The role of regional LGBTQI+ festivals and events in promoting social movements: A local stakeholder perspective

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A B S T R A C T

Festivals and events can foster a collective sense of purpose and foster shared commitment to a cause by engaging the numerous and diverse stakeholders necessary for the organisation and running of these events. It is from this stakeholder perspective that this paper explored how LGBTQI+ events can help regional communities resist marginalisation and become advocates for social movements. Interviews with ten key stakeholders involved in the planning and implementation of the Broken Heel festival in Broken Hill and the fabALICE Festival in Alice Springs, identified four overarching themes: resisting marginalisation; places of identity; value of inclusion; and emerging tensions. These themes provide important insights into the role and effect of regional LGBTQI+ festivals on local communities and suggests areas for future research and advocacy.

1. Introduction

Festivals have a significant function within our societal structures and play a critical role in influencing the identity and image of various destinations (Bazzanella, Peters, & Schnitzer, 2019). Through collective participation and symbolic expression, festivals not only foster community cohesion but also serve as platforms for advocating social change, echoing the principles of Social Movement Theory (SMT) (Martin, 2016). Festivals and events can facilitate this as they can help to establish a common sense of purpose and aid in the expansion of allies to a cause through the involvement of the numerous stakeholders required to make these events possible (McGehee & Santos, 2005; Monterrubio, 2017).

Over the past few years, some regional areas in Australia have witnessed unexpected success in hosting niche festivals and events that have garnered widespread involvement from the local community (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021). Regional LGBTQI+ festivals, such as the Broken Heel Festival in Broken Hill, New South Wales (NSW) and fabALICE in Alice Springs, Northern Territory (NT), have proven extremely successful, along with other similar festivals and events (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Lewis, 2021). Many of these festivals and events are considered unique, unconventional, or deviating from the traditional perception of a destination, as they often challenge the heteronormative, mono-ethnic, and mono-industrial image associated with rural

destinations (Lockett & Lewis, 2022; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021).

These LGBTQI+ events in regional Australia serve as temporary 'gay spaces' (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021), and are at the forefront of creating safe and inclusive spaces. Importantly, in regional Australia, these spaces are often created as an active response to a lack of LGBTQI+ representation and visibility in mainstream society, and they offer a sense of community and belonging for those who may feel marginalised or isolated (Lockett & Lewis, 2022; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021), which is especially evident in regional Australia (Easpaig et al., 2022). Marginalisation is often described as a result of cultural politics, which manifests differently within specific local social relationships (Hubbard, 1998). Marginalised individuals and community groups frequently face both overt and covert discrimination, as well as bullying. Consequently, individuals within LGBTQI+ communities may seek 'gay spaces'. They act not only as leisure spaces but also serve as an impetus for human rights activism and potentially social change (Caudwell, 2018; Ong & Goh, 2018).

Therefore, this paper aims to further investigate the role of LGBTQI+ festivals and events in the creation of safe and inclusive places for LGBTQI+ individuals in regional areas. It does this by applying a social movement theory lens to understand how these events can create safe and inclusive spaces that foster unity among individuals, provide opportunities to build community and resources, and contribute to the formation of a destination's image (Mair & Duffy, 2020; Ong & Goh,

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2018). They allow marginalised individuals, even if temporarily, to reclaim space and express their identity through these festivals. To understand this contemporary role of LGBTQI+ festivals and events in regional Australia, analysis is conducted from a key stakeholder perspective. Particularly as local stakeholders have an in-depth understanding of the specific social, cultural, and political context of the region, allowing them to identify the challenges and opportunities for LGBTQI+ festivals and events to act as social movements in a region.

2. Literature review

2.1. LGBTQI+ festivals and events as social movements

SMT is an interdisciplinary study in the social sciences that aims to understand causes and manifestations of social mobilisation. It explores the various forms that social movements take and examines their potential social, cultural, political, and economic impacts, including the formation and functioning of these movements (Jasper, 2010). This paper draws upon Hetherington's (1998) notion of social movements, whereby expressive identities are examined through the lens of performance, spaces of identity, and the occasion. As such, we intend to demonstrate how identity politics are simultaneously local, plural, situated, and complex.

Social movements are purposeful and strive to create social change with a common goal (Little, 2014), with SMT able to be seen as 'the entwinement of movement dynamics with those of the socio-political environment in which they act' (Gillan, 2018, p. 531). Throughout history, festivals, events, and gatherings have been used to rally acceptance of marginalised groups, such as LGBTQI+ people, and as part of a social movement to gain traction for rights in the political arena (Lockett & Lewis, 2022). LGBTQI+ social movements have focused on various causes throughout history, ranging from acceptance, liberation, and equal rights of LGBTQI+ groups. They span across time and space, impacting social change, and in some cities, pride events have served as a strong cultural statement (Bruce, 2013) leading to social transformation (Bryson, Barberg, Crosby, & Patton, 2021). For example, drag performances, core to most LGBTQI+ events, have a long history of been discussed within a framework of SMT, as a form of 'expressing gay identity, creating and maintaining solidarity, and staging political resistance' (Taylor, Rupp, & Gamson, 2004, p. 1).

