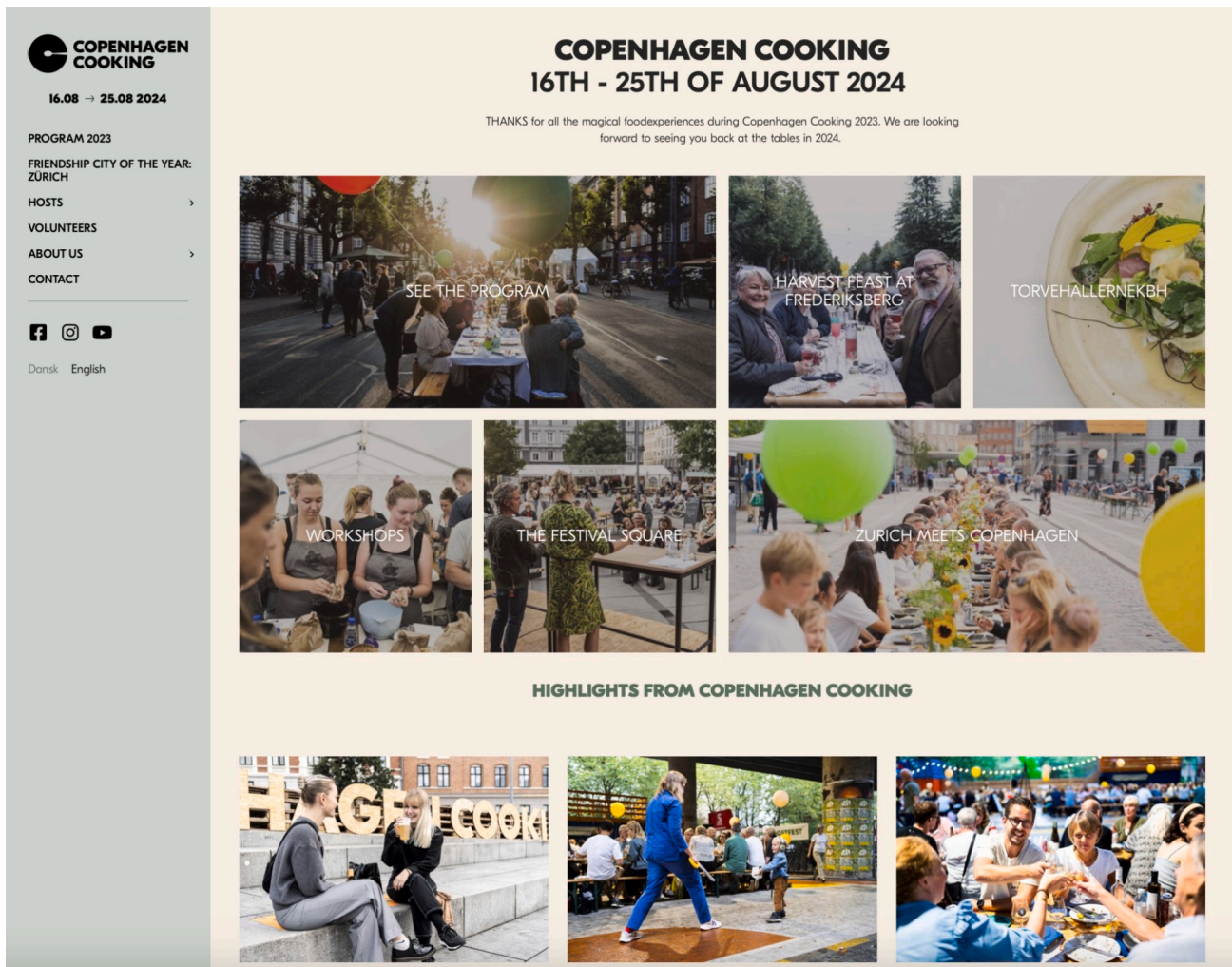


Fig. 1. The top section of the Copenhagen Cooking homepage.  
Source: [www.copenhagencooking.com](http://www.copenhagencooking.com), copyright of the Copenhagen Cooking, last accessed September 25, 2023



Fig. 2. A visual represents the intergenerational interaction of the Abergavenny Food Festival website.  
Source: <https://www.abergavennyfoodfestival.com/cook-stars-kids-cookery-school/>, copyright of the Abergavenny Food Festival, last accessed April 15, 2024.

the event's title, location, purpose, and practicalities are described. The intramodal analysis of the event description reveals the topic of inclusivity referring to children, the association of *delicious dishes* with beauty and a fun atmosphere.

