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SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE FESTIVAL INDUSTRY

A typology of festivals and the formation of new markets

Marianna Sigala

Introduction

Technological advances and the social media (SM) revolution are transforming all industries, and the festival sector is no exception. Increasingly, festival organizers are exploiting SM to market their festivals and distribute festival content (Pasanen & Konu 2016). SM are increasingly used by festival organizers for partially or fully digitizing festivals (e.g. online streaming and virtual festivals). Similarly, festivalgoers demand but also expect to use SM for sharing their festival experiences and interacting with festival communities (MacKay, Van Winkle, Halpenny & Barbe 2016; Morey, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Szmigin & Riley 2016).

However, the impact of SM on the festival industry is not only instrumental in terms of simply serving the functional needs of the industry by providing the technological tools for digitizing existing festival operations. Instead, SM are also a transformational driver by re-structuring the festival industry, supporting the formation of new ‘competitors’ and festival products, as well as transforming the role and the function of traditional festival stakeholders. SM are converting attendees from passive festival viewers to active co-creators and co-marketers of their festival experiences. SM empower attendees and other festival stakeholders to assume and undertake festival organization practices, to initiate and drive festivals and ultimately, become festival micro-entrepreneurs. Peer-to-peer marketplaces and platforms (e.g. www.meetup.com, www.kickstarter.com) – empowering users to co-create and/or co-fund projects and ventures – expand the role of attendees and stakeholders to festival co-funders and co-entrepreneurs.

These fundamental disruptions of technology and SM are recognized in the tourism literature (Sigala & Gretzel 2018). Sigala (2018) has also recently advocated that the technologies have transformed tourism management and marketing from a static and utilitarian sense to a transformative conceptualization whereby tourism markets and actors both shape and are shaped by technology. Unfortunately, research and literature in the festival field has not yet caught up with this technological revolution. Although there are an increasing number of
Social media transformation.

studies looking at the use of SM by festival demand and supply, research has failed to investigate so far the transformational power of SM in shaping and driving the formation of new festival products, markets, and competitors. Instead, festival research has mainly focused on discussing the functional and instrumental role of technologies on ‘existing’ and traditional festival stakeholders and products (e.g. Hoksbergen & Insch 2016). Moreover, research has failed to examine the entrepreneurial impact of SM on the festival industry demonstrated by the increasing number of user-generated and crowdfunded festivals.

To address these gaps, this chapter aims to discuss the transformational role and impact of SM on the festival industry.

Social media and the digitization of festivals

SM are platforms enabling users to meet, network, socialize, collaborate, store, share, and distribute information and resources. In the festival context, SM provide a common online space where users can gather in order to either host a virtual festival and/or to broadcast online a traditional festival to a mass international audience. Digital broadcasting overcomes space and time constraints, and so it can significantly increase festival ‘attendance’ by allowing anyone on the globe with an internet connection to attend and participate in an online broadcast festival. SM also represent a ‘free’, two-way communication medium that not only efficiently distributes content but also empowers online users to interact with each other, the content itself, and the content creators. By doing this, an online festival community is created whereby online festivalgoers create and consume festival content as well as share and discuss it by interacting with other festival stakeholders (Hede & Kellett 2012; Hoksbergen & Insch 2016). Through their online engagement with festival content, creators, and online users, online festivalgoers can personalize and actively participate in the co-creation of their (online) festival experiences.

SM affect the type and the nature of festivals in two fundamental ways: 1) the place/space whereby the festival takes place and/or is distributed, and 2) the actors and the way in which the actors are involved in festival practices, i.e. initiating the festival and/or (passive or active) role in festival practices.

The place/space of festivals

Festivals enabled and supported by SM: traditional, hybrid, and virtual festivals

