

## EVENTS AS PROENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING SPACES

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Climate change is an ongoing issue for governments internationally, driving them to seek more ways in which to encourage the general public to engage with the sustainability agenda. Despite substantial research into consumer behavior, behavior change, and social marketing, there are still opportunities to find innovative messaging tools that may help to persuade people to change their habits. This article reports on initial exploratory research into the use of events as a space for proenvironmental behavior messaging, and concludes that although significant research is needed, some events have potential to become environmental learning spaces for attendees.

Key words: Events; Sustainability; Social marketing; Proenvironmental behavior

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### Introduction

Despite dropping from the front pages as a result of various international financial and economic crises, climate change is still an important issue for government and society. Some of the most concerning predicted impacts include the projected increase in the severity and frequency of severe weather events [Interdepartmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2013]. This may bring about increased risk of fire, flooding, and cyclones in Australia, as well as impacting other countries in a range of ways such as sea level rise, temperature rise, and biodiversity loss (IPCC, 2013; Jopp, DeLacy, & Mair, 2010). Despite these predicted impacts, progress towards the required levels of behavior change needed to arrest or mitigate the effects of climate change has been slow and patchy at best.

Many of the changes that will be required to address some of our climate change-related issues will involve persuading individuals to make changes to their fundamental habits. Research suggests that changing habitual behavior is difficult and that the best time to change a habit is at a time when the individual is out of their normal routine (Verplanken & Wood, 2006). Since one of the defining characteristics of an event or festival according to Getz (1997) is as an opportunity for a leisure, social, or cultural experience outside the normal range of choices or beyond everyday experience, such activities may represent a context in which behavior change can be encouraged. Additionally, Sharpe (2008) points to a growing interest in leisure as a context for fostering social change, and goes as far as to suggest that leisure (and potentially events) might serve as a social space for individuals to engage with the

civic and political spheres of life. Sharpe (2005), in an earlier article, further notes that most of our contemporary leisure is oriented towards pleasure and thus our greatest potential for change may be through efforts to introduce social, environmental, and political aims into this pleasurable context.

This exploratory study aims to examine the potential for events to represent useful learning spaces within which attendees are made aware of, and influenced by, behavior change messages.

### Literature Review

Although much debated, the issue of climate change is of considerable significance for the future of our societies. In addition to the biophysical aspects of climate change that have been predicted, it is likely that climate change will also have social impacts. These range from agricultural decline and subsequent food security issues to social unrest brought about by economic diversification and decline (IPCC, 2007). Indeed, it is likely that climate change will exacerbate the existing disparity in the distribution of wealth, increasing the gap between the rich and the poor globally. This threat is significant enough to drive governments to seek a range of ways to cut their carbon emissions, encourage energy- and water-saving behaviors, and normalize proenvironmental behavior among the general population.

A substantial amount of research into proenvironmental behavior change strategies is under way, using concepts such as “nudge theory” (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009) and “spillover theory” (e.g., Thøgersen & Crompton, 2009). These theories assume that persuading individuals to make small changes will result naturally in the individual making further small changes, all adding up to significant change over time. Nudge theory (the suggestion that a series of small changes in behavior will result in greater changes over time) has been used by the UK government in a variety of contexts and suggests that positive reinforcement and suggestion can be vital in influencing the decisions made in relation to areas such as proenvironmental behavior (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). However, research into the effectiveness of this theory is still at an early stage. Spillover theory in the environmental arena has been advanced by Thøgersen and Crompton

(2009), among others, and proposes that small changes in one area of proenvironmental behavior (e.g., recycling) are likely to spill over into the individual making changes in other areas of environmental behavior (e.g., monitoring energy use). However, this concept is contested, and it seems that any spillover is likely to be on a very small scale. Indeed, celebrated Cambridge professor David McKay goes as far as to say “Don’t be distracted by the myth that ‘every little helps.’ If everyone does a little, we’ll achieve only a little” (cited in Thøgersen & Crompton, 2009, p. 3). Therefore, there remain significant gaps in our understanding of where, when, and how to persuade individuals to change their behavior.

