EVALUATING THE SOCIOCULTURAL EFFECTS OF FESTIVALS

Developing a comprehensive impact correlation model and its application

Ronnit Wilmersdörffer and Daniela Schlicher

Introduction

Over the past decade, the analysis of sociocultural impacts of festivals and festival tourism has been increasingly considered in tourism and events research (Crespi-Vallbona & Richards 2007; Getz 2010; Mair & Whitford 2013). However, as a review of the existing literature reveals, this particular strand of research is still in its infancy. While the economic impacts of festivals have been subject to research since the 1980s (see, for example, Gartner & Holec 1983; Ritchie 1984), the study of sociocultural effects is a more recent phenomenon. Equally, as Zifkos (2015) pointed out, sociocultural aspects have usually been neglected within the sustainability policy and planning of festivals, with emphasis being placed on economic aspects instead (Crespi-Vallbona & Richards 2007; Brown & Trimboli 2011). This shortcoming needs to be addressed given the well-documented importance of community support for the – not least economic – sustainability of events and event tourism (see, for example, Gursoy & Kendall 2006). In this chapter, the authors develop a tool based on available research to analyse the interdependencies of sociocultural impacts and thereby enable the development of policy for the sociocultural sustainability of festivals. A short case study serves to demonstrate the practical applicability of the model.

Literature review

Literature on the sociocultural dimension of festivals draws on the existing body of research within the field of tourism and events. Despite its slightly longer history, the area of sociocultural impact analysis within tourism and events is characterised by a certain vagueness; in search for a clear definition of sociocultural impacts, one is frequently confronted with fuzzy terminology or mere listings of individual effects (Fredline, Jago & Deery 2003; Small, Edwards & Sheridan 2005; Small 2008). One of the more comprehensive definitions is given by Teo (1994) for whom sociocultural impacts are
Sociocultural effects of festivals

the ways in which tourism is contributing to changes in the value systems, morals and their conduct, individual behaviour, family relationships, collective lifestyles, creative expressions, traditional ceremonies and community organisation.

(p. 126)

Sociocultural impacts are usually categorised into social costs and benefits. While the latter refers to issues such as community pride, improvements to the social infrastructure, preservation of local traditions, image effects and a positive self-perception of community members, the former includes the well-known community disruptors of congestion, noise pollution or vandalism (Ritchie 1984; Dwyer, Mellor, Mistilis & Mules 2000; Delamere, Wankel & Hinch 2001; Fredline et al. 2003; Small et al. 2005). The commodification of culture (King & Stewart 1996) or social relationships (Tucker 2003), as well as intra-community conflicts, may also be considered as social costs. Leier (2006) and Gibson and Connell (2012) further identify the issue of gentrification as a negative consequence of hallmark events due to their effect on (particularly property) prices and the resulting displacement of residents. While local property owners and landlords would certainly benefit from such a development, hallmark events may thus contribute to an increasing social divide within the host community.

For approximately a decade, the term sociocultural capital has increasingly been gaining popularity to describe potential community benefits of events. Sociocultural capital refers to an enhanced awareness of community resources and their optimised utilisation; more efficient or valuable cooperative structures within a community (Arcodia & Whitford 2005, cited in Lassila, Lindroth & Rantanen 2013), community pride and stability (Fredline et al. 2003), as well as inclusion, trust, networks and solidarity within a community (Quinn & Wilks 2013). Particularly relevant to the area of festivals and festival tourism are the factors of bonding and bridging social capital, which refer to an enhancement of communication and understanding between previously divided groups and social strata within the community or between hosts and guests (see, for example, Fisher 2004; Sam & Berry 2010; Lassila et al. 2013; Quinn & Wilks 2013). Such a divide may first appear unsurpassable in the context of traditional, rural host communities and their ‘alien’ visitors attending a subculture festival (Gibson & Connell 2012).

The mobilisation and deployment of sociocultural capital has been identified as a highly significant – if not the most important (Mykletun 2009) – factor in ensuring the long-term success of festivals (Gursoy & Kendall 2006; Kania 2013). The (perceived) value of sociocultural benefits may, in fact, surpass the value community members attach to tangible and monetary benefits accruing from the festival or event (Gursoy, Kim & Uysal 2004; Gibson & Connell 2012; Andersson & Lundberg 2013), ultimately giving rise to the host community’s enthusiasm and support for, or otherwise resistance to, the festival. The current trend among festival organisers towards attempts to create community pride within host communities may be attributed to this insight (Gibson & Connell 2012).

