

## An Exploratory Study on the Meanings of a Local Fair from the Perspectives of Locals

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### 1.0 Introduction

The impacts of festivals/events on local communities have been perceived in a variety of ways ranging from economic to social to cultural, and this varies according to event type, such as mega events, community-based festivals, public/non-profit or private events. In the past two decades, festivals/events have been categorized as one type of tourist attraction experiencing an exceptional growth rate (Getz, 1997; Goldblatt, 2014). Specifically, festivals and fairs have been employed by local communities as venues for reaping economic/financial benefits, and so it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of festivals and events. This is attested by various festival/event studies (e.g. Crompton & McKay, 1997; Moscardo, 2007; Thrane, 2002; Tyrrell & Johnston, 2001). It is assumed and confirmed that spending at community festivals/events will generate revenue to boost local incomes as well as create more job opportunities (e.g. Burns, Hatch, & Mules, 1986; Crompton & McKay, 1994). Patrons perceive that these festivals/events serve as the economic engine in the local community and that the locals will receive the monetary revenue from visitors. A significant proportion of event studies underscore the assessment of economic effects due to its ease of evaluation and tangible characteristics (Dimmock & Tiyce, 2001). However, less attention has been paid to the non-economic effects derived from festivals/events. As for a holistic view of community development, researchers have urged that these non-economic effects at the social or cultural levels should be analyzed for a better understanding of the effects of festivals/events on local communities (Delamere, 2001; Rollins & Delamere, 2007; Getz, 2008; Small, 2008; Sharpley & Stone, 2012). Community-based festivals/events represent small-scale events that are designed to celebrate local values and ways of life bound by the specific geographic location (Dimmock & Tiyce, 2001; Getz, 1995). Durkheim (2001) stated that festivals, rituals, events, and celebrations will bring people together and contribute to the sense of “effervescence” for bonding them tightly. Researchers concurred with the non-economic effects and articulated that community-based festivals/events would construct the space for building social cohesion and exploring group identity (Allen, O’Toole, McDonnell, & Harris, 2005; Rao, 2001; Turner, 1982). Specifically, community-based festivals/events would grant an opportunity for its community members to come together to entertain, celebrate, and socialize on a specific occasion.

Additionally, community development is one of the four areas (the other three are sociological, leisure participation, and tourism development) to explore the effects of festival/events in the field of Festival Studies (O’Sullivan & Jackson, 2002). Arcodia and Whitford (2006) mentioned that such gatherings would generate a sense of community and increase levels of social cohesiveness. During festivals/events, the links among community members are created and strengthened, and individuals have opportunities to help build up their social confidence and pride in their community identity by being involved in these shared celebrations (Guetzkow, 2002; Molloy, 2002). Derrett (2003) studied four festivals in New South Wales and concluded that image, pride, and togetherness generated by community-based festivals lay the foundation for sense of place and community.

Other studies have echoed such findings and indicated sense of community among festival attendees is one of the main positive social outcomes as it fosters intensive interaction and bonds among all community members. Interactions among the community members grounds the foundation of social capital *de facto* as numerous connections are established during community festivals. Specifically, the social capital level is elevated by embracing the presence of networks, the shared norms, the trust, and the reciprocity from community festivals (Leonard & Onyx, 2004; Putnam, 2000).

Social capital also functions by strengthening the bonds between group members (bonding social capital) and establishing links between the community members and outsiders (bridging social capital). Both types of social capital illustrated one of the social effects of festivals/events on community members. In addition to social capital, Jackson (2006) examined the Australian aboriginal festivals and concluded that such celebrations enhance community members’ pride in their traditional heritages and strengthen their cultural identity. Van Winkle, Woosnam, and Mohammed (2013) conducted their study on a festival in Texas, exploring the sense of community among festival attendees. They concluded that the festival did contribute to a component of the concept of sense of community as there was a significant relationship between the festival attendees and the emotion connection factor. Sense of community is evidently established through local festivals/events by way of elevated interaction levels and shared identity. In short, besides economic aspects, literature on event studies reveals that local residents perceive the effects of festivals/events from social and cultural aspects as well. This study, therefore, is designed to evaluate the non-economic meanings attributed to festivals/events by interviewing locals at a local community festival, i.e., Lemonade Art Fair (LAF).