This adds to the analysis of social movements as social change aimed at cultural, political and legal inequalities (Bruce, 2013). For example, the inaugural 2019 Wagga Wagga Mardi Gras in regional NSW provided a space for LGBTQI+ individuals to temporarily transform their socio-cultural space, leading to a reconciliation of differences in the community (Lewis & Markwell, 2021). Indeed, stakeholder frameworks for rural LGBTQI+ events have placed themselves as ally destinations and the use of these events as political instruments to change policies, create social acceptance and to celebrate community (Lewis, Small, & Mehmet, 2019).

However, there is still a sense of a lack of acceptance for LGBTQI+ people in regional areas in comparison to the bigger Australian cities. This, therefore, presents the role of regional LGBTQI+ events and festivals as both a community celebration and as part of social movement and social change. Social change through pride events has been documented through time, globally and increasingly in rural areas. However, rural LGBTQI+ communities have experienced the risk of being isolated on dual fronts, firstly in the experience from heteronormative culture and secondly, from the active political movements and urban LGBTQI+ culture (Marple & Latchmore, 2006). Conversely, it is increasingly being documented that smaller rural LGBTQI+ events are driving social change, transforming attitudes, and giving voice to individuals in these LBGTQI+ communities and their allies (see, for example, Marple & Latchmore, 2006; Lewis & Markwell, 2021; Ford & Markwell, 2017; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021).

Research into the societal impact of festivals and events, particularly

in their ability to mobilise collective action and engender social change, is solid (see, for example, Laing & Mair, 2015; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Fong-Emmerson, 2022; Walters, Stadler, & Jepson, 2021); yet the application of the SMT within the realm of festival and event studies remains notably limited. Despite the relative scarcity of studies in this domain, social movements have been argued to be significant in considering organisational and stakeholder structures within events, positing that such structures play a pivotal role in fostering solidarity and catalysing the emergence of new social movements (Eleftheriadis, 2015; Johnston & Klandermans, 2003). Notably, Martin (2016) emphasises the inherent connections between festivals, carnivals, and emerging social movements. Importantly, he investigates how these festivals and events serve as platforms for collective action, resource mobilisation, and the negotiation of power dynamics within society; and as such, sheds light on the intricate interplay between cultural expression, social activism, and the construction of alternative social spaces within contemporary societies.

2.2. Importance of stakeholders for regional events

Social movements involve a mobilisation of activists, actors, and other key stakeholders involved at the grassroots level in organised activism in response to issues, changes or aspects that marginalise others (Milano, Novelli, & Cheers, 2019). Social movements are usually made up of individuals, friends and stakeholders that have a common aspiration or goal of attaining fairness and obtaining redress for issues that result in marginalisation (McGehee & Santos, 2005; Milano et al., 2019). As such, involving stakeholders and members of communities in the planning and execution of LGBTQI+ events can raise the consciousness of issues regarding marginalisation of LGBTQI+ individuals in rural communities, and facilitate the expansion of alliances and networks to support social movements (McGehee & Santos, 2005). Events and tourism can establish a sense of common purpose and shared commitment to a cause through involvement of the many and varied key stakeholders required to facilitate events (Monterrubio, 2017), even in regional and rural communities.

Due to the marginalisation LGBTQI+ individuals could experience in regional and rural communities, the benefits of LGBTQI+ events being held in these communities are important and vital (Lockett & Lewis, 2022). Rural areas are typically perceived to be quite conservative and as such, the organisation of LGBTQI+ festivals and events may be particularly challenging given the lack of resources, smaller pool of attendees, organisers, and volunteers. Smaller populations often mean interrelated ties between members of a community and could lead to conflicting stakeholders that may have an impact on the organisation of an LGBTQI+ event (Lewis et al., 2019; Lockett & Lewis, 2022). Conversely, these close ties could create a safe and supportive environment to allow these events to develop and thrive. It is important to make stakeholders, contributors and attendees feel comfortable with supporting and participating in these events. As such, the relationships between stakeholders and the community are essential to the success of rural LGBTQI+ events (Ammaturo, 2019; Lockett & Lewis, 2022).

Event stakeholder relationships are often shaped and influenced by power, which can be based on the level of interest in the event, financial resources, and influence in terms of decision making (Walters et al., 2021). Power does not necessarily have to be a negative in relation to power imbalances but can be seen as a positive in terms of a capacity to do something, which can be created and nurtured through relationships with stakeholders. This power and associated knowledge is embedded in the social relationships between people, groups, stakeholders, and organisations. By engaging the community as an equal partner their voices can be heard, which in turn empowers them (Walters et al., 2021). Thereby facilitating their collective efforts and action in pursuit of a common goal and/or social movement (Monterrubio, 2017).

This study sought to explore the role of LGBTQI+ festivals within regional towns through the eyes of key stakeholders who are involved in their planning and management. Specifically, via social movement

theory, we focused on the role these events play in assisting marginalised groups to feel more accepted in rural towns, as well as the festivals' effect on the perception of a destination. Both are important considerations in supporting all members of rural communities, as well as building an accepting, inclusive destination image for regional areas. Analysis from a stakeholder perspective is crucial, given the key role stakeholders play in social movements via mobilisation of like-minded individuals and conscious raising (King, 2008).

