
Guest editorial: Sharing and belonging in festival and event space: introduction to special issue

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Introduction

The origins of this special issue lie in the ATLAS Events Special Interest Group track held as part of the ATLAS annual conference in Cork, Ireland, in September 2022. Researchers were invited to submit research on the theme of “Festivals and events: offering wellbeing, solidarity and hopefulness in times of uncertainty”, and this subsequently evolved into a call for papers for this special issue on the theme of “Sharing and belonging in festival and event space”. Recent years have seen a growing awareness of how events can potentially help to cultivate community and a sense of belonging, enhance individual and collective well-being, create moments and spaces where diverse groups can share interests and socially interact in positive ways (Jaeger and Mykletun, 2013; Stevenson, 2020; Wilks, 2011). However, the roles that events play in shaping places and communities are not always positive (Smith, 2015) and neither are they always fully understood.

Events and the places that host them exist in a state of continuous evolution, not least because of the political, socio-economic and environmental threats and instabilities that continue to reverberate across our interconnected world. The internationally felt COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, constituted an enormous shock to the sector in recent years, and much has now been written about how festivals and events navigated the crisis and evolved in its aftermath (Coles *et al.*, 2022; Davies, 2021; Estanyol, 2022). One obvious effect of the pandemic was to accelerate digitalisation, a development that poses implications for the nature and quality of both audience engagement and cultural production processes (Shipman and Vogel, 2024). More generally, given the turbulence of contemporary times, it seems more pertinent than ever to interrogate whether festival and event spaces can be constructed in ways that foster sharing (Hassanli *et al.*, 2021), caring (Munro, 2013), hopefulness (Waitt, 2008) and inclusion (Laing and Mair, 2015). Accordingly, there is an ongoing need to ask how festivals and events can foster values like “participation and civic responsibility” so as to help individuals overcome shared difficulties (Rowen, 2020, p. 695) and to investigate how events can contribute to the sustainable regeneration of communities, neighbourhoods and places at the collective level (Richards and del Pilar Leal Londoño, 2022).

Sharing and belonging in festival and event space

While some argue that physical closeness of diverse groups does not equal social mixing (Peters, 2010), others argue that people gradually increase their knowledge, understanding and acceptance of difference through encountering others in shared spaces (Agrawal and Barratt, 2014). Bagwell *et al.* (2012, p. 6) go so far as to suggest that “when shared space stimulates interaction between groups then this induces a sense of belonging”. However, the shared spaces created through festival and event activities are temporally bound and may be one-off occurrences. Ostensibly, they also appear to be ephemeral in nature, and so it is quite difficult to argue that they matter when it comes to enabling people to co-exist harmoniously. What’s more, Swartjes and Berkers (2022, p. 5) argue that “people primarily come together to celebrate a shared lifestyle (Bennet and Woodward, 2014) rather than to meet ‘others’”.

Yet, a few considerations are worth bearing in mind. At a time when society is becoming more individualistic (Franklin, 2009), festivals and events represent opportunities for people to



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come together as collectives (Arai and Pedlar, 2003). As a form of cultural participation and for a variety of reasons, festivals are now pervasive, not only in Western societies but across the globe. Often, they either occupy or spill out onto the streets of our cities, towns and villages, where everyday life is performed (Martire *et al.*, 2023). Not only that, but they also usually constitute social and cultural highlights in people's lives. As Wood and Kinnunen argue in this special issue, festivals are memorable because they entail sociality, escape from routine and novelty and bring with them emotional highs and lows (Wu *et al.*, 2020). All of this means that festivals are characterised by a peculiar intensity that blurs the distinction between those present, be they locals, visitors, performers or organisers (Frost, 2016).