## 2.0 Method

Since the quantitative research method dominates most festival studies (Robson, 2008), this study uses the qualitative research method to collect data from informants as this approach is appropriate for understanding informants' experiences and perceptions of festivals/events (Shipway, Jago, & Deery, 2012). Two sets of data were collected using freelist and semi-structured interviews. Freelist is a research method used in cultural anthropological research to elicit key elements of a cultural or structural domain (Borgatti, 1994). During freelist exercises, informants are asked to list all the elements or words that represent the festival in their minds, thus, representing their specific knowledge or perceptions associated with this domain (Fleisher & Harrington, 1998). Freelist has three assumptions: 1) when people freelist, they tend to list terms in order of familiarity; 2) individuals who know a lot about a subject list more terms than do people who know less; 3) terms used most frequently by informants are an indication of locally prominent items (Quinlan, 2005). Words provided in a freelist exercise have particular saliency and significant meaning for informants. Borgatti (1994) stated that freelist is easy, quick and quantifiable but long interviews may allow informants to remember more obscure information. Holloway (2008), meanwhile, suggested that the interview is an effective approach for collecting data from informants to understand their feelings, perceptions, and descriptions of specific phenomena. As such, the semi-structured interview was also utilized for collecting data from attendees.

### 2.1 Setting and Sampling

The LAF is sponsored by a local university and the city hall as part of a series of celebrations before the July 4<sup>th</sup> holiday. The first LAF was held 41 years ago, and today it is a thriving local event with more than 10,000 attendees in 2014. The LAF features more than 200 art and craft vendors selling their high-quality and creative artifacts, as well as more than 20 food stands selling food and beverage. Later in the evening, LAF concludes with an outdoor concert performance by the local symphony orchestra. The purposes of this festival, as indicated by the festival staff, are to increase community involvement in public events and preserve long-held community traditions.

### 2.2 Data Analysis

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in a Word document for analysis. For the freelist exercise, ANTHROPAC 4.98 was utilized to determine Smith's saliency index (S) to measure the importance of a listed item in an informant's freelist (Smith, 1993). The Smith saliency, which takes rank and frequency into consideration, ranges from 0 to 1 where a higher score relates to a greater importance/saliency of the item. Lastly, interpretation of results from the interview data grants us a holistic view of patrons' views on this community-based festival. Content analysis is utilized to code and categorize data from the interview. As Flick (2006) and Silverman (2001) suggested, coding and categorizing are the main data analyses of the original text. The answers from open-ended questions were coded and categorized in three steps: data reduction, data display, and verification and drawings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After abstracting and summarizing the original text, the appropriate codes were labeled in the assigning unit and categorized into the same group.

### 3.0 Findings

Most informants were middle-aged (average: 46 years old) Caucasian females with college degrees who have lived within a forty-mile radius for more than fifteen years. They were not first-time visitors to this art fair, and fourteen out of twenty attended this festival with their family members. It took participants about fifteen minutes to finish the interview and freelist exercise.

Freelist was utilized to collect the meanings attributed to the LAF by informants, and it allowed the researcher to discover the relative saliency of items across informants within a given domain. Seventy-three phrases about the meaning of LFA were identified. The top six terms were elicited and ranked, respectively, as 'fun,' 'community,' 'gathering,' 'art,' 'food,' and 'music' (with Smith S's value ranging from 0.299 to 0.205, see Figure 1). 'Fun' and 'community' are the top two words used to represent LFA, according to the Saliency ranking; thus, most informants believe that the LFA equates to an enjoyable and entertaining community-based event. The findings from the freelist exercise echoed the categorized themes extracted from the analysis of the interview data.

#### Figure 1

During the interview, informants were asked to detail and explain their perceptions of the LAF. Findings from the semi-structure interviews are presented regarding the perceived meaning of LAF. Five main meaning themes were identified in this study: community gathering, socialization, business venue, summer celebration, and community pride. Information from interviews was used for complementing the findings from the freelist exercises.