Despite some notable exceptions (e.g., Frost & Laing, 2013; Mair & Laing, 2012; Sharpe, 2008), the linkages between events and social or behavioral change are often overlooked (Frost & Laing, 2013), and while literature on event studies is varied (see Mair & Whitford, 2013), very little research has considered how events may be used to fulfill objectives around behavior change. In the major events context, Ramchandani and Coleman (2012) propose that attending events such as the Olympic Games or other large sporting competitions can encourage participation among spectators—meaning that attending a sporting event can provide the motivation for an individual to take up more sporting activities. However, any change in activity levels may be temporary and therefore more long-term research is needed in order to understand the impact that major events may have on sporting and activity-related behaviors.

In their work on slow food festivals, Frost and Laing (2013) identified a range of messaging tactics being used by events, from overtly political (signifying a close link between the event, politics, and regional identity) to more subtle messaging, using ambassadors and champions to try to gain wider acceptance in the mainstream for the slow food philosophy. According to Frost and Laing (2013), there are many case studies of events being used as platforms for delivering persuasive social and political messages. Examples include London’s Notting Hill Carnival and its messages about the enduring identity of the West Indian Diaspora, as well as opposition to racism; Sydney’s Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, which includes messages of

support, pride, and equality; and the Burning Man Festival in Nevada, which promotes radical art and free expression (Frost & Laing, 2013). Further, many events are associated with counterculture, and have a strong history of promoting social justice (Anderton, 2011). The Glastonbury Festival is just one example of such an event, but there are many around the world. Such events (often music festivals) promote social justice issues, feature organizations such as Greenpeace and Amnesty International, and place substantial importance on their advocacy role. In addition to those events with overtly political messages, many events carry less overt messages, particularly music festivals such as Bluesfest in Australia, and Coachella in the US. In the proenvironmental behavior context, these may include stalls promoting environmental charities and organizations (such as Greenpeace), notices and requests for particular proenvironmental behavior (e.g., recycling, water saving, etc.), or practical steps that attendees can take (such as offering shuttle buses or car pooling to cut down on car traffic to and from the event).

According to Jackson (1988), leisure events often have political undertones, and express ideological conflicts. Using the example of the Hillside Festival, an event deliberately positioned by the organizers as a vehicle for social change, Sharpe (2005, 2008) examined how events may be used as a tool to advocate for social change, and concluded that while there are issues with social messages that are too overt or heavily political, nonetheless festivals and events do offer a space where messages can be disseminated without having a detrimental effect on the leisure experience of attending an event. One key point emphasized by Sharpe (2005) was the importance of keeping overt politics at the edge of the festival, in domains that had to be actively entered by the attendees (education seminars, workshops, etc.). This allowed the attendees to be exposed to political messages and behavior change messages without infringing on the leisure characteristics of the festival.

Some event and festival organizers believe anecdotally that they are in a unique situation to be able to persuade people to make behavioral changes (Mair & Laing, 2012). For example, Mair and Laing (2012) cite an interviewee (festival organizer) who felt it was their moral duty to talk about things they

care about during their festival, and this included the environment. Other interviewees in the same study made comments about the need to educate patrons, and their desire to make the festival an educational experience. While research has not examined in detail why this may be the case, it is likely due in part to the liminal nature of some events which facilitates an experience out of the usual for participants (Kim & Jamal, 2007). The notion of liminality suggests a space for people to behave in ways that they do not normally behave (e.g., Turner, 1982; Wang, 2000). This may allow them to be more relaxed, and potentially open to messages that might otherwise be the case. It may also be in part due to the strong commitment to proenvironmental behavior shown by many event organizers, which has encouraged them to provide opportunities for education and learning around environmental issues.