3. Method

3.1. Study context

This research adopted the interpretive/constructivist approach in a qualitative framework. The study was exploratory in nature, necessitating a thorough understanding of emerging phenomena (Patton, 2002). The investigation specifically centred around two towns in regional Australia, Broken Hill (NSW) and Alice Springs (NT), both of which host annual LGBTQI+ festivals. To understand the importance of these festivals for regional destinations and observe the positive changes they bring to communities, as well as their impact on shaping the identity of a destination, we conducted semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders such as representatives from local government, industry associations, and event organisers.

The Broken Heel Festival was first organised in 2014, and over time, the three-to-five-day festival has become a significant event in Broken Hill's calendar, drawing a crowd of more than 6500 people, with 70 % of attendees coming from outside of the town. It usually runs in September (Baird, 2019). fabALICE is a younger festival – celebrating its fourth year in 2023. A four-day festival which attracts more than 2000 attendees (Allison, 2023), fabALICE usually runs in March – right after the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Due to the COVID pandemic Broken Heel Festival was cancelled in 2020 and 2021, whereas fabALICE did not run for three years in a row (2020–2023). Broken Heel and fabALICE both pay homage to the iconic Australian film 'Priscilla, Queen of the Desert', which aired in 1994 and was directed by Stephan Elliot. The film depicted the journey of Mitzi, a drag performer, Adam a.k.a. Felicia, and transgender Bernadette as they voyaged from Sydney (NSW) to Alice Springs (NT).

Broken Hill, situated in the westernmost part of NSW, is renowned for its status as one of the oldest mining towns in Australia and the birthplace of the world-famous mining corporation, BHP (Broken Hill Proprietary). Often nicknamed the "City in the desert", the town has a population of approximately 18,000 people, with a median age of 44 (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2021). However, many in the town are transient, part of the FIFO (fly-in-fly-out) workforce needed to support mining operations surrounding the town. Being an old mining town, the architecture is a distinctive mix of old and new, with historical colonial-style government buildings, pubs and hotels that reflect the late Victorian architectural period to the newly established Lode Miners Memorial and café sitting atop a ridge line west of the town. It is the diversity of architecture and rich mining history that saw the town placed on the National Heritage list in 2015 (Broken Hill City Council, 2023). Alice Springs is the third largest town in the NT, and is roughly equal distance between Darwin to the north and Adelaide to the south. The population of Alice Springs is approximately 25,912 with a median age of 34 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people make up 20.6 % of the population. As a rough central point of Australia and gateway to the "Red Centre", Alice Springs has become a key tourism hotspot due to its rich Aboriginal and European Heritage, surrounding desert landscapes and as a major stop on The Ghan transcontinental railway line (Alice Springs Town Council, 2023).

3.1.1. In-depth interviews with key stakeholders

In-depth interviews with local stakeholders enabled a more thorough and nuanced examination of the effects of regional LGBTQI+ festivals and events on local communities (interview protocol is available in Appendix A). The interviews were held as means to capture the distinct societal, cultural, and political circumstances of the two study regions. This enables them to recognise the obstacles and prospects for LGBTQI+ festivals and events in the region. Particularly as Lockett and Lewis (2022, p. 632) argue that interviews with stakeholders involved in local pride events 'help enhance the efficiency of the research process by providing access to a broad range of perspectives based on their experience, and help the researcher understand theories of what works in practice'. From the epistemological perspective, this study adopted an insider positionality. The lead author of this article identifies as a gay cis-male, and the second and third authors are cis-female, who although not identifying as LGBTQI+, are strong supporters of the LGBTQI+ communities.

Semi-structured interviews with ten key stakeholders were conducted: six in Alice Springs and four in Broken Hill (Table 1). Our research participants consisted of individuals who provide the perspective of government, community, business and the events themselves. The interview questions were informed by SMT, ensuring they captured key elements such as collective identity, resource mobilisation, and any possible political opportunity structures (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2021; Thompson, 2002).

The demographic details and stakeholder type of the specific participants could not be released as part of this study without breaking the ethics protocol and the possibility of them being identified as they are situated within relatively small communities. Interviews of this kind must maintain anonymity and confidentiality so that participants feel comfortable sharing their ideas without feeling obligated to provide explanations that align with societal norms or social/company/government expectations (Stokes & Bergin, 2006). However, in Table 1 we have included an indication of what perspective they are providing their comments from, e.g. government, community, business, and the event themselves, to provide context to the quotes provided.