SM provide the digital platform and space whereby one can either broadcast festivals and/or host virtual festivals as well. However, festival research has not discussed yet the role and the impact of SM on the types of festivals based on the location whereby they are hosted and distributed. Zanger (2014) developed an event typology according to the degree of intensity that events integrate with SM for digitizing their practices. This typology is also adapted here for identifying the types of festivals enabled and supported by SM. In this vein, the following types of SM ‘enabled’ festivals can be identified (from the most to the least integrated with SM): 1) virtual festivals (festivals totally held online), 2) hybrid festivals (online festivals with offline activities, e.g. red carpet events or traditional festivals streamed online), and 3) traditional festivals with a complementary use of SM for promotion. Overall, SM can be used as platforms for streaming and sharing videos and other content of both traditional and virtual festivals before, during, and after the festival.
SM are increasingly used for live streaming the performance of traditional festivals (e.g. Dekmantel in the Netherlands, Notting Hill Carnival, and The Social in Maidstone). Live streaming is claimed to help festivals to expand, internationalize, and diversify their audience reach with limited costs; engage and interact with festival audience (e.g. online polls, competitions, communications, share of content); increase festival exposure and attract future attendees; and better control and manage the sponsored content in terms of when, how often, and who views the sponsored content. Festival organizers and/or artists also post video performances on SM platforms such as SoundCloud, YouTube, Spotify, Facebook Live, and BE-AT.TV. Such videos enable attendees to relive, share, and reflect on their experiences; interact with others and debate what they have learned from their festival participation; and/or use videos as a festival memory and souvenir. Sometimes, users can also curate their own ‘festival favourites’ playlists, which can be a mix-and-match of their preferred pieces and festival moments. Before the festival, SM and streaming can be used for broadcasting pre-festival playlists in order to announce festival lineup and program, enhance festival promotion, get attendees into the mood and reinforce the festival atmosphere, and reduce purchase risk and increase ticket sales by giving an example of what the festivals are about. Anecdotal evidence (Reidy 2016) shows that the streaming of festivals increases both the festival prestige and ticket sales.

Internet advances have also fueled the rise of many (online) virtual festivals (Robehmed 2013). Music and film online festivals in particular are booming, due to the digital nature of their festival ‘product’ and experience. In online festivals, the organizers distribute and share the festival content online to an international audience without time zones and place constraints. Attendees of online festivals can also ‘attend’ the festival performance; participate in festival activities; and become part of, interact with, and network with the festival community from the convenience of their armchair. Moreover, the mobility and connectivity afforded by the smart phones allow the online festivalgoers to be continuously connected and updated with the festival happenings and community. In other words, the SM create a new type of festivalgoer, i.e. the ‘always on’ festival co-creator.

Some film festivals are held entirely online. This was pioneered in the 1990s by the Webdance Film Festival (http://webdancefilmfestival.com/). Usually, films are shown for a certain amount of time, and viewers can vote on the films they have watched. Other film festival activities such as the red carpet, behind the scenes, greenroom interviews, and viewers’ contests also take place online. Nowadays, websites (e.g. https://filmfreeway.com/festivals and https://festhome.com/) also list online film festivals alongside traditional film festivals. This might imply that film festivalgoers may consider traditional and online film festivals as equally substitutable and comparable experiences. However, primary research is needed to verify whether, for whom, and to what extent this is true.

The actors initiating (SM-supported or virtual) festivals: firm-driven vs customer-driven festivals

Online festivals can be initiated and organized by any actor, including traditional festival organizers, online start-up companies, the traditional mass media, and artists themselves.

For traditional festival organizers, one of the key issues is to address the challenges raised by the SM and the digital festivals to their business model and to the attractiveness of traditional film festivals. The traditional Tribeca film festival in New York has created an online film festival with features that redefine the type of online film festivals and at the same time do not jeopardize, but instead reinforce the image and appeal of its traditional film festival.
Instead of buying an ‘online pass’, users reserve free tickets for any of the six feature films offered online via the Tribeca (Online) Streaming Room (https://tribecafilm.com/festival/tribecanow). Films have three to five screening windows, and the number of “seats” per window is limited, i.e. there are limited virtual seats that online users have to reserve – just like at the regular festival. Tribeca also offers live streaming of certain events taking place at the traditional festival – including the opening press conference, the award show and the red carpet. The online screenings are only one part of the Tribeca (Online) Film Festival. Attendees online and offline can take advantage of the revamped Tribeca website to engage in conversations with the directors and Tribeca staff. The Filmmaker Feed (www.tribecafilm.com/tribecaonline/filmmaker-feed/) is Tribeca’s way of letting festivalgoers connect with the filmmakers. Each filmmaker page includes the official trailer for their film, embedded Twitter and Facebook streams, and access to other SM links. This aggregation of social channels for a specific film or filmmaker further increases and supports the engagement of online users with the festival community. The website also allows the online audience to ask questions of filmmakers or Tribeca programmers while also engaging with the overall online community.

Some traditional festivals have also used SM as a platform for hosting a parallel festival or an expansion of the festival on the Internet in order to enhance the festival promotion and/or engage more with the attendees. The Burning Man festival has created BURN2 (www.burn2.org), which is an extension of the traditional festival and its community in the Second Life platform. Festivalgoers create their avatars in Second Life in order to attend and participate in the online festival activities as well as interact with other avatars and other stakeholders of the festival community.