*Come by and draw your favourite fruit, vegetable or ice cream. Or draw a giant lasagna. [...] Whether you are an artist, child, food lover, parent, friend, aunt or something else entirely, you are welcome to come by and paint with us!* [Copenhagen Cooking, Events, No. 55].

Narrative visuals used on the website represent the intergenerational connections from the children's perspective and emphasize their role as decision-makers. Chalk drawing events and family cooking sessions put children in a power position. Similarly, on the website of the Abergavenny Food Festival, the visual emphasis is placed on intergenerational relations and activities. The festival programs place children in charge of food creation:

*Find out how dough is made. Mix your own sauce. Choose your own toppings. Tuck in with friends and family* [Abergavenny Food Festival, No. 85].

Seafest, the Dorset Seafood Festival, and the Ludlow Food Festival also introduce references to intergenerational inclusivity through visual and textual signifiers. Entertainment, the essence of any food festival, is depicted through live music, creative food preparation, and consumption. Seniors wearing bright colours and singing songs are associated with dynamism and their active participation in the festival. On its website the Dorset Seafood Festival uses the spatial balance of pictures, symmetrically depicting seniors (left hand) and children (right hand) to reinforce the meaning of a sense of community (Fig. 3). Under 'What's on,' in the festival highlights, the invitation uses an affective language style ('our much-loved local seafood heroes') directed at families:

*Be entertained by talented chefs as well as by our much-loved local seafood heroes. Learn about underutilised species, bring the family to try new experiences and find out why we should all be eating more seafood* [Dorset Seafood Festival, No. 6].

It refers to the intention to raise awareness of fishers and the challenges they face during their work. The emphasis on seafood as a healthy alternative for children and adults alike is a persuasive message running through the website.

On the Ludlow Food Festival website, we find water-colour paintings on both sides of the festival logo. These references to vegetables occupy a predominant position in the homepage composition in terms of size. The visual over-representation of vegetables raises social consciousness of the impact of food production and consumption on our health and the natural environment. Colours are relevant resources of visual

communication and colours often have a meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002). The typographic signifiers – the informal font choice of the magenta-coloured Ludlow Food Festival logo – make the communication playful.

Food festival websites, such as Stragusto and the Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival, use other visual signifiers to portray social inclusion and a sense of community. The visual emphasis is placed on convivial food consumption and all the social activities that make it joyful.

On the Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival website, oysters dominate the header and are also used in the festival's logo. The slogan is also symbolic – Embrace the Wild Atlantic Way of Life – and refers to the challenges that fishing represents. The theme of intergenerational connection emerges from visuals depicting the grand parade on Galway's streets. The salient position of local traditional attire, festive clothes, and flags supports the idea of pride, place attachment, and a sense of community.

Abergavenny Food Festival extends its community-building endeavours beyond the confines of the festival itself, fostering engagement throughout the year. The culturally meaningful invitation to locals and visitors asks them to:

*[...] get involved in Abergavenny's vibrant food culture, with a host of community dinners, grow-your-own initiatives, political debates, and social gatherings.* [Abergavenny Food Festival, No. 9].

The political overtones used on the website create a link between local food traditions, community identity and new ways of considering food and cooking traditions. Festival organizers recognize that 'it takes a town and a team' to make the event happen and support local stallholders, food producers, and chefs. The visuals featuring festivalgoers of diverse ethnicities immersed in a festive atmosphere symbolize the event's commitment towards inclusivity.

#### 4.2. Festival websites promote awareness of physical and mental health

The ideology of a healthy diet and slow food actions are part of most food festival discourses (Frost & Laing, 2013; Pizzichini et al., 2021). A plant-based diet is presented as a health-conscious choice on the Ludlow Food Festival website, while seafood – with sustainable fishing practices – is endorsed by the Dorset Seafood Festival and the Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival. A healthy diet is associated with cooking skills, as shown by the festivals' visual discourse. Festivals actively involve children, teens, and young adults in the preparation of dishes with vegetables. Not only families but also children are in charge of their own health, as the following quotation from the Dorset Festival website shows:



Fig. 3. The top section of the Dorset Seafood Festival website.