Participants were interviewed via Zoom in 2021 and 2022 and lasted between 25 and 70 min. Two of the three researchers independently analysed the transcripts. This ensured that the results were not influenced by the biases of a single researcher. The study followed Burnard's (1991) suggestion for analysing qualitative interviews. Two researchers manually assigned codes to the transcripts using an open coding method that was based on the participants' comprehension of how LGBTQI+ festivals in Alice Springs and Broken Hill affected local communities. Open coding is a method in which data are initially broken down and analysed to identify concepts, categories, or themes. It allows for exploration and discovery, with the researcher remaining open to emerging patterns and concepts (Patton, 2002). This process helps develop a comprehensive understanding of the data by identifying a wide range of ideas and perspectives. The third researcher conducted a review of the coding process to ascertain the validity of the codes applied and found that coding was largely consistent between the two researchers. Of the few codes that were not consistent – these were discussed and revisited by the researchers that did the initial coding, and the third researcher, to reach consensus.

Table 1
Interview participants.

Pseudonym	Location	Perspective
Ashley	Alice Springs	Event
Jamie	Alice Springs	Event
Riley	Alice Springs	Business
Alex	Alice Springs	Government
Jo	Alice Springs	Government
Blake	Alice Springs	Community
Drew	Broken Hill	Business
Quinn	Broken Hill	Event
Robyn	Broken Hill	Government
Kim	Broken Hill	Community

4. Findings and discussion

Our study on regional LGBTQI+ events in Australia was guided by Hetherington's (1998) perspective on social movements, which explores how expressive identities are manifested through performance, spaces of identity, and the occasion. At the same time, we emphasise the importance of the need to motivate collective stakeholder action to create social change (King, 2008). Four overarching themes have been uncovered: 1) Resisting marginalisation; 2) Places of identity; 3) The value of inclusion; and 4) Emerging tensions. These themes provide important insights into how individuals and groups construct their identities and engage in collective actions within the regional LGBTQI+ events.

4.1. Resisting marginalisation

Regional LGBTQI+ events play a crucial role in resisting marginalisation for members of LGBTQI+ communities (Fileborn, 2019; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021). Marginalisation is a complex social phenomenon that refers to the process by which certain individuals or groups are relegated to the periphery of society, and are systematically excluded from opportunities and resources that are available to the dominant population (Alimahomed, 2010; Trudeau & McMorran, 2011). LGBTQI+ events provide a platform for individuals to come together, share experiences, and form connections with others who may have had similar experiences. By temporarily queering the town and acknowledging LGBTQI+ people, regional LGBTQI+ events can counter the isolation and alienation that can result from feeling ostracised or marginalised within society at large. This was observed by the study participants:

Jo (Government): fabALICE helps to reduce stigma and discrimination that we experience, generally, just through visibility.

Robyn (Government): Every year that goes on and [Broken Heel Festival] gets bigger and bigger, it's creating that acceptance. Now it's not just that one time in the year, where there's that kind of LGBTQI+ representation in events, they now happen all year round, weekly. So, the festival made it very acceptable in the town.

The extracts above illustrate the existence of LGBTQI+ festivals in regional Australia serve as a sign of visibility, showing that there are members of the LGBTQI+ communities present in the region and their presence is recognised and valued. This has synergies with previous work by Lewis and Markwell (2021) and Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy (2021), who argue that regional LGBTQI+ festivals and events facilitate and maintain shared awareness among a group of people by prompting them to consider and potentially change their beliefs and attitudes related to culture. Importantly, this also signals the involvement and contribution of various stakeholder groups. Evidently, these groups facilitate the collective action through a social movement not only by binding the individual stakeholders together but also helping to bringing the whole community together year-to-year to form important social networks (McGehee & Santos, 2005).

Regional LGBTQI+ festivals serve not only as an exercise for the LGBTQI+ communities to come together but also to celebrate other often-marginalised community groups such as Aboriginal people, immigrants, and refugees. This further strengthens the argument that such festivals possess community-building and identity-forming elements beyond the LGBTQI+ population. Similar parallels have been recently observed in the contemporary meaning of urban pride events in Australia (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Fong-Emmerson, 2022). In this study, participants observed:

Jo (Government): fabALICE is co-hosted by two Darwin-born Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal drag queens who [...] as far as I understand [are the] producers of fabALICE. They advocate for the LGBTQI+ community and Aboriginal LGBTQI+ people. [...] Look at the publicity that was brought by Courtney Act [a famous Australian drag queen] to Central Australia.

She talked a lot about Aboriginal culture, she went on mainstream media and talked about Mardi Gras, Alice Springs, Aboriginal people and drag. And for me, that was a really important opportunity to bring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people together and use drag as a way to do that.

Robyn (Government): Initially [Broken Heel Festival) was kind of a shock. And then [...], it really promoted and made the community more inclusive. [It made us] just more aware of different cultural groups that exist, and that already exists in the town as well.

Social movements often arise during pivotal junctures when certain groups of individuals are unjustly placed at a disadvantage by the prevailing rules of economic, social, or political systems. As such, stakeholder importance within these social movements is paramount in addressing intersectionality (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2021). As evidenced in this study, it underscores the significance of engaging diverse and often marginalised groups to foster a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to social change. Furthermore, these quotes imply LGBTQI+ events, at least in regional Australia, are inherently intersectional, as in their design and execution they are inclusive of other often-marginalised groups of people, such as Aboriginal people. This relationship might well be bi-directional, whereby building relationships within the community and enhancing the dialogue between the LGBTQI+ communities and the broader community contributes to the success of these events. Therefore, the broader recognition of the multifaceted perspectives and experiences of various stakeholders enables the development of social movements. Such instances impart a social license to better navigate the complexities of intersecting identities and power dynamics that shape contemporary social issues within the community.

