

Conference Review: Events Special Interest Group track at the ATLAS Annual Conference 2022

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Abstract

The 2022 Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research (ATLAS) Annual Conference took place on the Munster Technological University campus in Cork, Ireland, 6-9 September 2022. The theme of the conference 'What matters now to the global tourist?' raised pertinent questions about the challenges facing the tourism and leisure industries and education since the onset of the global pandemic. This review focuses on a series of papers from the Events Special Interest Group which covered themes such as solidarity, community, festivals, place-making and digitisation.

Keywords: events and festivals; community; solidarity; place; ATLAS; tourism and leisure.

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Festivals and events in times of uncertainty

The 2022 Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research (ATLAS) Annual Conference took place on the Munster Technological University campus in Cork, Ireland, 6– 9 September 2022. Delegates from 28 countries came together to discuss a variety of topics under the overarching theme of 'What matters now to the global tourist?' Overall, the strands of the conference emphasised the significance of several areas of tourism and leisure and brought into sharp relief the changes and challenges in the sector at a moment when travel and tourism regaining momentum since the start of the pandemic. Conference delegates raised important questions about accessibility, inclusion, and sustainability in the face of the global pandemic and climate crisis and discussed a multitude of ways the sector is addressing these issues. Keynotes set the tone with focuses on travel and wellness (Associate Professor Melanie Kay Smith, Budapest Metropolitan University), the current objectives of Tourism Ireland's strategy (Siobhan McManamy, Acting Chief Executive, Tourism Ireland) and importantly, organisation and employment models for the tourism workforce (Professor Michael Morley, University of Limerick). This review focuses on themes evident within the Events Special Interest Group strand of the conference, which include spaces of solidarity, community building, and placemaking, as well as changes in digital practices since the pandemic.

Within ATLAS, there are several Special Interest Groups (SIGs) which focus on specific education and research topics or geographical areas. As part of the activities of the Events Special Interest Group [SIG], Bernadette Quinn (TU Dublin) and Maarit Kinnunen (University of Lapland) co-convened a track on the theme: 'Festivals & events: offering wellbeing, solidarity, and hopefulness in times of uncertainty'. The Events SIG was further framed by the launch of the publication © Irish Journal of Arts Management & Cultural Policy 2023

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Festivals and the City: The Contested Geographies of Urban Events (Smith et al., 2022). The publication contributes to broader scholarship addressing the complexities of place and space in urban events, festivals, and activities (Brownett and Evans, 2020; Derrett, 2003) as well as acting as a useful frame for the SIG track.

Solidarity and community

Three papers in the special track highlighted the power of festivals and events in providing spaces for solidarity and community. These papers echo recent studies of inclusion (Finkel et al, 2018), community building (Mackay et al, 2018) and solidarity (Roy, 2016) in festivals and events spaces. Danielle Lynch (TU Dublin) presented the paper *Carrying the mantle: tracing the emergence of the Five Lamps Arts Festival* (Five Lamps Festival 2023), a Dublin festival established in 2007 by local resident Róisín Lonergan. The festival is in Dublin's North inner city, an area which has undergone rapid urban regeneration alongside an influx of multinational companies, growing multi-cultural communities and ongoing anti-social issues (Lynch, 2022). Lynch's paper highlighted the importance of locating the contemporary festival within a broader historical context of community arts activism in the area. Lynch carefully tracked the legacies of activist groups such as Balcony Belles, a female acting group based in Sheriff Street in 1996 and Inner Art, a project which took place in Dublin's North-East inner city, in September 1997. In doing so the contribution gave context to the emergence of the Five Lamps Festival and its place within the wider ecology of arts and community activism in North inner city Dublin, highlighting the role of festivals which are by, and for, the community in which they take place.