Online start-up companies or SM platforms are also initiating new festivals. For example, mixify.com streams existing music festivals and one-off concerts, but it also hosts its own digital music festivals attracting numerous online viewers (e.g. a digital event in 2013 drew 70,000 virtual attendees from 143 different countries) (Robehmed 2013). Mixify incorporates the social aspects of sites like Turntable.fm by allowing fans to ‘hype’ favorite parts of the mix, chat to DJs, while they perform and interact with other online users.

The traditional mass media is also embracing online festivals. MTV has launched a 24-hour online-only music festival (Live Music Day Festival) that featured more than 50 artists. Festival performances were accompanied by fans’ picks, while the fans were also able to customize their experience by selecting only the artists they wanted to watch (Cubarrubia 2013b). Another example is Comedy Central, a Twitter-based comedy festival (Cubarrubia 2013a). During a whole week, comics and directors (including famous artists such as Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, and Amy Schumer) led #Comedyfest with tweeted jokes containing the festival’s hashtag and clips of routines, roundtables, and discussion panels shared through the new video platform Vine. The organizers viewed the online festival as a great way to connect with the festival fans, who are quickly adopting this new media and direct approaches in festival participation. The organizers have also developed a free application ‘CC: Stand-Up’ (financially supported by ads) that allows users to find new comedians based on what they or their friends have been watching. This application enables the users to personalize their online festival experience and actively interact with the online audience.

Finally, artists themselves are getting in on the act. For example, founded in 2011 by working artists, the Art of Brooklyn Film Festival (AoBFF, www.theartofbrooklyn.org) is the only independent, international festival in the world devoted entirely to Brooklyn’s vibrant film and media scene. AoBFF only screens work by Brooklyn-born, Brooklyn-based, and Brooklyn-centric filmmakers. AoBFF is also the only indie film festival to
build and program its own video-on-demand streaming platform: Brooklyn On Demand (www.brooklynondemand.com), where it broadcasts festival favorites, original series, and more, both online and on a Roku channel with over 10,000 subscribers, alongside Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime. AoBFF is a creative hub, online platform, and showcase for independent film- and media makers in Brooklyn and around the world.

Research in the area of virtual festivals is still lacking, and so these examples raise many questions to be answered by future studies. Topics for future research include strategies for addressing competition and challenges posed by online festivals, defining and understanding the online festival experience, and identifying and segmenting the market for online festivals.

**Actors’ involvement in festival practices**

**User-generated festivals**

The aforementioned examples of online festivals also show that by using SM, any actor (e.g. attendees, artists, communities) can have access to networking, communication, and content distribution tools for designing, hosting, broadcasting, promoting, and distributing festival (content) as well as building a community around a festival. In fact, the festivalgoer can also be one of the actors empowered by the SM to design, fund, and host his/her own (online) festival. The idea of festivalgoers becoming entrepreneurs by driving and organizing festivals is not surprising, and it is supported by several practical examples and preliminary research findings.

From a practical and industry point of view, there are several SM and web service companies providing people with the technological platforms and tools to generate, promote, implement, and fund their events. These include social networks where users can organize and promote their own events (e.g. www.meetup.com); online intermediaries, such as LiveOnDemand (www.liveondemand.com/) or www.eventful.com, that provide useful platforms to empower anyone to pitch and implement their own event; web-based software companies (e.g. www.eventbrite.com and www.eventful.com) which enable any user to get access to free set-up and other business services (such as setting up a webpage for promoting an event and an online booking and payment tools for enabling online ticket sales); and crowdfunding platforms which enable peer-to-peer financing or micro-financing, such as www.Indiegogo.com and www.kickstarter.com. Any user can use these platforms for raising money creating their own festival.