Although scant, the literature on events and behavior change messages demonstrates the tension between using an event as a tool for wider behavior change, and accusations that only those already interested in the desired behaviors would be interested—the so called “preaching to the converted” (Mair & Laing, 2013; Sharpe, 2008). Research by Mair and Laing (2013), using the Transtheoretical Model (TTM), considered whether ecofests were successful in achieving their behavior change goals. The TTM, often referred to as the “stages of change” model, suggests that the individual moves through a sequence of five stages as they adopt voluntary changes in their life—precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance (Prochaska, 1979). An understanding of the stage of change of an individual will help to ascertain what kinds of support and encouragement are needed to move that individual on to finalize their behavior change. The Mair and Laing (2013) study demonstrated that while a number of attendees were already engaged in an environmentally friendly lifestyle, the event offered important validation of their lifestyle choice, along with encouragement and support to continue with their proenvironmental behaviors. This point was also emphasized by both Frost and Laing (2013) and Sharpe (2008)—even those already engaging in the desired behavior need support and reinforcement of their lifestyle choices, and events may help

to provide that reassurance and validation of their beliefs and behaviors. While such events may or may not represent the catalyst for initial behavior change, nonetheless, they appear to be important in maintaining desired behaviors over time.

In order to work out how events may play a role in changing behavior, it is important to examine some key concepts from other disciplines including social marketing and habits research. Social marketing can be defined as “the design, implementation, and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas” (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971, p. 5). Two types of social marketing interventions have been conceptualized (Verplanken & Wood, 2006)—“downstream” interventions (which deal with existing negative situations and are generally aimed at the individual) and “upstream” interventions (which look at preventing negative situations in the first place and are usually at a societal level). The usual metaphor for explaining this is that downstream, paramedics are constantly rescuing drowning people from the river—an intervention to prevent this might be a sign upstream saying “No Swimming.” Interventions to change behavior that focus only on the downstream—hoping that personal experience, media, or information will lead to a shift in attitudes—are unlikely to be successful on their own and therefore an integrated approach is necessary (Verplanken & Wood, 2006). In other words, information campaigns can successfully convey information, but do not necessarily change behavior (Verplanken & Wood, 2006). If events were to be used as a space for the promotion of behavior change messages, then it is likely that a coordinated upstream approach would be most effective.

According to Verplanken and Wood (2006), interventions to change behavior will be most successful when they are designed with consumer habit in mind. Habits are formed as a result of continuous repetition of actions—the first time a person performs a behavior they may give it some thought, but as time goes on, and the action is repeated without any negative consequence, the habit becomes reinforced. Habits are performed frequently, they occur in the same context each time, and they are undertaken automatically. As Verplanken and Wood (2006) note: “actions that have been repeated in stable contexts are most likely to be changed through

interventions that disrupt the environmental cues that trigger habit performance automatically” (p. 90). Verplanken and Wood (2006) refer specifically to the fact that informational campaigns can gain power when they are applied during naturally occurring periods of change in a consumer’s life. In this article, it is argued that attendance at an event is an occasion when environmental cues are disrupted, and potential new behaviors can be introduced.

While some event organizers appear to feel that they are in a unique position to influence attitudes and behaviors, and while the social marketing and the events literature may support this notion, little is known as to what attendees feel about the use of leisure places as learning spaces. The aims of this exploratory study, in the context of proenvironmental behavior, are threefold. Initially, the research aims to ascertain how aware attendees are of the overt and more subtle proenvironmental messages at events. Secondly, the research aims to gauge attendee reaction to the idea of organizers using the event space as a vehicle for proenvironmental behavior change. Finally, the research will examine the proenvironmental worldviews held by attendees to explore the notion that such events are only preaching to the converted.

### Methodology

This research took a quantitative approach. Initially the data collection procedures will be discussed, followed by the questionnaire design.

#### *Data Collection*

This research used an online panel based in Australia and the UK to collect the data as this approach was deemed to be the most pragmatic by the author. Online panel surveys are flexible, have a global reach, allow for timely completion and large sample sizes, and are convenient, with easy data entry. The sample consisted of 50% male respondents and 50% female respondents. Half the panelists came from the UK and the other half from Australia, thus allowing a wider geographical reach for data collection purposes.