Attempts to measure community perceptions of a festival’s sociocultural impacts abound, despite the difficulties to quantify the ‘soft’ factor due to the need to measure the impacts indirectly via community attitudes and perceptions of change (Pasanen, Taskinen & Mikkonen 2009; Wilks 2013). This requirement of indirect quantification has therefore given rise to divergent research designs, limiting the compatibility, reliability and generalisability of results (De Grosbois 2009; Pasanen et al. 2009; Robertson, Rogers & Leask 2009; Wood 2009). Depending on the factors and items analysed, the choice of stakeholders included in the analysis and the timing chosen for the surveys, studies of the sociocultural dimension tend to yield very different results.
In an attempt to measure the ‘soft’ factor, Andersson and Lundberg (2013) transferred Lindberg und Johnson’s (1997) contingent valuation method from tourism to a festival context. The host community’s attitude is determined by attaching monetary values to perceived impacts: the willingness to pay or willingness to accept certain sociocultural effects. Among the most influential scales developed to measure sociocultural impacts of festivals are Delamere’s (Delamere et al. 2001) Festival Social Impact Attitude Scale (FSIAS) and Small’s (2008; Small and Edwards 2003) Social Impact Perception Scale (SIP), each with their own lists of items and factors. While the FSIAS encompasses the unique factors of community costs and benefits, as well as individual benefits, the SIP proposes six factors relating to community sociocultural capital and individual costs and benefits. As observed by Woosnam, Jiang, Van Winkle, Kim and Maruyama (2016), the FSIAS has regained popularity among researchers in recent years. However, the SIP’s added value lies in its applicability before and after the festival, while the FSIAS is used to analyse residents’ projected attitudes before the event. Additional scales to measure sociocultural effects of festivals and special events were put forward by Fredline et al. (2003), Wood (2006) and Kim, Jun, Walker & Drane (2015), among others. In order to increase the validity of results, Wood (2009) has called for a standardised, as well as flexible and adaptable, scale to reflect the uniqueness of each community and event.

Adding to the complexity at hand, a sound framework for analysing the sociocultural effects of festivals must take into account the various independent variables shaping the host community’s perception – the term ‘host community’ being misleading in itself, given its heterogeneous nature (Picard & Robinson 2006). Researchers therefore need to consider the external factors shaping the subjective perceptions of individuals, the sum of which translates into the ‘host community’. These factors range from the availability of information (Kwon & Vogt 2010) and media effects (Weaver & Lawton 2013) to destination image, economic opportunities and host-guest ratio (Gibson & Connell 2012).

A tool to inform sociocultural sustainability policy

Based on the literature review at hand, the cyclic impact model depicted in Figure 7.1 provides an overview of the different facets of sociocultural impacts explored. Using change in attitude (as a proxy for behaviour) as the ultimate reference mark for the sociocultural impact of a festival, the model highlights a chain, or cycle, of cause and effect between all occurrences of sociocultural impacts.

The model highlights the circular and interdependent nature of manifested sociocultural impacts occurring in a festival-hosting community, residents’ perception and evaluation of the impacts, proactive and reactive measures taken to address the impacts, and residents’ attitude and behaviour towards the festival.

Manifested Impacts refer to physical, destination, community and cultural impacts. Physical Impacts are physical changes to the site of the event. Destination Impacts constitute changes to the external perception or awareness of the geographical space associated with the event as a touristic destination and thereby to its touristic value. Community Impacts are changes to the social cohesion within the host community resulting from internal interactions related to the planning, organisation and/or execution of the event. Cultural Impacts, finally, are changes to the host community’s cultural identity resulting from interactions with festival visitors.

Impact Perception refers to factors where locals may perceive changes to a previous status quo in their lives or in the life of the community resulting from the festival. An individual assessment – or impact evaluation – of occurrence, relevance and intensity of manifest impacts form the basis for a catalogue of overall positive or negative experiences and perceptions.
relating to the festival. Opinions on the sum of positive and negative impacts from each perceived area of impact give rise to residents’ **Attitude** towards the festival. The thus formed attitude, in turn, becomes manifest in the **Behaviour** displayed by the host community towards the festival’s organisers and visitors. The manifestation of this behaviour – collaborative or otherwise – can constitute an asset or an existential threat to a festival, making the host community an extremely powerful stakeholder. The individual attitude of members of the host community therefore constitutes a pivotal factor in assessing sociocultural sustainability.

Proactive and/or reactive measures taken to address those impacts influence both the manifestation of impacts as well as residents’ perceptions of the impacts. Such measures include impact management and action by public-sector organisations, festival organisers, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and community members. By assessing expectable negative impacts in advance or already manifested impacts and taking corresponding action, the factual occurrence – or at least intensity – of those impacts can be contained, improving the support of and reducing the pushback from the host community. Similarly, positive impacts can be enhanced by according policy, creating a stronger positive experience in some areas for the host community. This is invaluable, as it can be used to compensate in the personal assessment for negative impacts that are difficult or impossible to alleviate.

