Working Paper Series

Music Festivals as Sites of Consumption: An Exploratory Study

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Working Paper No 05/05

January 2005
MUSIC FESTIVALS AS SITES OF CONSUMPTION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT
This qualitative exploratory study examines the music festival scene in an effort to identify themes for future research. Twenty-one interviews with festival-goers were videotaped. Thematic analysis of the interview data suggests that music festival consumption offers a unique site for the investigation of certain aspects of consumer behaviour. Lines of enquiry for follow-up research include issues such as the nature of the community which is formed at festivals; how and why consumers make use of music festivals to try new social and musical experiences; and how festival-goers mark the differences between festival time and non-festival time.
BACKGROUND
Literature in both consumer behaviour and musicology has tended to focus on the private, as opposed to social, consumption of music. Bowman (1998) identifies that, from a number of philosophical perspectives, music is viewed as fundamentally social. Music is socially constructed, socially embedded and its nature and value are inherently social (Bowman 1998). This notion is supported by a wider group of music researchers. For example, Hargreaves and North (1997) maintain that “what makes [...] sounds into music is the way in which people collectively imbue them with musical meaning, and [that] a vital part of this process is the social and cultural context in which the sounds exist” (p.1).
Consequently, it is unlikely that consumption processes in social situations are the same as those in private situations. As music is inherently social and frequently consumed in the presence of others, the impact of social settings on post-purchase consumption processes offers a compelling research opportunity. However, Hargreaves and North (1999) argue that the situational/social factors in music consumption have been neglected. They conclude that the social functions of music are manifested in three main ways, namely in the management of self-identity, interpersonal relationships and mood in everyday life. A study by North and Hargreaves (1999) provides empirical evidence that people, in this case adolescents, do use music as a ‘badge of identity’. This idea is supported by Goulding, Shankar and Elliott (2001), who found that the construction and expression of one’s identity is a key reason (among others) as to why people attend raves.

THE FESTIVAL INDUSTRY
The festival is a phenomenon which spreads across a wide range of cultural sectors, including film, literature, religion (Ward, 2003), opera, popular music, dance, comedy, and sometimes a mix of many of these elements - for example the Edinburgh International Festival, inaugurated in 1947 (Harvie, 2003). Those interested in the commercial side of the festival business can see the potential marketing opportunities in the gathering of tens of thousands of consumers in one place for a few days. Oakes (2003), for example, points up the need for an appropriate fit between festival sponsors and festival-goer demographics. Within marketing and consumer studies there have been some recent explorations of festival consumption, specifically the Burning Man fire festival project, a one-week-long antimarket event (Kozinets, 2002; Sherry and Kozinets, 2004). The earlier article concludes that Burning Man participants “successfully construct a temporary hypercommunity from which to practise divergent social logics” (p.20). Kozinets points out that in contrast to the isolated individual emancipation from the market posited by other thinkers, the ethnographic study of this festival has highlighted the possibility that emancipation may be achieved (temporarily) by “individual consumers becoming re-embedded in communities” (p.33).