From a research point of view, preliminary findings provide evidence of the ability of SM to support user-generated events. Research shows that by enabling the rapid spread of ideas and user-generated content, SM have given rise to new forms of social movements (Castells 2009) and possibilities for organizing activism (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). Many studies document examples of the power of SM to promote and organize collective action and enhance political empowerment (Segerberg & Bennett 2011; Shirky 2011). Some studies also mention the booming phenomenon of tourism-related events that are created, organized, held, and promoted entirely by the users by using SM (Brown, Getz, Pettersson & Wallstam 2015; Hartmann 2012). In this vein, the SM empower the festivalgoers to be converted from value co-creators to festival micro-entrepreneurs. Events completely generated by users and promoted through SM have not only been growing during the past decade; they have also become more formal, organized, and specialized in certain subjects (Lee & Tyrrell 2012; Shirky 2011).
However, research has not examined yet user-generated tourism events and specifically, festivals. Thus, there are still numerous issues that are worth further and in-depth investigation. Future research can examine the motivation and profile of actors using SM to generate festivals, the consequences for festival entrepreneurship of using SM in this way, the use of the various platforms mentioned earlier (such as crowdfunding) to generate and finance festivals, and the relationship between festivals and grassroots social movements and activism.

**User involvement in festival practices**

The previous discussion on the impact of SM on festivals also demonstrates that the nature of the festival is not only influenced by which actor initiates and drives it but also by which other actors are involved and how they are enabled to (actively or passively) participate in the festival practices. Online film festivals can allow goers to simply passively view films online, or they may also allow festivalgoers to actively engage in festival practices by voting on films, sharing comments, asking questions to and interacting with others, such as filmmakers, actors, and judges. Gyimóthy and Larson (2015) highlighted the need to involve many and various festival actors (e.g. festival patrons, offerings, organizers, artists) in the use of SM in festival practices. This is because festivals have a multi-relational context, and so they need to exploit the multi-actor network interactions afforded by SM rather than the dyadic communication models. The way firms can use SM to actively integrate customers into their business operations is well documented in the literature (Sigala 2018; Sigala & Gretzel 2018). To achieve this, firms have to exploit the social and networking capabilities of SM in order to convert all their operations into ‘social’ functions as follows: open or user-driven product innovation, social marketing and public relations (e.g. online referrals, customer reviews, favorites’ lists, influencer marketing), social sales (e.g. recommendation systems based on customers’ online purchases, customer reviews of festivals, and artists influencing online sales), social service (e.g. peer-to-peer online support, user- or community-discussion forums), and social production (co-creation of experiences).

Generally, to measure actor involvement in festival practices one would need to consider the following dimensions (Sigala 2012):

- the active or passive role of the actor, for example: actors viewing festivals vs sharing and discussing festival content; or festival operators collecting market research by using available online data (e.g. published festivalgoers’ preferences and profiles) vs asking goers to purposefully share and discuss their festival experiences or answer an online poll;
- the number of business functions in which actors are involved;
- the degree of actor involvement in every business function. Actors can be involved in all or some of the following new product development (NPD) stages: ideation, idea evaluation, product testing and prototyping, product launch, and promotion.

Indeed, industry publications reviewing event technology providers (Solaris 2017) provide evidence that there are numerous SM solutions available in the market. These SM technological solutions enable festival organizers to develop web-based and mobile applications for empowering festival actors to participate in all festival functions, from social marketing and social ticketing to mix-and-match customized applications supporting the development of festival communities whereby festivalgoers create their online social profiles for finding, meeting, networking, interacting with and sharing festival experiences with other actors (e.g. other festivalgoers, artists, organizers, local community).
On the other hand, the few existing studies in festival technology (e.g. Gyimóthy & Larson 2015; Hudson & Hudson 2013) do not use festival operations for categorizing the use of SM but instead use the categories of pre-, during, and after the festival. Similar to the benefits sought by tourists when using SM for supporting their tourism experiences (Sigala 2017; Sigala & Gretzel 2018), festivalgoers use SM at every stage of their festival experience, in order to: anticipate and plan their pre-festival experiences, activities, and trip; co-create festival experiences (on-site or online) by participating in online discussions with artists or goers, answering and voting to online polls, generating and posting festival content; and store and share post-festival experiences for memories, reflection, learning, and referrals. Flinn and Frew (2013) suggest that SM can benefit both the organizers and the attendees as lived experiences can be constantly captured, displayed, retold, and relived across numerous SM networks. Hence, festival operators need to integrate SM in all the phases and operations of their festival production and consumption.