Emma Grove's presentation *Belonging, Power, and Avenues for Inclusion in a Traditional Irish Music Festival* explored the boundaries of traditional music in Temple Bar musical festival, Tradfest. Grove, a researcher employed by the Temple Bar Company to explore the parameters of the festival, examined the gendered and nationalistic construction of Irish traditional music spaces. Highlighting the potentialities of festivals to 'democratise culture' by becoming more inclusive, particularly in terms of gender and culture (Brown, 2019), Grove's paper pointed towards ways in which a more diverse range of artists could be included in the festival space. These included recommendations such as increasing the involvement of women artists through the commissioning of new work, as well as taking an artist-centric approach to facilitating relationships between Tradfest and communities that have been marginalised. The strategies proposed by Grove, intended to directly influence policy making, propose immediate action for building solidarity through bringing together different communities.

Also working in an urban context, Daniel Baxter (Glasgow Caledonian University), presented *Creating Safe Spaces: Exploring the LGBTQ+ communities' experience of ally inclusion at LGBTQ+ safe spaces in the UK*, co-authored with colleagues Claire Leer and Steve Jones. Focused on a nightclub in Brighton, England, Baxter unpacked the transformation of a queer nightclub space, as people from outside the queer community began to participate. The paper highlighted the rising popularity of drag events, particularly mainstream TV shows such as Ru Paul's Drag Race, as a 'catalyst' for the transformation (Baxter et al., 2022). In terms of solidarity and community, Baxter unpacked a space that is typically seen as an 'inclusive and safe space' for attendees and asked questions about safety in the context of queer spaces welcoming more

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mainstream clubgoers audiences (Baxter et al., 2022). In doing so, Baxter highlighted the complexities involved and considers the impact on the LGBTQ+ community.

Emma Wood presented the paper *Shared festival experiences: The power and purpose of remembering together*, which she co-authored with Maarit Kinnunen, Jonathan Moss and Yanning Li. In this paper the team explored the idea of memory negotiation in remembering festivals. Through an inductive study, they paired individuals (friends, partners, siblings) who attended festivals together and interviewed them, individually, and then together, about their memories. The aim of the research is to compare individual versus shared memories and to explore the process through which memory revision occurs. One of the outcomes will be to consider the implications of memory negotiation for festival experience, a relevant contribution when considering the shared nature of festival experiences.

Sharing social spaces was also in focus in the paper by Amber Herrewijn (NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences) *Nudging sustainable behaviour at festivals*. Herrewijn questioned how social conditioning shapes people's actions using the example of cigarette butts, arguing that many smokers, and the public more broadly, do not consider cigarette butts as waste or litter. Using case studies from festivals, as well as from research projects conducted at NHL Stenden University in the Netherlands, Herrewijn proposed ways of nudging more sustainable behaviour including examples such as gamification and communication. In one example, gamification was used to encourage festival goers to collect cigarette butts and place them in specially designed rubbish bin that helped visualise how many cigarettes go to landfill. By making the scale of the problem visible and educating people on the damage caused by cigarette butt rubbish, the strategy enabled collective action towards targeting the problem therefore building a sense of responsibility within the community. Herrewijn's paper emphasised the importance of sustainability in festivals and events, a theme that was prevalent throughout the ATLAS conference.

Festivals and place

While the papers above highlighted urban case studies from cities like Dublin, Barcelona and Brighton, several other papers turned the focus to arts and cultural festivals in rural locations and highlighted the significance of place. In terms of rural festivals and events, scholarship has often emphasised themes of place-making (Li and Lau, 2022; Sayari and Tuba, 2018) and inclusion (Duffy, Mair and Waitt, 2019; Quinn et al., 2020). Marisa de Brito's (Breda University of Applied Sciences) presentation, *Sustainability practices and placemaking: the case of 'Bons Sons' festival*, co-authored with Luciana Almeida and Lilian Wanderley, focused on the Bons Sons festival based in the region of Madalena, located between Porto and Lisbon. This community-run festival includes a wide demographic ranging from young children to elderly community members. A key underpinning approach is to view the 'village as a school' and to promote the idea of active aging. De Brito shared the example of older women in the town knitting and crocheting souvenirs all year around to sell at the festival, partly to raise funds. This approach raises questions regarding the life of the festival and its ability to create and facilitate avenues of work, play and leisure in the village outside of the festival period. De Brito's paper showed how the temporal dimensions of the festival stretch beyond the remit of the festival programme as Bons Sons functions as a cultural event for the community to work towards all year.