The influence of the individual attitude, too, is by no means limited to manifestation of behaviour. Much rather, it must be acknowledged and taken into consideration in every link of the impact chain. Each member of the host community brings her individual attitude and expectations into the assessment of occurrence, relevance and intensity of festival externalities. They even affect the very manifestation of those sociocultural impacts that are causally related to the host community’s behaviour (**Community Impacts** and **Cultural Impacts**).
While the individual attitude and expectations prior to the very first festival cycle are largely dependent on intrinsic factors, in the following years these will be largely congruent to the changes in attitude effected throughout the previous festival cycle.

The importance, impact and interplay of impacts, perceptions, attitudes and measures will be demonstrated on the example of the Wacken Open Air (W:O:A) festival.

**Case study**

The W:O:A is Europe’s largest heavy-metal festival, taking place annually in a small village in Northern Germany. While today it is known for its exceptional convergence between the village and the festival (Hinrichs 2011), it actually faced a real threat of being shut down by the local community in the past (Schöwe 2009). A comprehensive case study of the festival was conducted as part of an undergraduate thesis submitted at the International School of Management; extracts of this case study are applied here to illustrate the journey of the change in attitude of the Wacken host community through effective policy. The study used descriptive data collection and relied primarily on secondary sources: a host of in-depth stakeholder interviews from various publications and media outlets, newspaper articles, documentaries, elements of popular culture, anecdote collections and academic publications about the W:O:A. All combined, these offer a relatively comprehensive picture of the sociocultural impacts and their influence on the success of the festival. For the purpose of this chapter however, we shall merely identify key stages of the festival development and develop one area of impact in each stage to illustrate the applicability of the impact cycle model.

The first stage in the existence of the W:O:A can suitably be described as phase of insignificance. The festival started out as an all-weekend metal party organised by four local youths in 1990. Between that year and 1995, visitor numbers never exceeded 5,000 people (ICS Festival Service GmbH 2017), and as the event took place in a secluded gravel pit near the village, the early years of the W:O:A went by most of the local community completely unnoticed. Accordingly, no conscious policy or measures for sociocultural sustainability were implemented during this initial time. Nonetheless, community impacts started to become manifest from the very beginning. Even the formation of the team of organisers from within the village community constitutes an increase in interaction within the community, intensifying with the increasing number of other community members becoming involved in the organisation and realisation of the first festival cycles. Beside volunteering activity, we can already observe a heightened awareness and sourcing of community expertise and resources at this stage: tasks and responsibilities related to the festival were delegated in accordance with skill sets available in the volunteering body. Examples for this are Mathias Venhor, who as electrician was put in charge of the festival’s power supply, or the farmer Uwe Trede, who supplied his field as camping grounds and volunteered as a security guard (Schöwe 2009). Until 1993, the festival was thus executed solely on the basis of community volunteering (Schöwe 2009) and through this involvement also gained supporters within the village community. This was to prove critical in the following period of negotiation that resulted from heightened awareness for the festival due to increasingly perceptible sociocultural impacts.

The second stage we shall refer to as the phase of negotiation. The period of negotiation began in 1996, when visitor numbers unexpectedly doubled in comparison to the previous year, taking by surprise locals and organisers alike. The lack of necessary crowd management systems led to a series of widely perceived adverse physical impacts, when 10,000 festival visitors first notably exceeded the local infrastructure’s carrying capacity (ICS 2017): miles of traffic jams, hours spent queuing for groceries, heaps of rubbish and vandalised front gardens were effects that were felt
Sociocultural effects of festivals

intensely and unfavourably by the unprepared locals (Kunkel 2009). This resulted in a village council’s decision to deny the organisers the use of the public gravel pit in 1997, forcing them to move the event site to a private property instead. The same chaotic situation as in 1996 re-occurred when visitor numbers jumped again by nearly 100 percent to 18,000 persons in 1998 (ICS 2017). Combined with increasing issues of noise pollution, the pushback from the local community was so strong that the village council considered banning the festival altogether.

‘However, the organisers worked tirelessly to eliminate the grievances and thus earned the village community’s respect’, current mayor Alex Kunkel said in an interview about the development of W:O:A (2009, p. 89). The measure of a clearance task force patrolling the village during the festival not only got rid of the pollution problem but also worked to decrease the perceived gravity of the problem by locals. Kunkel added that since then, the streets of the village were never as impeccable as on the Monday following the festival (Kunkel 2009). The passing nature of the nuisance, combined with a relative improvement to the original state, increased the tolerance of the locals towards short-term negative physical impacts. The proactive stance of the organisers towards also solving perceived problems contributed heavily towards eliminating many sources of resistance, as illustrated by the case of one local man who was convinced the noise pollution was detrimental to his heart condition. The organisers offered him a short holiday for the duration of the festival which became obsolete when in the following year, the same individual attempted to take the money without actually taking a holiday (Trede 2009).