SITES OF POPULAR MUSIC CONSUMPTION
In this section, we consider a number of sites where music is consumed in public, with a view to identifying current themes and approaches. The relevant sites are: pubs, raves, gigs and festivals. Bennett (1997) notes that little has been written about the pub as a site for the production and consumption of rock music. In his paper, he is concerned to re-frame the pub as not just a stepping stone from local scene to full-time professional music-work but as denoting “a primary site for the interaction of popular music with local structures of feeling” (p.107). Here, the sense of community is local, established, continuous, and somewhat closely guarded. Goulding et al.’s study of the UK rave scene (2002) identified key issues as being identity, the emergence of new communities, escape, engagement and prolonged hedonism. They also noted the sharp differences in consumers’ behaviour between working weeks and rave weekends. Noting the centrality of community to the rave scene, they see ravers as coming together as a temporary community to partake in a collective experience. Malbon (1999) in his study of clubbing, has some caveats about the notion of community and communitas applied to this context. He suggests that one should not read these terms in such a way as to infer that there is a neat similarity and conformity amongst the clubbing crowd. He also points out that differentiation can exist within clubbers as well as between them and others. Finally, he asserts that “the fluctuation between self and crowd is a defining feature of the clubbing experience” (p.187). Individual live concert performances (gigs) by a band, often preceded by a support act, are another key site of popular music consumption. Weinstein’s (2000) account of heavy metal music and culture highlights the potential for emotional or even peak experiences, the intense preparation rituals by both band and audience, the bonding and reciprocal gratitude between them and the notion that gigs are occasions where a “transitory community” (p.199) is formed. Shuker (1998) highlights the importance of music festivals. There
are a wide range of musical genres which have their own festivals, for example: Newport Folk and Jazz Festival; Cambridge Folk Festival, WOMAD (world music), Helena, Arkansas (blues - see King, 2004). Rock musical festivals, specifically, are traced back to Monterey (1967), Woodstock (1969 - see Connell and Gibson, 2003) and the Isle of Wight (1970). Concerts may be cause-related (e.g. Live Aid, 1985) or straight commercial ventures (e.g. Knebworth, UK). Nowadays, rock festivals are widespread across Western Europe, perhaps the biggest venue and the one with the most consistent history being Glastonbury in the UK. In terms of theorising festivals, Shuker (1998) foregrounds the notion that they reinforce popular music personas, creating icons and myths in the process. He also conceptualises the audience as both a temporary community “joined in celebration and homage to the performers and/or the genre” (p.122) and also a commodity in a major commercial enterprise. Shuker, finally, notes that “festivals have received only limited attention within popular music studies” (p.122), a point echoed by King (2004). King contends that blues festivals serve three main functions, namely: the honouring of musicians who have contributed to the genre, preservation of blues culture, and racial integration. Connell and Gibson (2003) position music festivals as ‘common features of music tourism industries’. In their opinion, festivals ‘provide places with ‘spectacle’ and a sense of ‘uniqueness’. They function to create networks for performers, generate tourist income, help regenerate urban areas, or to enhance ‘the cultural awareness and experiences of local populations’. In summary, there has been a lack of research into consumption at/of rock music festivals.

RESEARCH DESIGN
Music festivals are a fairly common cultural event and are also economically important. However, little effort has been made to understand the experience that people have while attending a music festival, and therefore we do not yet understand the real significance of these events from the consumer’s point of view. Thus the main objective of this research was to investigate the consumption experience of music festivals. By exploring questions such as why people have attended a particular festival and what experiences they have had while there, an understanding of music festivals as sites of consumption can be gained. Ethnographic research is particularly appropriate for understanding music as a social practice (Cohen 1993) and therefore offers a suitable approach to addressing the research objective.

The research involved semi-structured interviews with informants who were attending the Southside Festival 2004 in Neuhausen ob Eck, Germany. Southside is an annual rock festival that is twinned with the Hurricane Festival in Hamburg, Germany. In 2004, some of the feature acts were the Pixies, PJ Harvey, The Cure, Franz Ferdinand, Die Fantastischen Vier, Placebo and David Bowie. However, David Bowie’s performance was cancelled as he was hospitalised after his performance at the Hurricane Festival the previous night.

Festival attendees were approached in various locations around the festival site and asked if they would participate in an interview. Although a small number of those approached refused to take part, a total of twenty-one interviews were conducted over two days. Efforts were made to interview a cross section of the attendees in terms of gender and age. Almost all of the informants spoke English as a second language, with German as their primary tongue. The interviews were conducted in English and were recorded on both audio and video equipment in order to capture a three-dimensional portrayal of the informants (Belk 1998). The interview data was then transcribed and a thematic analysis undertaken using cross case and within case comparisons.

THEMES
A number of themes have emerged from the analysis of the data. These are presented and discussed below.

Theme 1 - Motivations
People were motivated to attend the Southside Festival 2004 for a number of different reasons. The most apparent motivations fall into two categories: (1) aesthetic enjoyment and entertainment and (2) social needs. Many informants stated that they were there simply for the music. This motivation is best captured by Hargreaves and North’s (1999) ‘aesthetic enjoyment and entertainment’ function of music. This function incorporates affective, cognitive appraisal and social dimensions, indicating that a person’s response to music is based on the interaction between the person, the music and the situation.

What made you come to this festival? The great music. Have you got a particular band that you are interested in seeing? Yes, the Hives. I love the Hives, and the Cure, PJ Harvey.
In this case, the informant had already developed an aesthetic preferences for the music. However, the following quote provides evidence that some informants attended the festival in order to hear new bands and therefore form new aesthetic preferences.

You would have known which bands were playing before you came, but you still came anyway, even though there wasn’t much music that you liked. Why did you still want to come? I just want to be surprised. And have you been? Yeah, of course. I saw some bands I didn’t know before and they were pretty much fun. For instance, Within Temptation I hadn’t seen before and that was a pretty nifty show.

In contrast, there are also many informants who attended the festival on the basis of social needs. For these informants the actual music did not seem to matter.

Are you looking forward to seeing any bands? No, just a good time.