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Although not presented in the Events SIG track, the paper *The Literary Festival: A stage for promoting our cultural and literary heritage*, presented by Mary McGuckin (Atlantic Technological University) also explored the relevance of place to arts and cultural festivals. McGuckin's paper was part of the Special Track from the ATLAS Special Interest Group on Cultural Tourism: 'From tangible to intangible cultural heritage: pathways from the future'. In her paper, McGuckin argued for the significance of literary festivals in Ireland, such as the Festivals of Writing and Ideas in Borris, County Carlow (Festival of Writing and Ideas 2023), which focus on 'creating a community or sense of belonging or participation'. McGuckin's research takes in the perspectives of leaders, managers, and thinkers in the organisation of literary festivals and asks questions such as what makes literary festivals authentic? She also touched on the pandemic-induced digitisation of literary festivals during 2020 - 2022 and associated benefits in terms of accessibility, citing Sasha de Buyl, the director of Cúirt, the international festival of literature, whose innovative practices are garnering attention in this area. Established in Galway in 1985 as a three-day poetry festival, Cúirt now encompasses a myriad of events including debates, art, and film.

Festivals since COVID19 and digital engagement

For the festivals and events sector, the pandemic had widespread and unavoidable implications. Several papers examined the effects on festivals and events in the lockdown context. Alba Colombo (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya) presented *Arts Festivals and Digitisation from the Social space scene: ephemeral festivity in times of distancing, proposals and legacies*, co-authored with Xavier Villanueva. This explored the relationship between space and festivity in the context of social restrictions during the COVID19 pandemic in Europe. The research, which is part of a broader research project, 'Festspace', led by the University of the West of Scotland, considered how spaces of festivity were created and experienced during this time. Colombo illustrated these using examples from Barcelona such as Festa Major de Gracia which used a combination of online and offline events to engage people during the pandemic.

The lasting significance of the transition to online platforms was demonstrated by Gary Kerr (Edinburgh Napier University) in an examination of events staged for the dementia community during COVID19. In *Unlock & Revive: Delivering events for the dementia community during COVID19*, Kerr reported on a multi-disciplinary action research project that focused on people with early onset dementia (people who receive a diagnosis before 65th birthday). Focused on delivering practical findings, this research raises important questions about the accessibility of digital events and about how technology can act as both a barrier and a gateway. Digital events alleviate the need to travel in person, something which can create barriers for people with accessibility issues. Kerr's paper highlighted the significance of digital events, and their lasting legacies in terms of providing accessible events within dementia communities.

Finally, Samantha Morris and Bernadette Quinn (TU Dublin) presented research on *Rural festivals and digitisation* from the *Festivals, Audiences, and the Digital Experience* (FADE) project. The presentation reported on the growing digitisation of arts festivals in Ireland, its challenges (poor digital infrastructure, lack of digital skills, increased labour and cost), as well as opportunities (increased accessibility, broader audience engagement). The paper problematised the terminology currently being used to describe digital arts activities in festival settings, deconstructing terms like

hybrid, online and digital which are often used interchangeably. Since the onset of the pandemic, the switch to online events occurred rapidly for many festivals and events, leading to limited critical reflection on what occurred, and what was achieved. Quinn and Morris demonstrated how further research is required to break down what constitutes hybrid festivals, or digital festivals in an events space that has been entirely transformed by the pandemic.

The ATLAS conference was the first in-person conference held by the association since the COVID19 outbreak and it rightly focused on an important question of 'what now?'. While some of the presentations presented festival research that raised themes of place-making, social inclusion and cultural identity, others focused on the specificities of how people continued to make festivals – whether online, digital, or remotely – during the pandemic. The presentations outlined above covered diverse themes from solidarity and community, festivals and place to festivals and digital engagement. The papers offered a deeper and more nuanced understanding of events occurring since the beginning of the pandemic and highlighted areas for further research. The very timing of the ATLAS conference, and unanswered questions around events and digitisation demonstrate a need for further understanding of the successes and failings of the 'digital pivot' since COVID19 while many presentations demonstrated the power of conducting deeply place based work that pays attention to historic and contemporary contexts of place.

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