4.2. Places of identity

There is an inherent understanding that community is connected to the concept of place (Mair & Duffy, 2020) whereby a sense of place relates to a person's connection to a particular location or a 'spatially defined setting' (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2011, p. 795). Massey (1993) construes the notion of place as more than just a location on a map, and that both significant and minor movements contribute to shaping its character. A sense of place is formed through the various ways in which social connections are spatially constructed and expressed. Festivals and events have the inherent capacity to shape a sense of place (Mair & Duffy, 2020), and imbue the local communities with new and differing qualities outside of those already present. This is reflected in the extracts from the interviews with the study participants:

Alex (Government): [fabALICE] is not just about money. It is also about morale. It is about creating a more inclusive society here at Alice Springs.

Robyn (Government): In a small countryside town, there are not necessarily as many events like this [Broken Heel Festival], there's no celebration out here like Mardi Gras. Events like that do not really occur in smaller country towns [...]. But ever since Broken Heel first happened, it really just drove that culture, made it accessible and popular in the town. It almost created another identity for the town.

These extracts illustrate how fabALICE and Broken Heel festivals epitomise the understanding of place – they can be viewed as locations where connections within and outside of the local area are strengthened and transformed. As such a sense of place is important for wider community cohesion and contributes to shared values related to culture and identity. The notion of place is integral to social experiences and is shaped by shared practices and understandings (Jarman, 2018). When people feel connected to a place, they are more likely to take pride in it and work to maintain and improve it. This can lead to the development of strong, vibrant communities that are attractive to both residents and visitors.

A fundamental assumption behind the staging of LGBTQI+ festivals and events in regional towns is that they serve as an activity for building

community, creating and/or enhancing social bonds. Regional LGBTQI+ festivals and events are important contributors to broader community building in regional Australia, moving beyond the integral and distinct positive impacts on the local LGBTQI+ communities. Arguably such events are examples of social movements that manifest dynamic expressions of collective identity that embodies a communal response to societal challenges. This is evidenced in the following quotes:

> Blake (Community): I'm sure there's still homophobia, don't get me wrong, we have a heap of fundamentalist churches. People [in Alice Springs] are taken on their face value of what their quality is as a person, and what skills and commitment they bring to the community […].

> Jamie (Event): [fabALICE] is about respecting people's choices. […] It has moved beyond acceptance and tolerance, […] it is effectively more reflective of the broader values, honesty and integrity, and respect. These sorts of values are clearly a part of the broader community. I think it emphasises a sense of connection to country and family, like they [community] see themselves as a broader family.

The extracts above suggest regional LGBTQI+ festivals contribute to a sense of belonging and identity for a wider community. SMT underscores the role of such festivals in not only affirming individual and group identities but also in fostering collective action and solidarity (Martin, 2016). Festivals can serve as a means of (re)defining individual and group identities through the expression and celebration of symbolic and emotional values (Finkel & Platt, 2020). They also have practical benefits, such as providing a gathering space for people to interact with each other. They bring people together and create a shared experience, as well as showcase the local culture and character of a place. This collective coming-together aligns with SMT's emphasis on the importance of shared symbols and rituals in strengthening group cohesion and advancing social change (Johnston & Klandermans, 2003). As such, these festivals serve as a community identity activity aimed at strengthening collective memories and the identities of the towns.

Community identity in this study is manifested in two dimensions – internal and external. Internal community identity is portrayed through the celebration of the culture of their towns and the diversity within the local communities. This is reflected in the aforementioned quotes by Blake and Jamie, however, the notion of internal community identity is also felt in the pride and comfort of being able to host LGBTQI+ events in their towns. For example:

> Jo (Government): Alice Springs people generally might feel proud that an event such as [fabALICE] is in their community.

> Robyn (Government): I think that it's great to have such a huge event [Broken Heel Festival] put on where there is a comfortable place for that.

> Kim (Community): The street parade was absolutely amazing. I was surprised how many other locals [not identifying as part of the LGBTQI+ communities] actually went to the trouble of creating a float to put in the parade.

These extracts suggest that residents value festivals as important elements of their social and cultural life due to the positive relationships they contribute to. The SMT provides a framework for understanding how these festivals act as catalysts for social cohesion and collective identity formation (Johnston & Klandermans, 2003). The positive impact on people's social and cultural lives is fostered through connections, understanding and appreciation of difference and diversity. This contributes towards the current debate in cultural geography about people's interactions with each other and how these interactions shape and define the character and identity of a place and its effect on community building (Qu & Cheer, 2021).

External community identity pertains to the validation that their town is inclusive and tolerant towards LGBTQI+ people. The validation is grounded in the assumptions about the imagined perceptions of their town. It is often placed at the centre of their sense of accomplishment

and pride. For example:

> Quinn (Event): [Local] people become proud because they see the influx of people come to their city and have an amazing time. And they get a sense of pride of their city, you know, [they feel that] they're not in some backward town.