Overall, while there is general agreement that events create one of those spaces where people have an opportunity to meet others, some of whom are like-minded (Wilks, 2011), others less so; there is less agreement as to the specifics of what happens next. There is an understanding that events promote the sharing of experiences, interests and values (Hassanli *et al.*, 2021), but this process may not be straightforward. When sharing any space, there might be inequalities and power relations that typically threaten particular cohorts, e.g. females or members of minority groups. In their paper in this issue, Baxter, Jones and Leer evaluate problems that are created when heterosexuals occupy LGTBQ + safe spaces. Equally, while festivals and events are very often credited with helping to foster a sense of belonging (McClinchey, 2008), belonging is a very complicated notion, and often it is used as if it were self-explanatory (Antonsich, 2010). In the event context, Duffy (2005, p. 679) reminds us of this by saying that it involves "on-going dialogues and negotiations within communities as individuals and groups attempt to define meaningful concepts of identity and belonging". The paper from McGillivray, Walters and Guillard in this issue presents empirical material that brings such dialogues and negotiations into sharp focus, while that of Luna-Cortes highlights how event organisers can actively play a role in positively influencing the process. The contribution of Almeida, de Brito and Wanderley promotes an understanding that it takes time to cultivate belonging, as it does the sharing of knowledge, values and goals. It further shows that events, in tandem with ongoing socio-cultural practices, can contribute to this process. These papers, as well as that of Pessina, underscore the role that events can play in encouraging a sense of pride in places, people and cultural practices. As Brannon and Lin (2021) strongly argue, feelings of pride are closely associated with belongingness.

Papers in this special issue

The papers published in this special issue offer insights into different kinds of events, spaces and settings. In tandem, they demonstrate that there are many ways of sharing togetherness, of sensing connections with others and of fostering belonging. Two of the papers focus on what is typically understood to be place-based community events, a type of event about which a great deal has been written. McGillivray *et al.* open an essential discussion on the meaning of place-based community events in stigmatised residential areas. Territorial stigmatisations include negative perceptions of residents and their place of living, often connected to poverty, crime, poor housing, ethnic minorities and negative media attention. McGillivray *et al.* emphasise how community-run events can challenge these representations by empowering people and making them proud of their place. They analysed the Govanhill International Festival and Carnival staged in Govanhill, Glasgow (Scotland) and the South Dunedin Street Festival in Dunedin (New Zealand). Their findings demonstrate how these events took ownership of local spaces, how the community-based event organisation empowered local actors and produced collective pride and how the events brought long-term benefits through increased social capital and positive media coverage. These place-based events helped local communities create shared memories and emotions, thus fostering acceptance and tolerance of others living in the same area and improving their quality of life.

A territory becomes stigmatised over a long period of time. However, the study shows how community- and place-based events might gradually change these harmful representations.

The paper by De Almeida *et al.* continues the focus on place-based community events using a case study of Bon Sons, a community-run festival set in a rural village in central Portugal. The authors use a qualitative and longitudinal approach to investigate the role that such events can play in rural place-making. An overarching ambition was to investigate how the practices engendered through the event inter-link with social practices already established and ongoing in the village. Their findings point to several ways in which event activities reaffirm the values and the life force of the village by showcasing it to the outside world, valorising local practices, generating funds for local heritage restoration projects, strengthening inter-generational ties and cultivating a sense of belonging by including a cross-section of local residents in its activities. While the context is different, this paper also demonstrates how the achievements of a community festival can include an enhanced sense of pride in place. In this case, the event is a vehicle through which a small rural village can showcase its place and its culture to the outside world, receiving external affirmation in the process.

The quantitative study of Luna-Cortes is quite different in that the setting and the event attendees are much more specific. It deals with an event organised to welcome first-year students at a university in Colombia, where the crime rate is one of the highest in the world. However, the themes of collective identity and belonging are again to the fore. In this study, a core problem was: How could event organisers reduce the fear of crime and consequent uncertainty about participation? The results indicated that participation in a WhatsApp group administered by the event organiser before the event increased trust in the organisers and reduced the perceived crime risk, which in turn, reduced ambivalence (indecisiveness, having mixed emotions) and increased the intention to participate. While all the participants had similar levels of ambivalence, foreigners (in contrast to locals) had a lower intent to participate. Consequently, event organisers, particularly in high-risk countries, should consider active social network communication before the event to increase their clientele.