Source: <https://www.dorsetseafood.co.uk/fcimages/images/sliderpics/home/5.jpg>, copyright of the Dorset Seafood Festival, last accessed April 15, 2024

*The programme is designed to help children learn how to cook and enjoy fish as part of a balanced diet [Dorset Seafood Festival, News, No. 14].*

The multimodal analysis of the websites helped to identify our second theme: awareness of the physical and mental health of food producers, fishers, and hospitality workers. On the Dorset Seafood Festival and the Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival websites the topic of well-being is explicitly addressed. Thus, these festivals transcend their roles as mere celebratory gatherings and assume a heightened significance in the domain of social sustainability. Surprisingly, a diverse array of topics – generally considered taboo – is mentioned. The awareness of fishers' mental health is one of these. On the Dorset Seafood Festival website, the description of the Fishermen's Mission is salient given that the festival contributes to raising money for this charity. This organization is the only national charity to provide financial and emotional support to local fishers, both active and retired, and their families. The Mission contributes to raising awareness of the perilous nature of fishers' work, characterized by accidents and fatalities. Addressing the mental health issues of food producers and fishers supports the argument of social inclusion and equity and mitigates social exclusion.

Cardiovascular diseases and stroke are among the health risks in service-related industries. However, people outside the hospitality industry are rarely aware of the difficulties, pressures, and health concerns the hospitality workforce faces. The Ludlow Food Festival challenges the discourse on mental health within the sector and regularly invites a former chef who has grappled with the aftermath of a stroke. On the website, under the 'What's on' label, we find a conversation with him and learn his views on the British culinary arts and the importance of preventive measures that recognize the early signs of stroke [Ludlow Food Festival, What's on, No. 35].

The Burnt Chef Project, set up in 2019, soon became a widely known not-for-profit organization, which combats the stigma of mental health issues within the hospitality industry. The Dorset Seafood Festival has teamed up with the project and invites head chefs to speak about their experiences. Mental health remains an inadequately discussed topic and an occupational hazard that needs to be managed. The industry grapples with a constellation of challenges, including protracted and irregular working hours, demanding and stressful working conditions, and heightened performance pressures. All these negatively influence mental and physical health and need to be openly and widely addressed and managed.

#### 4.3. Festival websites preserve local food culture and heritage

Although the third theme, local food culture and heritage, was among the primary objectives of all nine festivals analysed, some differences in communicating and presenting food heritage were eloquent. The Stragusto website effectively incorporates the importance of heritage in its textual and visual communication. The festival itself is regarded as an expression of the city's history and local identity. Traditional street food and seafood dishes are recontextualized, often playing a pivotal role in fostering interaction between chefs and visitors, thereby educating festivalgoers about food (Fig. 3). A collage of eight photos accompanies the festival description:

*A festival that rekindles the atmosphere of the ancient markets, a concentration of flavours, smells, colours, voices that, every year, overwhelms the historic centre of Trapani [Stragusto, Home, No. 62].*

This radiates an aura of joviality and culinary delight. The images are captured from close range, focusing sharply on both the food and the individuals, enabling clear observation of their facial expressions. In the food images, traditional Italian dishes take center stage. In terms of composition, the photos maintain a proportional distribution, alternating between food and people. The colour palette used in the images conveys warmth, with yellow, orange, brown, and red hues predominating, evoking a sense of coziness.

Within the collage, viewers can discern distant, medium, and close-up shots, all while the subjects' expressions reflect happiness (Fig. 4). Many of the individuals depicted hold food or drinks, creating an impression that they are offering them to the audience, establishing a more immediate and intimate connection. Close-ups of vendors further enhance the audience's sense of closeness. The report on one of the events of the Copenhagen Cooking Festival begins with the phrase:

*A tribute to the open sandwich [Copenhagen Cooking Festival, Events, No. 61].*

This event highlights the traditions of crafting and savouring the renowned Danish (Scandinavian) sandwich, *Smørrebrød*, within the context of gastronomic heritage. The event's description underscores that in the 1800s, urbanization led to a transformation of daily meals, with workers shifting from cooked midday meals on farms to cold rye-bread-based options. The food's origin, rooted in the working class, is portrayed in an accompanying drawing. While the narrative visual recalls a humble way of life, it is juxtaposed with the current understanding of the sandwich as something particular. The cultural and historical references are part of the symbolic capital of local communities and the act of remembering the humble origins of the *Smørrebrød*



**Fig. 4.** Collage displaying traditional food on the Stragusto Festival website.

Source: <https://www.stragusto.it/en/> copyright of the Stragusto Festival, last accessed April 15, 2024



contrasts its current role as a unique dish.