> Drew (Business): I personally think there's something very magical and energetic about people coming together and celebrating which is really positive. This is really necessary for good living, and for the city to embrace it, you know, backup that sort of event and also help celebrate colour and diversity, is a fantastic message to get out to anybody in the world.

This challenges the notion of regional towns being bigoted and adds to the overall sense of pride within the local community. LGBTQI+ festivals and events provide an opportunity for people from the local community to come together and celebrate their diverse identity and foster a sense of belonging and pride. Inadvertently, this sense of community pride is one of the elements that is needed to facilitate tourism in their towns (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021). Fundamentally, regional LGBTQI+ festivals and events provide space for both LGBTQI+ and non-LGBTQI+ people from outside Alice Springs and Broken Hill to come together and enjoy these destinations. This value of inclusion is discussed in the next section.

4.3. The value of inclusion

Creating, organising, and running festivals and events that welcome everyone is key to fostering social inclusivity, which might entail individuals gaining a deeper understanding of political matters and feeling empowered to speak out about them (Laing & Mair, 2015; Ong, Lewis, & Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2021). The question of inclusivity and its value within contemporary festivals and events has been a trending topic, as it arguably contributes to the broader perception of destination image. Previous studies exploring how events impact the perception of a destination from the perspective of tourists have concluded that events can enhance a destination's image, influence a tourist's decision-making, rectify negative perceptions, and even change the overall image of a destination (Duarte, Folgado-Fernández, & Hernández-Mogollón, 2018). Hosting LGBTQI+ festivals and events can be interpreted as a sign of an inclusive tourist destination (Ram, Kama, Mizrachi, & Hall, 2019). Indeed, LGBTQI+ festivals and events can play a significant role in attracting tourists to regional areas, as well as building and enhancing the image of a particular region, town, or city (see, for example, Ram et al., 2019; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021). The stakeholders in this study have seemingly agreed that both Broken Heel Festival and fabALICE are part of their town's inclusive tourism profile, not only highlighting the importance of LGBTQI+ inclusion but also the economic benefits and the opportunity to showcase the region:

> Blake (Community): There's an economic benefit. […] fabALICE brings dollars, it brings heterosexual dollars, it brings rainbow dollars. It's a fun festival. Nobody's gonna die. […] Because it's built on Priscilla [the movie], it legitimises the LGBTQI+ community as a marketing strategy in the big picture. It's inclusive, you don't have to be LGBTQI+, anyone can take part. It's strategically run, more and more local businesses can get involved and gain from that. And it could certainly be an opportunity to showcase Central Australia and Alice Springs, which is something else from the racist town from hell in the middle of nowhere that nobody wants to go to that's completely flat, which it's not.

> Robyn (Government): I think the advantages are definitely bringing people […] into the town, that's always going to be a positive for the town to drive people out here that might not have seen a reason to want to come before. So that's very beneficial not just to the town in general, [but] for tourism, and for locals, like small businesses out here.

It can be deduced that regional LGBTQI+ festivals have a significant

economic impact by attracting tourists and boosting local businesses. These events also increase the visibility of a region and promote it as a destination for both tourism and investment. Therefore, involvement and backing from the local community, including local businesses, is crucial for the success of any place branding exercise. Local businesses in Broken Hill and Alice Springs are embracing Broken Heel Festival and fabALICE by window-dressing and propping the towns. Participants explain:

> *Quinn (Event): We had a bit of a slow uptake. [In the beginning] we tried to offer window dressing competitions to get people to participate, but now they just do it off their own back. And you know, weeks before we get to see some amazing displays happening in windows. […]. Supermarkets put [the rainbow] flags up around the shop […].*

> *Jamie (Event): The retailers were invited to dress the premises up. There were banners put-up all-over town, down the main streets and off light poles. […]. Some business owners in the CBD took the opportunity to display their support, their active support, by having rainbow flags flying and all that sort of stuff.*

Businesses in regional Australia play an important role in in creating the value of inclusion for the LGBTQI+ communities. From the SMT perspective, the significance of institutional support in advancing the goals of social movements, and businesses' participation in these efforts exemplifies this support (Martin, 2016). The support includes participating in, embracing and sponsoring events and initiatives that promote equality and acceptance. Not only does the public display of rainbow flags and window-dressing in the spirit of the festivals show a commitment to inclusivity and diversity, it also has a positive economic impact on the wider communities of Broken Hill and Alice Springs. Research suggests that consumers are more likely to support businesses that align with their values, and the LGBTQI+ communities are no exception (Gudelunas, 2011). Arguably, this visible support from businesses can be seen as a form of framing, whereby through social movements certain values and messages are promoted to attract broader public support and legitimacy. Overt and proactive support for LGBTQI+ communities might have a positive impact on a business's image, reinforcing the interconnectedness of economic interests and social advocacy within the framework of social movements. Thus, it also contributes to the enhancement of the overall image of a town and region as a welcoming and inclusive destination. It challenges the notion of the bigoted and backward regional town when it comes to often-marginalised groups of people. In turn, this arguably enables regional destinations to attract more diverse visitors and, potentially, lead to increased tourism and economic growth. While this is not central to this study, conducting additional studies with festivals' attendees would be necessary to further assess the perspective of an inclusive destination image.