An online panel survey company was engaged to complete the data collection, and 502 completed questionnaires were received, meeting the quotas

identified above for gender and country of survey completion. According to Evans and Mathur (2005), online surveys are appropriate where a large sample is sought, with wide geographic coverage, and where there is access to a good sample list of respondents who are frequent and experienced internet users. Online panel surveys are widely used in marketing research as a way to access large samples with wide geographic coverage. E-mail requests for panel members to participate in the survey were sent out to just over 500 panelists, explaining the broad purpose of the research and providing a link to the online survey site. Only those respondents who completed the survey were included in the 502 responses obtained. Respondents had to have attended a music festival in the past year to qualify to complete the survey. Music festivals were selected as they have a tradition of environmental initiatives, and the literature suggests that such festivals may be a good place to consider introducing behavior change messages (see Mair & Laing, 2012). Furthermore, it may be surmised that music festivals would have a particular demographic of attendee more likely to have positive environmental attitudes, and therefore it may be possible to ascertain whether any behavior change messages at music festivals would indeed be preaching to the converted.

### *Questionnaire Design*

In order to understand attendee levels of awareness of various environmental messages already used at events, respondents were asked to consider the last music festival that they attended, and then answer questions on whether they noticed any messages, and whether they felt they had learned anything about the environment or proenvironmental behavior as a result of attending. Following that, respondent views on whether event organizers should take the opportunity to educate or inform attendees about the environment were gathered.

Research suggests that the main motivations for attending a leisure event are relaxation, enjoyment, socialization, fun, etc. (e.g., Nicholson & Pearce, 2001). As a result many events attract a broad cross section of society. Therefore, it appears unlikely that most event attendees would have similar environmental worldviews. The final section of

the questionnaire was designed to allow an understanding of whether those attending music festivals already hold strong proenvironmental views. In order to examine the worldviews of event attendees, an instrument with proven validity in this area—the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) (Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, & Jones, 2001)—was administered.

The NEP has become a widely used measure of proenvironmental orientation, and reflects a worldview, or fundamental paradigm (Dunlap et al., 2001). The original scale, and a subsequent revised scale, has been used for over 20 years in a variety of settings as a way to understand the beliefs or attitudes of respondents with regard to the environment. The scale has 15 items, designed to tap each of the five hypothesized facets of an ecological worldview, including the reality of limits to growth; antianthropocentrism (a rejection of the idea that the interests of humans should be at the center of all decisions); the fragility of nature's balance; the rejection of exemptionalism (the notion that humans are exempt from the constraints of nature); and the possibility of an ecocrisis (Dunlap et al., 2001). The NEP has been used in a number of studies to examine the environmental attitudes in the tourism context, for example Dolnicar and Leisch (2008), Lee and Moscardo (2005), and Wearing, Cynn, Ponting, and McDonald (2002). The results of NEP studies consistently demonstrate that those who score highly on the ecocentric domain (generally are in agreement with the five facets of the ecological worldview) are more likely to engage in proenvironmental behavior and, conversely, those with high scores on the anthropocentric domain (who are more likely to disagree with the facets of the ecological worldview) are less likely to engage in proenvironmental behavior (Lee & Moscardo, 2005; Mair, 2011). Therefore, it can be argued that those festival attendees who score highly on the ecocentric domain are “the converted”—they already hold proenvironmental views, and are likely carrying out proenvironmental behaviors.

### *Sample Obtained*

Data were provided in SPSS format, and SPSS 17 was used to analyze the data. All data were screened and cleaned, although there were no missing values, as the sample obtained had answered every

question. As a result of the screening, cleaning, and removing of outliers, a total of 408 cases were used in the analysis. There were no significant differences in responses based on country of origin of respondents, and therefore it was considered acceptable to combine the responses. All 408 had attended a music festival in the past year, with the most common responses being the Big Day Out Festival, the Edinburgh Festival, Falls Festival, Glastonbury Festival, the Leeds Festival, the Reading Festival, Soundwave, Summadayze, T in the Park, and the V Festival. All of these festivals incorporate environmental initiatives to a greater or lesser degree and therefore it is reasonable to assume that attendees were exposed to some overt or more subtle environmental messaging during their attendance.