Lanier and Hampton (2008) have diverged from the previous approaches by adopting a different perspective for measuring attendee participation in festivals. Specifically, they have identified three types of customer participation in a festival experiences based on the degree of attendee control over the resources (i.e. time, money, and energy) associated with the market offering (from lower to higher degrees of control). The first type of participation is *co-optation*, defined as the process in which customers assume duties traditionally performed by producers, such as self-service technologies for online sales and marketing. The second type is *co-production*, conceived as the process whereby customers participate in the design and/or production of the offering. Finally, the third type is *co-creation*, defined as the process in which ‘customers extend or alter the product beyond its original and/or intended form, use, and/or meaning’. Research (Lanier & Hampton 2008) shows that in their search for new ways to sustain their fantasy engagement experience, festivalgoers move from a lower to a higher level of involvement once they perceive that they have reached the peak of the activity and engagement level with the festival organizers. Findings also revealed that participants differed in their ability and/or desire to move through the stages of involvement (Lanier & Hampton 2008).

Overall, from a festival organizer perspective, SM integration is conceptualized from a business operations/functional approach. From a demand perspective, festivalgoers see the use of SM as a co-creation opportunity to enhance and enrich their decision-making and experiences during the whole journey of their festival experience (before, during, and after the festival). SM use for increasing attendee participation in festival experiences is highly recommended because research shows that greater customer engagement in co-creation can lead to higher brand loyalty, repeat sales, positive feedback and referrals, and customer satisfaction (Sigala 2012; 2018). However, research is required to refine and test these relations within the festival context in order to specify which type and level of engagement is more effective and appropriate for each of the various festival actors. Indeed, not all attendees are able and willing to co-create (Lanier & Hampton 2008). Therefore, research should investigate which actors to involve in co-creation and in what type of festival practice as well as what actors’ capabilities, motivations/rewards, knowledge, and training need to be provided in order to support and ensure that actors are capable and willing to get involved in co-creation.

Research is also lacking in relation to our knowledge about the level and the type of industry take-up and use of SM for transforming their festival practices and operations. Recently, Pasanen and Konu (2016) surveyed the perceptions and the use of SM by Finnish Festival organizers for engaging their attendees in product innovation. The benefits of involving festivalgoers and stakeholders in festival innovation have been discussed in the literature (e.g. van Limburg 2008). Nevertheless, the findings (Pasanen and Konu 2016) revealed that
although the festival organizers are aware of the benefits of using SM for enriching the prod-
uct innovation processes, they mainly use SM for enabling their festivalgoers to participate
only in the first and the last stages of NPD (i.e. product ideation and new festival marketing).
The limited industry exploitation of SM for product innovation is not surprising and similar
to research showing a low level of SM exploitation for innovation processes in the tourism
sector (Sigala 2012). Hence, it becomes clear that the festival industry needs to be informed
and educated on how and why to use SM. This can be better achieved by sharing and dis-
seminating best practices providing useful practical examples.

Conclusions

Technological advances and specifically the SM revolution are transforming the festival in-
dustry by forming new products and markets and restructuring the industry by introducing
new players to operate and shape the festival sector. Although the adoption of SM is continu-
uously increasing both on the demand and supply sides, the festival literature has failed to
examine this transformational impact of SM. This chapter creates a typology for discussing
the impact of SM on the festival industry. The typology identifies various types of festivals
based on two dimensions: the place/space whereby the festivals happen and are distributed,
and the actors initiating and being involved in festival practices.

The challenges imposed by these two new developments in the festival industry are dis-
cussed. In sum, traditional festivals and operators are currently being challenged by virtual
festivals, even if the former are now integrating SM to digitize their practices. However,
research has neither described nor understood the type of these new festival experiences and
the new markets being emerged. Are digitized or virtual festivals a substitute or a necessary
complementary product sought and expected by festivalgoers? Are online festivalgoers a
new festival market or an existing one that has been transformed? More research is required
to answer such critical and important questions. Moreover, virtual festival experiences seem
to create not only a new product but also a new festival market and experience. Simultane-
ously, the SM revolution is empowering existing players (e.g. festivalgoers) as well as new
players (e.g. crowdfunding platforms, peer-to-peer marketplaces, technology providers, and
mass media) to penetrate the festival industry by generating and implementing new types of
festivals. The SM are fueling the (micro-) entrepreneurship in the festival sector, but limited
research has examined its implications on the industry and the festival stakeholders.

The chapter identifies and discusses all these theoretical and practical implications of the
typology by providing numerous real cases and practical guidelines for the industry, as well as
by identifying numerous questions for directing future research. However, change is the only
constant in the technology and the festival field. Furthermore, the festival actors are continu-
ously and dynamically shaped, but they also shape the festival industry, products, and mar-
kets. To that end, research is urgently required to interpret the implications of these industry
and technological trends and challenges. Research and innovative thinking is also required to
drive and lead research-based and informed transformation in the festival industry.

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