### 3.1 Community gathering

'Community' itself is one of the most prominent words for representing meaning to the LAF. Based on the interviews, it also serves as the most important meaning category for most LAF informants. In their conversations, more details and explanations were presented to illustrate why they believe community is a distinguishing feature of LAF. For example, over 70% of the informants stated that they believe community gathering is a critical part of attending this festival. LAF provided a "great opportunity to get together". They suggested, "Honestly I think it's more of a community gathering and for people to come and you know sell their things but I think it's huge for the community to be able to come out and do things together"; "so I guess the Lemonade.... or Lemonade Concert and Art fair or art festival it's about bringing all sort of different people together um...who have a lot of different things to offer and just spending time together"; and "it's important because it brings people together from all walks of life and I don't think we have a lot of events like that". They also believe LAF brings people together and forms a feeling of togetherness as indicated by comments such as "it's the community coming together to create a sense of community that they like. I am very happy about. I'm particularly happy that they do it on campus" and "a festival is like a time for people to get together. It's something where people can get together and express themselves and have fun together in lots of different ways."

Most informants stated that such community-based festivals instill a sense of community through intensive interaction with community members, friends, and neighbors. One participant stated, "I think it pulls the community together. I think that the people who have there and the vendors here, I think it helps to develop that community."

Moreover, the appeal of the main functions and features of the LAF such arts, crafts, food and music, enticed people to attend this festival. Informant stated that "I know that there are people who come here from the community who enjoy it because of the food, because of the people they see, the vendors that are here"; "it brings a lot of talented individuals together to display whatever it is that they're doing from signs to jewelry to various crafts to stuff like this...ah...probably we're lucky if we get to hear the same crowd or orchestra, community orchestra"; and "I guess it gets people together and it provides people with a good amount of things, different activities to do." As community gathering is one of the most important themes, one informant concluded that "it's not only for the performers or participates but also for the people in charge of this so it's a chance for everyone to get involved in something. It's a great experience. I think it's a great thing for the community. Absolutely."

### 3.2 Summer celebration and fun

Due to its geographic location, the summertime is another important and fascinating theme of the LAF for most informants, owing to the extremely cold winter season in Minnesota, "being outside in the summer in Minnesota"; "it's kind of like a warm place for you at this festival"; and "it's a summertime festival. it's a... a reason to get out of the house. Spend some time you know sitting outside in the shade." This category has a similar meaning to the term, "fun," from the freelisting exercise. Namely, having fun is also one of the major perceived meanings of LAF, as various arts and crafts are showcased to satisfy participants' curiosity. LAF is also a kind of celebration ritual as informants indicated that "every time I think of the festival I just think of colors and I think of like...I think of dancing. I would think of community dancing and like concerts outdoors but usually kind of more of a very spiritual basis. Art...to me it's about community, art music and dance." Informants expounded on the significance of the titular 'lemonade' in this festival, "What that's pretty good. Lemonade. I mean I think the positioning of this festival is it's supposed to be summer, it's supposed to be a very hot day and the lemonade is supposed to cool you down and refresh you"; and "the festival as such I think is a community building event and a celebration of life um...you know focused around certain specific things like here its more people's arts and crafts and um...then you know the music and certain attractions like that." During conversations, participants indicated fun is the major part when they think about LAF. Specifically, informants said "what we do is, it's fun running into people that we know"; and "just fun to see people and stroll around and see the artwork."