4.4. Emerging tensions

The themes of resisting marginalisation, places of identity, and the value of inclusion aid us in understanding the processes of change being experienced in regional Australia. While these themes could be understood as positive advancements within the communities, tensions about the purpose, culture, community benefit, and the true inclusivity of LGBTQI+ festivals and events have been a longstanding issue (Stone, 2022). Each festival has its unique flavour and style that is usually appealing to residents, although conflicts might arise with certain subgroups within the host community.

There is a broad expectation for LGBTQI+ festivals and events to be inclusive and supportive of diverse racial, gender, and sexual orientations (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Fong-Emmerson, 2022); however, there are often tensions regarding how much LGBTQI+ events cater to heterosexual people (Stone, 2022). The argument that fabALICE is more of a spectacle for heterosexual people has also been raised. Blake clarifies the latter:

> *Blake (Community): Well, here's the deal. I don't see [fabALICE] as an LGBTQI+ event. I don't see it as that at all. It is as marketed and sold as that [LGBTQI+ event] and it builds on that, but [to me] it's not an LGBTQI+ event. It's a heterosexual event and marketed as LGBTQI+.*

The argument expressed by Blake could be dissected in two ways. On one hand, there is frustration that the LGBTQI+ culture is commodified and packaged for heterosexual spectators to consume. On the other, there is a hint of worry that LGBTQI+ communities do not have ownership of the event and therefore do not have power over how they are represented. Both festivals are inherently homonormative whereby heteronormative constructs are imposed upon LGBTQI+ identities and culture (Duggan, 2002; Ooi, 2021). Alex epitomises the fact that fabALICE is made to appeal to a broader audience:

> *Alex (Government): […] I'm in my bubble. I would imagine if I stepped outside of my bubble [the festival would appear to] challenge quite a lot of the community's values and beliefs. But as far as I'm concerned, that's a great thing even if the festival is made to appeal to everyone.*

Further to the comments made by Blake and Alex it appears that the heteronormative constructs are elevated as the standard to which LGBTQI+ individuals are expected to conform to appeal to broader (non-LGBTQI+) audiences. Even though these festivals offer chances for LGBTQI+ individuals to genuinely showcase themselves, attendees seem to be 'boxed in' displaying their 'true' identities solely within particular, fleeting environments that continue to be influenced by the dominant heteronormative social standards (e.g., the display of sexual and marital relations; traditional understanding of family). Arguably, the inherence of homonormativity here stems from positioning fabALICE and Broken Heel festivals as tourist attractions. Homonormativity sells. It appeals to a wider audience who might identify as both hetero- or non-heterosexual. Indeed, as Ooi (2021, p. 25) argues 'the current prevalent social economic system is built on a heteronormative majoritarian logic'. The homonormative imaginations of regional LGBTQI+ festivals inevitably promote a particular (often cliché) form of queerness even though their primary function is to attract and cater to LGBTQI+ visitors.

Another point of contention surrounding regional LGBTQI+ festivals stems from the perceived unequal representation within the LGBTQI+ acronym, specifically between gay men and lesbians. LGBTQI+ communities are diverse and varied, which is why the plural form 'communities' is typically employed instead of the singular form 'community' (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2018; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Fong-Emmerson, 2022). This can create tensions and problems when trying to satisfy all members of the diverse LGBTQI+ communities. Riley explains:

> *Riley (Business): The lesbian community might have thought that there wasn't enough in the programme for them. It was more directed at gay boys and queens. […]. So, some of the more radical lesbians had a bit of a demonstration last year in the middle of the parade. […]. Well, as I said, the lesbian cohort might think there's not enough for them.*

The tensions surrounding inclusivity within the LGBTQI+ acronym are not new (Stone, 2022) and historically, there have been diverging views on the value and meaning of LGBTQI+ events within the acronym (Browne, 2007). From the SMT perspective, these dynamics highlight how social movements are often composed of diverse factions with varying interests and perspectives (Johnston & Klandermans, 2003). While these events were established as celebrations of inclusivity (Ford & Markwell, 2017), there can be danger in assuming that all communities within the LGBTQI+ acronym think the same (Browne, 2007). LGBTQI+ festivals can present an idealised version of communities and may not accurately reflect the diverse culture within them. Even when the communities are recognised as being culturally diverse, these perceptions can still shape the framework of a particular festival. As Stone (2022, p. 4) notes, while the 'origins of the LGBTQI+ rights movement

[…] included an emphasis on unity through diversity, […] this diversity was often limited and white-centric'.

While festivals and events must attempt to represent all stakeholders and participants, there can be no perfect event that is all things to all people. Events and festivals are likely to be heavily influenced by those that have a key role in their planning and development. So, if a particular stakeholder group is not represented at this important initial planning stage, they may not be well represented or feel that the event was for them. This is a key aspect of stakeholder management in events, in terms of trying to adopt a variety of strategies to manage dynamic stakeholder relationships, needs, and wants (Bazzanella et al., 2019).