The demographics of the sample are shown in Table 1. The sample is relatively young, and displayed a good range of educational attainment, which fits with the demographics that would be expected from attendance at music festivals (e.g., Gelder & Robinson, 2009, found that the majority of attendees at the music festivals they studied were under 40).

### Findings

In order to gauge attendee awareness of the environmental messages, respondents were asked to indicate whether they had noticed a range of green initiatives at the event they had attended. Table 2 illustrates the results. It appears many were noticed by a reasonable percentage of attendees, ranging from 77.5% for recycling to 27% for environmental

Table 1  
Sample Profile

Demographic	Percentage of Sample
Age	
18–29	27.5%
30–39	23.8%
40–49	23.8%
50–59	14.0%
60+	11.0%
Education	
High school or less	23.0%
TAFE/FE	25.0%
Undergraduate	35.0%
Postgraduate	17.0%

Table 2  
Environmental Initiatives

Initiative	YES, I Noticed	NO, I Didn't Notice
Recycling	77.5%	22.5%
Water conservation	35.8%	64.2%
Use of recycled materials	42.2%	57.8%
Environmental signage	27.2%	72.8%
Others	3.8%	

signage. This finding suggests that such initiatives could form part of a behavior change messaging strategy, since the audience is broadly aware of them.

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked whether they felt that they had learned anything about the environment as a result of their attendance. Perhaps surprisingly, only 13.5% answered that they had learned something. Examples given included the benefits of carpooling, how much waste is created by people, and how important it is to conserve water, along with how charities are helping people, how people can become involved in charity work, and learning about indigenous people. These clearly represent only small percentages of the total number of respondents, but at least these figures do indicate that some learning did take place during music festival attendance. It may be the case that some of these behaviors have become routine for people and are no longer noticed as being particularly special.

Respondents were then asked outright whether they felt that event and festival organizers could and should use the event as an opportunity to educate attendees. Responses were sought on a 5-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*. The items were chosen to represent a range of environmental issues. Table 3 shows that respondents were more clearly in favor of education on some topics than others, and were particularly open to education on recycling, and also on how to help the local community. However, education on other issues such as climate change, perhaps more political in nature, were less favored.

In order to examine the issue of whether behavior change messages at events would simply be “preaching to the converted,” a scale measuring environmental attitudes (the NEP) was administered. This

Table 3  
Mean Ratings for Whether Event Organizers Should Educate Attendees

Issue	Mean Rating
Recycling	4.15
Local community issues	3.83
Food miles	3.37
Climate change	3.09

Ratings on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.

was done in order to assess whether those respondents who had particularly strong proenvironmental worldviews may affect their responses to the other questions. Further, if it was demonstrated that music festival attendees already have strong proenvironmental attitudes, this may provide support for the claim that any proenvironmental messages at music festivals would be doing little to bring about changed behaviors or attitudes. The anthropocentric items on the scale were reverse scored, and then a total score for each respondent was calculated, giving an indication of their environmental attitudes. Using this method, the lowest possible score is 15 (highly anthropocentric) and the highest possible score is 105 (highly ecocentric). The hypothetical mean is 60. In this sample, the range was 15–75 with a mean score of 52. Results showed, perhaps surprisingly in view of the demographics of the sample and the context of the survey, that the sample was slightly skewed towards those with a more anthropocentric worldview. It seems that this sample of music festival attendees cannot be considered to represent those already strongly converted to proenvironmental behavior, thereby refuting the criticism that using such festivals as places for behavior change messages would only be “preaching to the converted.”

In order to ascertain whether there are links between these scores and whether respondents feel that event organizers should educate attendees, percentiles based on the NEP scores were used to derive a split in the sample allowing the creation of three approximately equal groups. Those groups were named anthropocentrics (those scoring between 15 and 47; 31% of the sample), midcentrics (those scoring between 48 and 56; 37% of the sample), and ecocentrics (those scoring between 57 and 75; 32% of the sample).