## 5. Discussion

Media resources, based on users and/or staff ratings, create and promote ‘best of’ lists of tourism destinations and festivals. CNN Travel’s Culinary Journey lists 10 European summer food festivals and promises readers uncommon events with local food and authentic experiences. Here, we investigated the website communication of the listed festivals and studied the ways social sustainability efforts – as the basis of authentic events (Mair et al., 2023; McClinchey, 2008, 2021) – are communicated.

Food festival websites play a critical role in positioning the events as sustainable. Prior research has studied food festival websites from different perspectives, with a focus on event management, persuasive messages, and value creation through marketing initiatives (Dodds et al., 2020; Frost & Laing, 2013; Laing, 2018). Our multimodal analysis of websites demonstrates the complex interplay between delivering a persuasive message and preserving the local ‘flavour’ of these festivals. Compared to website content analysis, this approach is not concerned with large datasets and statistically representative images. Rather, multimodality is based on social semiotics and as such it is ‘concerned to investigate processes of meaning-creation that are socially significant’ (Rose, 2016: 110). The visuals used for analysis are selected on how conceptually pertinent they are. The focus is given to visual denotive and connotative meanings and the social effects of the message (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Pauwels, 2012; Rose, 2016). Social impacts of food festivals can be diverse, providing opportunities for intergenerational interactions, raising awareness of food producers’ and fishers’ physical and mental health, education, skills development, and a sense of belonging. The communication of these intangible social benefits needs a specific and coordinated strategy.

The findings revealed that all nine food festivals aimed to create social consciousness of the impact of food production/consumption both on human health and on the natural environment, but surprisingly most of the websites did not appear to be aware of the need to address social (in)equality. The most surprising results concern that only two festivals (Ludlow Food Festival and Abergavenny Food Festival) addressed local food producers’ well-being specifically, and only one included a discourse on fishers’ mental health (Dorset Seafood Festival).

All nine food festivals share a common objective: to foster societal awareness regarding the far-reaching implications of food preparation and consumption, encompassing both human health and the environment, though they communicate in different ways. In fact, two out of nine food festival websites appear to be less attractive to viewers/potential festivalgoers as they are poorly developed. The analysis of the commitment to social sustainability on the websites showed that a great number of these festivals praise local communities and promote the relationship between present and future generations, although other concepts of social sustainability – such as social justice or equity – seem to be less prioritized. Social sustainability, enhanced by food festivals, has the potential to involve all social segments and to bond stronger relations across diverse ethnic communities. If a food festival fails to include and/or represent the different range of cultures and ethnicities living in the region then, as Mair and Duffy (2015) observed, it risks further marginalizing them. If the social sustainability of events is a long-term goal of festival organizers and policymakers, then the involvement of local community members should be better represented in online (and offline) communications. Food festival websites aim to attract festivalgoers; therefore, the website communication’s main discourse is on the satisfactory tourism experiences at the event. For the locals, the festival should guarantee inclusion and quality of life. These opposing interests need to be carefully managed both by the festival organizers and the website content creators.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1. Theoretical implications

Advancing current knowledge of whether and how food festivals communicate social sustainability on their websites, the results support the notion that human relations within a community network can be strengthened through place-based narratives and visual representations. From the theoretical perspective, this study expands the understanding of the interconnection between social sustainability of food festivals and website communication of events. Specifically, our findings advance knowledge on how the social semiotic approach and multimodality convey meanings in marketing of ‘the best’ summer food festivals in the online realm. Our findings further support Fustè-Fornè and Pont-Llagostera (2021) view that food communicates place identity and local culinary heritage. In line with Pizzichini et al. (2021), the results support the different social and symbolic capital leveraged by food festivals. Visuals and texts narrating intergenerational connections and human interactions can be seen to represent social cohesion. Importantly, inclusive conviviality emerged as a central discourse on food festival websites, especially in the communication of Dorset Seafood Festival and Ludlow Food Festival. The compositional elements of the festival websites show the power positions of multigenerational families representing them as equally important members of the community. The visual narratives depicting hands in collaborative activities – chalk drawing and family cooking – show the embodied co-creation of festival experiences, consistent with Lugosi et al.’s (2020) findings on the approaches to strengthen community’s social networks.