5. Implications and conclusion

By examining stakeholders' perspectives, this research shows the important role regional LGBTQI+ events play in building local town/regional community and strengthening the social, emotional, and political resilience. These events resist marginalisation by providing a space for identity expression, connection, visibility, and education, and they contribute to the overall well-being and empowerment of the community as a whole. This paper builds upon social movements by utilising regional LGBTQI+ festivals as a compelling case study. By examining these festivals within the framework of social movement theory, the study explored how these festivals serve as platforms for social mobilisation, resisting marginalisation, and conscious raising within the regional communities of Broken Hill and Alice Springs.

However, it is important to note that not all community members may have had the opportunity to express their views. Although limited to 10 key stakeholders, which is an adequate representation for these regional towns, future research examining stakeholder values may want to include a wider community voice, by explicitly seeking out both LGBTQI+- and hetero-identifying community members to ensure that their opinions, values, and concerns are heard. While acknowledging that events cannot be all things to all people, being able to express and have input does provide validation to some.

The emergence of regional LGBTQI+ festivals and events can be attributed to the growth of 'new' social movements. Indeed, a broad range of social and political issues has conflated the notions of social movements and matters such as tolerance or equality (Thompson, 2002). As such, the significance of social movements lies in their advocacy for fair treatment and inclusivity. Over the years, social movements have made noteworthy progress in the pursuit of equality in the LGBTQI+ space. As such, regional LGBTQI+ festivals and events as social movements continue to highlight the injustices faced by marginalised people and strive for an ideal where everyone is treated with equal respect, and differences are celebrated, not discriminated against.

The nature of place-based belonging for LGBTQI+ individuals in regional towns has been characterised as both 'alienating and liberating' (Waitt & Gorman-Murray, 2006, p. 10). Festivals and events play a crucial role in social change and in providing a space for ongoing sexual politics and the concept of belonging. Specifically, as regional LBGTQI+ events provide the opportunity for minority groups to 'own' a space and define the brand and identity of their town, which they may not necessarily feel represents who they are. Local LGBTQI+ events are seen to act as a representation of whether queer people were truly welcomed and accepted, thereby reflecting the values and sentiments of the community (Ammaturo, 2019; Ong, Lewis, & Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2021; Ong, Vorobjovas-Pinta, & Lewis, 2021).

The issue of inclusivity of destinations and LGBTQI+ events as attractions has garnered considerable attention recently (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Fong-Emmerson, 2022). This study suggests that such festivals can help to boost local economies by attracting visitors and promoting local businesses. Furthermore, these community festivals play a vital role in promoting a sense of unity and pride within a broader community and help to create a sense of place that is unique and special. On the other hand, the LGBTQI+ festivals tend to be imbued with the heteronormative understandings of the world and tailored to the taste of the masses—predominantly heterosexuals. Some authors have suggested that heteronormative norms of such festivals could be undermined by employing more ritualistic display of LGBTQI+ culture to challenge the dominance of heterosexual patriarchy and its perceived entitlement to public spaces (Kaygalak-Celebi, Kaya, Ozeren, & Gunlu-Kucukaltan, 2020). Another challenge facing regional LGBTQI+ festivals and events is that these festivals are often staged for their mass appeal. They tend to prioritise mainstream trends and commercialisation, which might dilute the authentic experiences and diverse identities within the LGBTQI+ communities. This commodification frequently results in the marginalisation of less visible or less marketable subgroups, leading to a representation that does not fully encompass the breadth of the community's voices and issues (Lewis & Markwell, 2021; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Fong-Emmerson, 2022). However, further research is needed to understand this complex phenomenon and its effect on broader regional communities.

Importantly, our study highlights the critical need to engage diverse and marginalised groups for inclusive social change. LGBTQI+ events in regional Australia demonstrate a high degree of intersectionality, involving various marginalised communities, such as Aboriginal people. This fosters bi-directional relationships, strengthening dialogue between LGBTQI+ communities and the broader society. In turn, the recognition of diverse perspectives enhances social movements, allowing for better navigation of intersecting identities and power dynamics. Businesses that support LGBTQI+ causes benefit from positive public perception and increased tourist activity. However, event planning must involve all stakeholders to ensure inclusive representation, as exclusion at this stage can lead to underrepresentation and dissatisfaction.

This paper explored how, from a stakeholder perspective, LGBTQI+ festivals and events could help regional communities resist marginalisation and become advocates for social movements. Through the four overarching themes of resisting marginalisation, places of identity, value of inclusion, and emerging tensions, this research provided important insights into the role and effect of regional LGBTQI+ festivals on local communities. It is clear that inclusion is created through opportunities to have a say or feel represented, but this can be difficult to balance with the many varied voices potentially leading to a diminishing of the original intent. We hope that the findings outlined in this paper would inspire future research and advocacy, highlighting the potential of LGBTQI+ festivals and events to foster inclusivity and support regional local economies.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Oscar Vorobjovas-Pinta: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Joanna Pearce:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Anne Hardy:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2024.101300.

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