### 3.3 Socialization

Some informants indicated that they perceived this festival as a place to meet new friends and build up their social network, which means that they hope they can use this festival as a venue to increase their social capital. Informants stated that "I think a lot of the time when you make friends here you end up having similar interests you go to the different stalls and then you, people end up having similar interests with you"; "we just reconnect with other people we recognize"; and "such a significant event that people will come and I'll come see friends and other people." Several informants recognized that LAF was a good opportunity to connect with other people by stating, "we just see neighbors and acquaintances from the past here but as far as making new friends"; "So it's more of a gathering for people I know"; and "we just see neighbors and acquaintances from the past here but as far as making new friend." Thus, LAF effectively functions as a platform for building social capital as informants declared that they had expanded their networks during this event. Moreover, some participants combined the senses of socialization and fun. For example, one participant opined, "I think it is a social activity ... so that's the first thing and for people to get out and do

*something fun,”* and another said, *“I suppose [LAF made] the socialization and entertainment get together, and it is a social event”*

### 3.4 Business venue and art works

Informants also indicated that LAF is an opportunity to boost business in the area and bring positive economic effects for local artists and vendors. They recognized the fact that LAF provides a venue for business owners; *“this is a business opportunity for those vendors. They actually have the chance to sell their stuff or to cause a lot of them are homemade so it’s not easy to get this from other places so that’s another one”*; and *“I think this festival offers local entrepreneurs an opportunity to boost their business.”* One informant shared his experience of different festivals: *“What I’ve seen in America, unless it’s like a traditional cultural festival, is that it’s usually very like commercialized. But what I like about this one is that it’s supporting small business”*. *“[I] hope they can grow their business and hopefully sell more stuff and keep doing what they’re doing to get more revenue in this festival.”* This response is reflective of participants’ perceptions on the meaning of festivals as one serving as economic outlets for these entrepreneurs. In addition to providing a business venue, some participants proclaimed that LAF also means ‘art.’ They indicated *“... I’m not much of an arts and crafts person but I really like seeing the art work that the artisans and the arts and the crafts people come up with...”*; *“...and as I was joking with some people earlier, it’s like where is my wallet?”*; and *“I think that what these people come up with are amazing [work].”* Therefore, artworks not only serve as commercial interests at LAF but also as representations of meaning, according to the interviews and freelisting responses.

### 3.5 Food

Informants noted the prevalence of various types of food at LAF and that it is one of the reasons for attending; for example, *“I came to LAF for [seeing] friends and food.”* Participants perceived that food symbolizes LAF because a wide range of food is sold at the festival. Participants suggested that *“cheese curds and good food”* are available at festival vendors and *“...food and fun and connection all put together you think is very important for our community”*. As a farmers’ market is available at LAF, one informant explained that *“there was fresh food and produce available at farmers market [even] it wasn’t as big as we thought.”* Food is always analogous to local festivals in the Midwest as people expect to eat some “new” food there (e.g., at big festivals like the Minnesota State Fair).

### 3.6 Community pride

Additionally, a new category was extracted from the interview data—community pride. Attendees bring community pride to this festival, and it is believed LAF carries on local customs and traditions: Comments included, *“The Lemonade Fair is our community spirit”* and *“it’s just ah, I see it as ah...a point of pride for St Cloud to join in this festival”*. LAF serves as a forty-year tradition for the city of St. Cloud, with informants remarking that *“It’s kind of like passing from one generation to the other and that’s the generation”* and it *“is recurring so it’s like a tradition.”*

## 4.0 Discussion and Implications

In this study, most informants believed that LAF actually represents the community itself and provides its citizens with an opportunity to augment its sense of community and togetherness. They stated that LAF offers them a venue to establish strong relationships by way of its features, namely, arts, crafts, and food. In concurrence with Putnam’s study (2000), interactions among LAF’s participants grants them an opportunity to create bonds within their community as well as bridges with outsiders and visitors. Informants asserted that they participate in LAF for the social and entertainment value, particularly because it gives them a chance to meet old or new friends as well as enjoy arts and music; this makes ‘community’ itself a central theme, one that encourages a higher participation level (Dwyer, Mellor, Mistillis, & Mules, 2000; Getz, 1997). Furthermore, informants claimed that their sense of belonging to a community increased during LAF when they networked with other people. Van Winkle, Woosnam, and Mohammed (2013) evaluated the sense of community concept in the Kolache festival context and concluded that festivals do contribute to forming sense of community. Other studies also concluded that attending festivals is associated with the build-up of sense of community (Bowdin, Allen, O’Toole, Harris, & McDonnell, 2002; Derrett, 2003; Schwarz & Tait, 2007). Brown and James (2004) argued that community-based festivals also display community itself. Arcodia and Whitford (2006), when they examined the social capital concept in the festival context, suggested that festival attendance would contribute to sense of community. Specifically, festivals contribute to the development of social cohesiveness (Delamere, Wankel, & Hinch, 2001) where it is one of the three ways to develop social capital in a society, as stated by Arcodia and Whitford (2006). In this study, the findings from the freelisting exercise, supported by the semi-structure interview, indicate that community gathering is a significant meaning as perceived by participants. Some participants also alluded to a similar concept, socialization, which serves as a critical step in creating social capital and consists of networks, bonds, and trust (Putnam, 2000). Likewise, social capital development during festivals/events results in stronger bonds and intense interactions among participants. Namely, from