The final stage, here referred to as the phase of consensus, began in 2000: the changes in the behaviour of the locals soon began to affect the visitors’ festival experience and public perception. It was not long before the original Unique Selling Proposition (USP) of the festival as ‘a party by metalheads for metalheads’ was complemented by a reputation for its special atmosphere that was in large part down to the participation of the host community (Hinrichs 2011). Hinrichs describes this dynamic as a perceived merging of the village Wacken and the W:O:A festival into a consolidated unit. We shall use this phase to examine cultural impacts: the changes in attitude of the locals altered not only how they encountered visitors but also the locals’ openness to engaging with visitors altogether. Hinrichs (2011) describes how locals invite visitors on their properties to get to know them and consequently form friendships. Another result of this openness is the extraordinary atmosphere of trust between locals and festival visitors. One example for this is the instance of a barman lending money to some random festival visitor – never to be seen again, his colleagues assumed at the time – and was sought out by the same visitor the following year to settle the debt (Hinrichs 2011). In fact, the openness is not only limited to the interaction between villagers and members of the metal subculture, but it also extends to interactions with strangers as a whole: while a minority of the villagers still consider them an invasion to their homely idyll, most locals are excited about the opportunity for intercultural exchanges and experiences (Hinrichs 2011).

Cultural exchange in this case goes both ways. One example of cultural transfer is the integration of the local voluntary fire brigade’s brass band, which was introduced to the festival in 2000 and has since been accepted and celebrated with enthusiasm by the festival visitors as an element of indigenous Wackenese culture. A great deal of cultural adaptation can also be observed on part of the locals: the village and its inhabitants decorate themselves with symbolism typical of the metal scene. The Wacken Skull, an apparently occult buffalo skull, is omnipresent as emblem of the W:O:A on the houses and T-shirts of both locals and visitors. The ‘Wacken Salutation’ used by visitors to express their delight over their visit to the festival is seconded or even initiated by many locals. This behaviour can be considered a temporary acculturation on part of the locals, suggesting some manifestation of a demonstration effect, albeit without the usually associated loss of identity.
In this exact balance between cultural adaptability and preservation of identity lies the secret to the festival’s sociocultural success. The negotiation of this fine line is also represented in policy, as can be illustrated using the example of the fire brigade’s brass band: on the one hand, the band is an iconic part of the W:O:A. The band members enjoy the attention of the fans and the media throughout the festival (Wacken – ein Dorf sieht schwarz 2012), and are happy to adapt their set list to the lowered standards of the raving metal fans. At the same time, their festival performance is clearly distinguished from their usual social role and standing; rather than performing under their official name, they adopt the stage name *Wacken Firefighters* and wear T-shirts in place of their usual uniforms. That way, the band can at the same time participate in and contribute to the extraordinary festival atmosphere and retain the dignity and prestige of their sociocultural standing in the community. A similar approach to the festival by other parts of the host community is illustrated in the regional documentary *Full Metal Village* (2006). It shows the exceptional circumstances of the W:O:A exactly as what they are: namely exceptional, a diversion from the remaining 51 weeks a year in which rural idyll, farming, choir practice and coffee parties dominate the lives of the community members. The perpetuity of these routines, the stable connection to the community and its traditions, is what allows for the participation in the festival happening without existential fear, loss of identity or self-abandonment. And this, in turn, is the key to the special dynamic the W:O:A is famous for today.

The W:O:A is a particularly interesting case with regard to sociocultural impacts; the development of its meaning within the community illustrates the interdependencies between attitude, behaviour, impact manifestation, perception, and policy. It also gives a clear idea of the role this plays in the long-term economic success of the festival. It also allows the conclusion that resolution of all negative impact manifestations is by no means required to produce a positive attitude amongst the host community as long as other aspects are experienced as sufficiently rewarding. The policy and measures taken by the organisers to contain negative impact, resolve conflict and enhance economic and emotional participation can be taken as a didactic play in how to increase the host community’s support for a festival.

**Conclusion**

The importance of sociocultural impacts on the success of festivals has experienced increased attention within the academic community in recent years. Most research conducted to this point, however, has taken a purely empirical, non-analytical approach to the subject which does not sufficiently reflect the complexity or the relevance of the matter. The impact cycle developed in this chapter has proved a useful tool to understand and describe the interconnected sociocultural impacts of a festival. A development of this approach may include additional external factors, and adding examples of preventive and reactive policy and measures, to give a more comprehensive basis for action for practical application.

**Note**

1 The exclamation ‘Wackööööön!’ accompanied by the devil horns gesture.

**References**


Sociocultural effects of festivals