Whilst the previous paper focussed on an in-person event, its use of digital technology to cultivate collectivity was clearly important. The influence of technology in shaping festival and event practices and experiences was taken up in a further paper authored by Pessina. As is now very well documented (Gloor, 2020; Vandenberg *et al.*, 2021), a prominent influence of the COVID-19 pandemic was to prompt an acceleration of digitalisation within festival and event organisations. Pessina writes about how Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCE), a national Irish traditional music organisation that usually stages an annual in-person festival – *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* (feast of Ireland) – staged a virtual festival, *FleadhFest*, in 2021. *FleadhFest* involved the streaming of videos created by CCE branches on the CCE YouTube channel. Empirically, the paper analyses the four videos created by the County Louth CCE branch and concludes that the digital arena provides an opportunity to maintain the celebration of both local music practices and a sense of community among local musicians. It points to the potential, unrealised in this case, that virtual celebrations like this have for connecting with tourism audiences.

The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted activities in 2020 and in the years that immediately followed was omnipresent in Wood and Kinnunen's paper. They studied the value of reminiscing about past festivals as a potential way of improving well-being in socially isolated times. Data were gathered from people in 2020, at a time during the pandemic when socially isolating restrictions were in force. Empirically, they recruited 13 pairs who had previously visited any overnight music festival together and asked them to firstly record their reminiscences and then to talk about the festival together with their companion. They found that study participants, who had visited festivals in the UK, Denmark and Finland, enjoyed new emotional experiences as they reminisced about past festival experiences in ways that positively affected their well-being. Very importantly, and in line with existing research (Mead *et al.*, 2021), they concluded that "sharing memories of a social experience with

likeminded others leads to feelings of gratitude, optimism and hope”. Among other contributions, this paper very helpfully invites a rethinking of the prevailing understanding that festivals and events are ephemeral phenomena with its suggestion that reliving memories of past festival experiences holds the power to enhance well-being.

The final paper in the special issue focuses less on events but rather on the spaces where events take place. Issues like site design and layout, the physicality of the site and the meanings that people associate with spaces all come into play when thinking about how to construct event spaces that are to be shared (Swartjes and Berkers, 2022). This idea is central to the paper contributed by Baxter *et al.* Their focus is on the LGBTQ + community. At the outset they remind us that this community has safe spaces of their own where they feel free from prejudice and judgement and where they can express themselves safely. Illustrating how event spaces are continuously evolving, Baxter *et al.* describe in their article how these spaces are more and more populated by heterosexuals, attracted by novelty and particularly the increased popularity of drag culture. The study explores how this infiltration of heterosexual attendees influences members of the LGBTQ + community. Using a qualitative survey (N = 558) with open-ended questions and the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) with 12 participants for data collection, they thematically analysed the data. Using Castilhos and Dolbec’s (2018) framework of four spatial dimensions, Baxter *et al.* conclude that safe LGBTQ + spaces are transforming from segregating and emancipating spaces, free from ridicule and fear, into market and public spaces, causing distress, discomfort and even fear among LGBTQ + community members. The venue managers of LGBTQ + spaces are encouraged to take steps to ensure these spaces also remain safe.

Conclusion

These papers show some of the different facets of sharing and belonging that events, festivals and their spaces may foster. They do this in the context of various challenging environments like times of pandemic, stigmatised residential areas, a rural area at risk of depopulation, high-risk countries and spaces where safety comes under threat as they become more open to the wider public. At the same time, and maybe even more importantly, they demonstrate the ways in which sharing and belonging might improve event participants’ well-being. This can happen as events boost pride in the place where people live, reduce ambivalence and fear in a high-risk environment, enhance a sense of community through virtually presented festival content in pandemic times, recreate warm and sociable festival atmospheres through reminiscing about past (live) experiences in times of social isolation and ensure that safe spaces remain safe and free of prejudice and fear.

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