participants' perspectives, they believe the community-based festival represents an opportunity for community gathering and social capital build-up.

In this study, participants also believed that this community-based festival strengthens their own pride in their community. Other studies are consistent with these findings and indicate that involvement in community festivals/events makes members proud of their uniqueness and identity (Allen, et al., 2008; Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012; Small, Edwards, & Sheridan, 2005; Van Zyl & Botha, 2004). Value in community itself can also pass from one generation to another during the festival as some LAF informants suggested. Derrett (2003) indicated that festivals serve as value keepers as they offer a context to strengthen local values via various activities and celebrations. Local values will be preserved and passed onto succeeding generations through festival programs as festivals/events are designated to preserve local history and culture (Frisby & Getz 1989). In addition to the meaning of community, gathering, and socialization, participants also consider LAF as a venue for local businesses which provides economic benefits for the local community. The economic impacts of festivals on local communities have been well documented in the past two decades (e.g. Crompton & McKay, 1997; Thrane, 2002). Expenditures by participants boost local business, increase household incomes, and even create new employment opportunities (Dwyer & Jago, 2012). In this case, arts and crafts from LAF generate significant revenue for vendors and create positive economic effects on the local community. It is a significant role of this art-oriented festival. However, O'Sullivan and Jackson (2002) argued that their findings showed that community festivals support local businesses but do not create new ones in the local community. In this study, participants saw LAF as an opportunity for local entrepreneurs to generate revenue by selling arts, crafts, and food, but no research was conducted to understand whether incomes from visitors would substantially support their businesses. It is important to bear in mind though those local businesses do offer financial support via sponsorship for local community festivals (Molly, 2002).

Fun and excitement seeking are not new to most festival attendees based on the reviews on festival studies by Li and Petrick (2006). In this study, participants thought about fun or excitement when they were asked about their perceptions of LAF. A variety of studies has well documented the connection between the festival and enjoyment seeking (e.g. Crompton & McKay, 1997; Li, Huang, & Cai, 2009). It is not surprising that most participants suggested that LAF means fun. Also, the literature suggests that food serves as the epicenter of the community event as it plays a powerful social tool enabling closer connections among family and community members (e.g. Anderson 2005). Sharples (2014) stated that food plays a critical role in festivals and events as it serves an indispensable part of the human experience. The findings also concluded that food is perceived as important by participants at LAF even though it is not the major attraction in this event. Finally, the celebration of summer has a unique meaning for LAF due to the local climatic constraints, that is, the long winter in Minnesota. It is not surprising that some participants list it as one of the meanings they ascribe to LAF, but the literature does not detail such exclusive perceived meaning for a community-based festival.

Based on the aforementioned findings, community-based festival planners and organizers should consider not only the potential economic effects but also the impacts on social function. For example, most participants in this study believed LFA means community itself and celebration of their own identity. They utilized an opportunity to expand their social capital and sense of community. Thus, the intangible effects should be emphasized because economic benefits were not the first priority for participants in this study. As Beard (2014) suggested, a well-designed festival is an experience-creating journey, and it is a critical issue in the design of a festival or event that will satisfy the stakeholders' demands. The festival sponsors, especially for small community-based festivals, should acknowledge the social benefits derived from festival participation in order to program it better in the future.

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