Aligned with Jepson and Walters’ (2021) argument on food festivals’ effect on communities’ well-being, our results suggest that any discussion on event’s webpage about the awareness of physical and mental health in the hospitality industry should involve locals and event organizers. The findings substantiate the argument that embracing the social commitment to eradicate the stigma around mental health issues (e.g. on the Dorset Food Festival’s website) can significantly contribute to the meaning construction on social sustainability in the website communication. Congruent with prior research (Hjalager & Kwiatkowski, 2023) our study provides additional support for the potential to represent local food culture and heritage as part of the social and symbolic capital of communities. Carefully designed food festival websites play a key role in such meaningful representation.

Our paper implies that three thematic pillars shape the discourse on the social sustainability of food festivals, events seen both as culinary celebrations and possible moments of community building. The modalities that reflect the ethical values and norms – enhancement of human well-being, development of inclusive societies, and support for local businesses – can also be disseminated on the event’s website. However, we found that food festival website communication only partly promotes inclusivity, thereby only partly embracing the discourse on social sustainability ideals that mitigate social exclusion (De Jong & Varley, 2018; Stevenson, 2016). Finally, the careful composition of website content, clear navigation options, and the use of effective language contribute to disseminating community values.

### 6.2. Practical implications

Our findings hold some practical implications, both for festival online content creators and food festival organizers. Content creators are advised to emphasize the symbolic capital of communities and the importance of intergenerational connections through a balanced composition of visuals depicting age groups. Festival websites targeting diverse demographic cohorts, such as children and seniors, can foster intergenerational bonds through visual communication. Inclusive communication can facilitate broader audience engagement with the festivals, thus strengthening community building. In this regard, composite images, such as collages, prove less effective as these depict age

cohorts separately, lacking a focus on their interconnectedness. Concerning textual communication, the use of nouns such as 'fun' and 'entertainment,' in relation to food conveys a positive meaning and can engage children while also focusing on local food heritage. Photographs on websites should emphasize gestures and expressions while simultaneously representing individuals as engaged community members. Food festival organizers are advised to pay more attention to the use of visuals and represent community members of diverse socio-cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Food festival organizers can associate the local food culture and heritage revitalization with specific spatial contexts such as a castle, seaside, or urban center. Visual elements that spotlight interactions between chefs, locals, and festivalgoers co-creating dishes and beverages can stimulate knowledge creation of local ingredients and cooking traditions. To keep interest in local food alive in the long term, food festival websites can extend audience engagement after the festival by updating the content on a year-round active website. Sharing news, menus with seasonal ingredients, and traditional recipes linked to festivities reinforces place attachment and a sense of community.

Furthermore, food festivals can strategically employ their websites to communicate their commitments to mental and physical health. Visuals, text, and design features on a website can incorporate health-related food such as fruit and vegetables with the promotion of health-conscious nutrition. Food festival websites can also address traditionally taboo subjects, such as the mental health of food producers, fishers or hospitality employees. This initiative could foster food festivals' commitment to social sustainability by embracing mental health concerns and making them visible.

### 6.3. Limitations and future research

Notwithstanding its relevant findings, this research is not free of limitations. The multimodal analysis was based on a limited sample of food festival websites – the CNN Culinary Journey list – and we focused only on European festivals. Further, we did not scrutinize social media platforms although we recognize that the multimodal discourse analysis might have revealed some other aspects of social sustainability. Given that this website analysis did not include any sonic signifiers such as music, songs, or vocal sounds like laughter, we plan to investigate the multimodality between visual and sonic signifiers.

Additionally, we acknowledge that there is a need to further investigate the social sustainability of food festivals and the authenticity of these events (Truc et al., 2024). While discourse formation on food, tourism, and food festivals has been increasingly shaped by (social) media (Fustè-Fornè & Masip, 2020; Irimiás & Volo, 2023), websites still play a key role in communication.

Future research could involve festivalgoers and use a photo-elicitation technique or collage to explore their sense of community and place attachment. Future research on the strict collaboration between community members of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and festival organizers could bring new insights into how social sustainability is created, strengthened, and communicated to locals and tourists alike.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Anna Irimiás:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Bence Csapody:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Melinda Jászberényi:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2024.101280>.

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