Why have you come to this festival? I go to festivals because festivals are great fun. Because of the people, everybody is happy. Everybody is happy, everybody is here for a party. The bands, it doesn’t matter who plays, as long as somebody plays and the people have fun, I have fun too.

The two main categories of motivations appear to be mutually exclusive, in that most informants expressed either one or the other motivation. This dichotomy is clearly illustrated in the following conversation between two informants:

(1) I would say, I never had the idea to go to a festival to see one special band. I always go to festivals to meet people and the bands I see, they are always just a ...in Austria we say, a cherry on the cake. (2) I wouldn’t agree. I mean the bands are important to me.

Some higher level motives were also expressed, such as Maslow’s ego needs and need for self-actualisation. In the following quote, the informant had suggested that a festival such as Southside, was one of the only places where people could be fulfilled because of the energy that could be felt there.

Why is there so much energy here? Do you really need to know? Just feel it. It’s just being here, to just be f**king here. If you want to, any time, any place, you can feel such positive energy. But if you come to such a location, you don’t have to think about it, it’s just coming to you, it’s just offering you, it’s just waiting for you.

Often where these higher level motives were expressed, they usually formed part of a more complex structure of multiple needs, which seems to reflect the multidimensional nature of the festival experience.

The reason I am here, the reason was David Bowie and the Cure, but David Bowie was not here and I hope the Cure will come today! The other reason is that this festival is very...how could I describe it...it’s very comfortable. There is no noise, there is no trouble among the people, everyone is friendly. In addition we are very lucky because of the weather. And all the surroundings around, it’s just like the late 70’s. The smell of the Indian...not the hippy culture, but something similar afterwards. The same culture that I had during my studies, at the beginning of the 80’s. And this is very comfortable for people like me. I’m not the youngest here, as you can see but this is also a reason for doing it. Because there is a mixture in the audience, you have very young people, you have people like me who are in their 40’s and you have people who are in their 60’s and 70’s. And this mixture is...I like it. This is all.

Theme 2 - Social Interaction
Social needs are an important motive for attending Southside 2004, as discussed in the previous theme, and social interaction also emerged as a significant part of the actual festival experience. Social interactions occurred at three different levels: (1) existing relationships, (2) new connections and (3) the festival attendees as a whole.

Attending the festival was often viewed as an opportunity to socialise with friends. In some cases, this was seen as being as, if not more, important than listening to the music.

It was great. I think last year I liked it a little more even, because they had more of the electronic music, and not so much hip hop, which I prefer. But you still decided to
come this year? Yes. Especially because it's a great group of friends who came. So it's a cool thing to do with friends. What is so good about being here at this festival with your friends? Um, I just like to go for camping with my friends, have some fun, come here to hear some music.

Even if the informants had attended with friends, some still saw the festival as an opportunity to make new connections with people. At a festival people who share similar lifestyles come together in one place. In some of the informant's eyes, this was viewed as a unique and special opportunity to connect with people.

There are people come together that would never know if this event wasn't. That's why we come here. We are people of different cultures, of different nations, of different religions, that's cool.

It's really special, because you are walking around in some band t-shirt, and people are coming to you and talking to you about this band. It doesn't happen in everyday life, it's just here. I only experience since here, it's really great.

The interaction between festival attendees at a holistic level was also viewed by a number of informants as being a significant part of the festival experience. There is a general perception that most people at the festival were nice and having a good time.

What is so good about people at a festival? They are happy all the time, some are drunk. But all in all, it is great fun, all the time. Every festival I have been to was fun.

Some informants felt that the nature of the people at the festival was something unique, whether it is because only certain people would go to a festival or because people act differently when at a festival.

For me, I found some people who are nice. It's nice to see that people can be nice if they want to be. Just the impression...and this impression you only get at festivals. Why do you only see that at a festival? I don't know. I think because it's a short time, they can express themselves very much easier than if they know. If I got to know you very good, I have to be careful about what I say, because you know me so you know which direction the conversation is from and stuff. It's different.

Theme 3 - Audience Behaviour

Being a member of the audience constitutes a wide range of behaviours. For example, some people simply stand and watch the bands perform whereas others dance, pogo, body surf, and/or sing along. Some of these behaviours only occur in certain areas of the audience such as at the front or near the back. Several informants explained that they like to take the same position within the audience for all bands.

We've been staying next to the mixing desk. You get the best view from there. We've been going from stage to stage. Why is the mixing desk such a good position? You can see well...but you'd probably prefer to go right up front, but I prefer a safe distance.