With a view to assessing the opinions of these different groups of respondents on education by event organizers, the results of the question “Do you think event organizers should educate attendees on important issues?” were categorized by respondent group. It can clearly be seen in Table 4 that for the most part, those with an ecocentric worldview are more in favor of education being part of an event or festival than those with a strong anthropocentric world view. In particular, the “ecocentrics” were more strongly in favor of events being used to educate attendees about climate change. However, this does not necessarily imply that behavior change messages would only be useful for those already holding proenvironmental views, and rather it suggests that the audiences at music festivals are relatively open to learning while attending an event, regardless of their existing environmental attitudes.

#### Discussion and Conclusions

In view of the changing climate, and the pressing need to find ways to encourage people to change their environmental behavior, this exploratory study set out to consider whether events may be considered as potential spaces for learning, and for proenvironmental behavior change messages. Research

Table 4  
Mean Ratings for Issues by Environmental Worldview

Issues	Anthropocentric	Midcentric	Ecocentric
Climate change	2.73	3.10	3.41
Recycling	3.98	4.08	4.41
Food miles	3.13	3.42	3.47
Issues important to the local community	3.63	3.72	4.16

Mean ratings on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.

suggests that there is a growing interest in using events as a platform for political messages (Sharpe, 2008), and that event organizers, and music festival organizers in particular, feel that they are in a position to advocate for particular environmental and social justice issues (Mair & Laing, 2012). However, very little empirical research has considered whether event attendees are open to learning while at events, and whether messages promoted at such events can be useful as part of a broader social marketing, or behavior change campaign.

The findings of this study suggest that relatively low numbers of attendees were aware of any overt messages at the music festivals they attended, with a few exceptions. However, this may reflect difficulties with recollection, although respondents were only included in the sample if they had attended a music festival within the past year. It could also be argued that this may not accurately reflect any subconscious processing of messages at the events. Alternatively, it may suggest that some of the proenvironmental behaviors (such as recycling) have been normalized to the extent that event attendees were no longer even aware of noticing them. It may be the case that any messages displayed at the music events attended were too subtle to be noticed, or were not perceived as being messages at all.

However, it is clear from these results that some learning did take place, and also that for the most part music festival attendees were not averse to proenvironmental messages being part of their attendance experience. This suggests that there may be scope for events to play a greater role in behavior change, albeit with the caveat that messages should not be too overtly political or educational (Frost & Laing, 2013; Sharpe, 2008).

It did appear from the findings that those with stronger proenvironmental worldviews were more likely to notice educational messages, and were more in favor of events being used as spaces for messages and learning, particularly around climate change. However, since the overall results of the NEP suggested a slightly anthropocentric worldview among attendees, it cannot be argued that behavior change messages used at such music festivals are simply “preaching to the converted.” This opens up the debate about which types of messages could be designed for use at festivals and events,

and the degree to which different attendees may be receptive to different types of messages.

Although the results of this study were not emphatic in terms of current levels of learning and behavior change at events, nonetheless, the findings suggest that there may be a role for music festivals (and possibly other types of large events) in a larger social marketing campaign. In the future, research could consider whether events may be useful spaces to facilitate learning about a range of issues—these may include proenvironmental behavior, but may also be extended to include areas such as social justice and health promotion (e.g., healthy eating and disease prevention).

There are a number of limitations with this study that should be acknowledged. The use of an online panel may be considered a limitation of the study, although the benefits of this methodology were discussed in the Methodology section. Additionally, restricting the sample to those who had attended a music festival recently means that those attending other types of events and festivals were not included, and therefore it is possible that different results would be obtained if attendees at other types of events and festivals were surveyed. Finally, this was an exploratory study and therefore further research is required before any definitive statements about events as learning spaces can be made.

Climate change is bringing about a range of impacts for societies around the world. It appears that now more than ever it is crucial to act to prevent further dramatic change, beyond the warming that is already evident in the system (IPCC, 2013). Finding suitable ways to persuade people to change their behavior is challenging, and yet must be achieved. As part of an integrated social marketing strategy encouraging proenvironmental behavior change, and with careful consideration of both the type of messages used, and the degree to which any educational or behavior change messages are overt or otherwise, music festivals may offer opportunities to influence attitudes and encourage behavior change in a meaningful way.

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