Are you going to stay back or will you get into the crowd? No, I have to because I am small and I can't see because all the people are 180cm around me. I just stay at the back and watch from the back. I can see more than if I would stay in the front

In contrast, many examples were provided where informants moved around within the audience depending on which band was performing and how the informant relates to, or feels about that band’s music.

It depends on the band. Because yesterday at Black Rebel Motorcycle Club, I wanted to be mostly alone. I was standing at the back, just a little bit dancing. I think tomorrow at Mogwai, I'm going to stand right at the front, and just stay there and close my eyes. It really depends on the bands. Some bands you have to jump to and to dance, some you really have to chill.

Many informants indicated that their preferred position is to be at the front of the audience, near the stage. Different reasons for this were given. The first quote below refers to social symbolic behaviour, whereas the second quote suggests that it is simply more fun at the front.

It's just two meters between you and the stars. Is that good? It's a good feeling. Because I can talk at home 'yeah, I saw David Bowie, two meters in front of me'.
Why do you like to go up to the front? Um, it's just, I don't know. There happens more. It's just more interesting and more fun. It's a better atmosphere I think.

Theme 4 - Activities
In addition to listening to the bands perform people undertake a wide range of activities while at music festivals. The majority of festival attendees were staying overnight in the adjacent camping ground. Thus, much of the time that people spent at the festival was accounted for by activities surrounding camping.

We just crash around our place [campsite], listen to some music, talk, cook together, this kind of thing.

Some informants had bought games and toys, such as Frisbees and hacky-sacks with them to use when not listening to the bands. Consuming alcohol and partying were also important activities as mentioned by many informants.

I see the bands. I make party, all time party. Not all time, because I think, sometimes I feel a bit tired. I need to sleep!

A range of commercial activities were also available to the festival attendees, including bungee jumping, shopping, piercing and tattoos. However, very few informants seemed interested in partaking in these activities.

Do you like that it's big? Yeah, of course. You can buy a lot of things here, a lot of food. Piercing, tattoo, everything. You can jump...I saw. Have you done that? No I didn't expect it to be here. It's OK, it's good.

Often the non-musical activities were used to help manage the overall festival experience. As suggested by the following quote, it would be difficult to spend all of the time listening to bands.

Sleeping, lying around, getting sun burned. Yeah walking around and looking at the shows. Do you actually go and watch many of the bands on stage? Well not all of them, but five or six a day. I think you can't do more because at night you will be too tired to do anything else.

Theme 5 - Atmosphere
The atmosphere was mentioned by many informants as being an important contributor to their experience of the festival. As can be seen in the following quotes, the atmosphere was generally perceived as being relaxed and peaceful, and to a certain extent, unique to Southside 2004.

It's a really great feeling. This whole community, there is no anger or stress, everybody is just letting anybody live. There is no stress here, it's like some kind of anarchy. Except for the cops of course.

This is a very special one in my opinion. Because it's...I do not know the English word for it...what is the opposite of war? Peace...it's very peaceful here. And I saw a lot of festivals where the notion of the people was much more aggressive. This here, not at all. It is the opposite, very peaceful and very comfortable. If you have a problem and there are too many people, and someone stands on your foot, he says pardon. This is not normal on a festival and therefore I like it very much.

The peaceful atmosphere was attributed to different factors. The informant in the first quote below suggests that it is because the festival attendees share similar tastes. In the second quote, it is the actual genre of music itself that enables this atmosphere.

A lot of people have the same interests, they like the music, and there is no aggravation. You don't get rival groups, everybody likes the same sort of things and it's very nice.

This is a rock festival, so it's different from other kinds of festivals. Other festivals are like if you have a full trance part, it's different from this one. More people are like on fully different drugs. Not like alcohol, but different stuff. The atmosphere is different. This I have to say, I like it. It's a very special place, much respect from other people. It's like you look around and everybody is a little bit like this, and there is no fighting. It's good.

Theme 6 - Festivals versus Gigs
Music festivals were seen as a distinctly different experience from concerts where only one main band performs (gigs). Some informants suggested that both festivals and gigs were good experiences, but the benefits you received were different. At festivals, it is the social element that is more important, whereas at gigs, the music
itself is the most important factor.

A festival is a totally different thing, I think. Because all the surroundings here, that makes it interesting. But a single concert is always better, I think, because the bands have more time to present their arrangements. Here they just get one hour and the timetable is very strict. So they just have to play, and then it ends. No encore.

Club tours are better than festivals. Festivals they play their hits and at the club tours they play longer and more for the people than here. Little concerts are often better than big festivals. But it's a great feeling festivals. Thousands of people and all are crazy. They drink, want to have fun, want to listen to music. I've never seen any riot on a festival. That's great.

The festival experience was also seen as more difficult than going to a gig, primarily because of the physical elements of the length of time involved and the accommodation facilities.

No, one a year I think is enough. It's quite expensive and after the festival you feel so dirty and everything is so messed up. So for one year, it's enough, one time, for me.

Theme 7 - Leisure versus Normal Life
A number of the informants referred to the festival experience as being something separate from their normal, daily life. Although only a few examples of this were found, the notion is important as it suggests that festivals are meaningful experiences for those who attend.

What do you think is the best part of the festival for you? Just hanging out and not having to think about my job or other things that bother you - usual, normal everyday life ... Because you can do anything which strikes your fancy. You don't have to bother about times or whatever, you just go here and that is it.

For me I found some people who are nice. It's nice to see that people can be nice if they want to be. Just the impression...and this impression you only get at festivals.

There was relatively little evidence at this festival of socio-symbolic consumption, or of subcultural capital issues (Thornton, 1996). That is not to say that the theme of identity did not emerge strongly from this data, though the use of identity as a heuristic construct could be useful in further research. It was surprising to find how relatively little the music mattered, and how important were the non-musical aspects of the festival visit, particularly camping.

DISCUSSION
As this is an exploratory study, our purpose is simply to identify potentially fruitful lines of enquiry to take forward to further research. In the literature reviewed above, the notion of community was common to pub rock, gigs and raves. In contrast with the pub-based music consumption instanced by Bennett (1997), the communities mentioned by Weinstein (2000) and Goulding et al. (2001, 2002) were transitory or temporary. Music festival communities may also be read as transitory, and therefore have this much in common with gigs and raves. The differences from gigs are that with gigs the focus is on the music; in the case of raves, the culture of consumption will be different from that of a festival community. However, this raises the questions as to what community means to consumers in this particular context, and also how the 'temporariness' affects the community's social interaction. Other scholars within marketing and consumption research have used the notion of 'brand community' (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002). In the case of this particular music festival, the festival brand (Southside) could not be regarded, on the basis of the evidence and impressions gathered, as a brand community. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) define a 'brand community' as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (p.412). This community is not admirers of a brand in this sense. In addition, the festival community is of course geographically bounded, as well as time-bounded. And, finally, musically speaking, the consumers' relationship is primarily with the individual band-brands and not the once-a-year festival brand. One could say, however, that festival-goers do seem to have a shared consciousness (ibid.), or at least appear to account for their festival experiences in terms which point to sharing of experience as well as to consciousness of similar tastes to others. However, Malbon (1999) has warned against assuming that to speak about a clubbing community implies that there is a neat similarity or conformity within it. Therefore one must be alert also to the ways in which festival-goers construct themselves within and without community-type formations at a
festival, for example by invoking musical genre as a category marker.

There is a sense in which the festival acts as an emancipatory structure, or experiential resource, with the aid of which festival-goers can find new musical and social experiences, make new friends, perhaps experiment with different ways of being. Those informants who mark the difference between festival time and elsewhen do so by reference to peace/war or by construing the outside world, including other festivals, as being hostile, aggressive, and stressful. Zukin (1993) is cited by Goulding et al. (2001) to make the point that “the features and experiences of contemporary leisure sites include [...] travel to distinctly separate zones [...] which [...] are thresholds of controlled and legitimate breaks from the routines of everyday, ‘proper’ behaviour in which individuals look for alternative social arrangements” (p.274).

In our opinion, the more promising lines of enquiry suggested by this exploratory study are questions such as: How do music festival-goers account for the nature of the community which is formed at music festivals? How do individual consumers situate themselves both within and without the overall festival community and sub-communities (e.g. groups of friends)? How and why do consumers make use of music festivals to try new experiences? How does the issue of time-boundedness affect consumer experiences of music festivals and their sense of community? How do festival-goers mark the differences between festival time and non-festival time, between normal life and festival consumption? Is there a connection between this symbolic boundary work (see Lamont and Molnár, 2002) and the sense of consumer innovation and experimentation?

CONCLUSION

This qualitative exploratory study has examined the popular music festival scene in an effort to identify themes for future research. Twenty-one interviews with festival-goers were videotaped at a German rock music festival. Thematic analysis of the interview data suggests that music festival consumption offers a unique site for the investigation of certain aspects of consumer behaviour. Lines of enquiry for follow-up research include issues such as the nature of the community which is formed at festivals; how and why consumers make use of music festivals to try new social and musical experiences; and how festival-goers mark the differences between festival time and non-festival time.
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