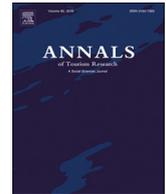




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## Research Note

## Festival visiting, voluntary risk and positive health

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## ABSTRACT

Many disciplines including geography, tourism and event management, anthropology, sociology, psychology, public health and medicine have a contribution to make to the study of festivals. Despite a growing body of tourism and event literature outlining the many motivations for and subjective benefits of attending festivals, the reporting of positive health outcomes remains underdeveloped. Researching festival visitors who take risks for pleasure (voluntary risk-taking or ‘edgework’), would make an important and illuminating contribution to the literature and could offer alternative and broader perspectives on what we define as ‘health’. Interdisciplinary research collaborations using universally accepted definitions, methodologies and measures offer great potential to further our understanding of positive health and voluntary risk-taking from the perspective of the festival visitor.

Festivals are a part of contemporary life, with different festivals appealing to different tastes and age groups; the outdoor music festival exemplifies this global phenomenon by celebrating eclectic lifestyles and attitudes. Many disciplines including geography, tourism and event management, anthropology, sociology, psychology, public health and medicine have a contribution to make to the study of festivals. Yet, despite a growing body of tourism and event literature outlining the many motivations for and subjective benefits of attending festivals, the reporting of positive health outcomes remains underdeveloped: indeed, the travel medicine and public health literature favour researching negative health issues associated with attending events and mass gatherings. This being the case, research into the taking of risks for pleasure (voluntary risk-taking or ‘edgework’) and associated feelings of positive health (often linked to an increased sense of freedom) experienced by festival visitors, would make an important and illuminating contribution to the literature and could offer alternative and broader perspectives on what we define as ‘health’.

The traditional medical view defines health in terms of illness, symptoms, and disease (Smith, 2008). In contrast, sociological research into lay (non-expert) health beliefs spanning a thirty-year period, positions health and illness within the social and cultural context of everyday life (Cornwell, 1984). Lay concepts of health affect a population’s perception of risk, health, and illness behaviour, and are consequently adjuncts to the traditional theoretical medical definitions (Helman, 1991, Lawton, 2003). Helman (1991) also suggests that lay concepts of health are in tune with the seminal, and still relevant, World Health Organisation definition of health, outlined as encompassing mental, physical, and social dimensions (WHO, 1946): this definition delineates the holistic, interactive and dynamic features of health. A UK survey of 9000 people investigated lay views of what being healthy meant to them; the results were divided in terms of negative concepts, where health was defined in terms of illness and disease, and positive notions of health related to wellness and feelings of being ‘carefree’ (Blaxter, 1990; Blaxter, 2002).

Contemporary life, for some, embodies a risk-taking ethic where consumptive experiences and freedoms to ‘let go’ and partake in excessive behaviours are a commonplace and accepted lifestyle choice (Eckersley, 2006). For instance, people participating in the night-time economy in many British towns, exhibit normalised behaviours associated with alcohol intoxication, use of recreational drugs and the consumption of unhealthy foods (Hayward & Hobbs, 2007). Festivals are additional spaces offering a release from the

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stresses of everyday life, where both hedonistic and less risky behaviours co-exist. The varying degrees of abandon available to the festival visitor in the form of voluntary risk-taking, contribute to the positive health benefits of feelings of freedom, heightened social engagement and ‘living life to the full’, or to negative outcomes such as injury or physical and mental illness.

The term ‘wellbeing’, although a part of the WHO (1946) definition of health and despite common usage within public health and the media in the UK (Department of Health, 2010), is not used here. The rationale for not using the term is that there is no universally agreed definition (Carlisle, Henderson, & Hanlon, 2009); furthermore, it is not ‘owned’ by any single discipline (Stewart-Brown, 2015), making its use problematic. However, the three dimensions of physical, mental, and social health outlined by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 1946), provide a good foundation to examine health at festivals. Physical health is largely expressed in the negative notions of crowds: dangers of being crushed and stressed, and environmental- or weather-related problems such as ‘trench foot’ in very wet conditions, or dehydration and sunburn caused by sun and heat (Zeit et al., 2009). Sexual health and other communicable diseases also pose risks to visitors (Ranse & Hutton, 2012). On the other hand, accounts of psychological positive health at festivals highlight feelings of happiness (Packer & Ballantyne, 2011). Positive social health is experienced in terms of the benefits of human interaction at festivals, enabling like-minded people to develop a sense of belonging and community (Jepson & Clarke, 2015).

Personal influences, values and behaviours impact upon the health and risk choices of visitors to festivals (Hutton, Brown, & Verdonk, 2013). Furthermore, the festival atmosphere contributes to and encourages a temporary lack of restraint and a departure from the customary order of society, permitting an attitude of ‘anything goes, and anything can happen’. The festival context facilitates the formation and dispersal of unique social relationships, where individual and shared negotiations and notions of risk impact upon positive health (Wood, 2018). A small body of relevant sociological risk literature addresses a relationship between leisure, work and the pleasure of risk taking, and defines this as ‘Edgework,’ where people voluntarily practice risky or potentially harmful consumption, contributing to feelings of positive health (Lyng, 1990; Lyng & Matthews, 2007). The study of Edgework in dangerous sport and occupations preceded the researching of risk behaviours in stock trading, street anarchism, avant-garde art and excessive substance use (Lyng, 2005). The concept of Edgework also encapsulates more mundane risk-taking, such as the escape from the tedium of life’s constraining social conditions, that gives a sense of self that is beyond control and regulation, even if this is temporary (Zinn, 2016). A willingness to participate in the different levels or gradations of Edgework offered by the festival experience, as they contribute to the positive health feelings of wellness and being fully alive, is also observed.

An examination of health and voluntary risk from the perspective of the festival visitor surely must lead us to an acknowledgement that although lay and theoretical viewpoints are often disparate, both are worthy of consideration. We can observe that certain elements and gradations of voluntary risk-taking or edgework at festivals can contribute to a lay perception of positive health, and yet the positive health benefits of this, especially in the context of festivals, has not yet been discussed in the health, social science or tourism literature. Research on the attributes of positive health gains from visiting festivals would balance the travel medicine and medical mass gathering literature reporting of negative aspects of health and events. Exploration of positive health outcomes from visiting festivals calls furthermore for wide, interdisciplinary research to look at different and broader ways of understanding this phenomenon. Lyall and Meagher (2012) support a prediction that the future of research will be increasingly interdisciplinary; and Mallaband et al. (2017) encourage academic disciplines to be flexible, stating that in the past some have combined to form new disciplines that were better equipped to answer emerging questions. More specifically, Getz calls for ‘interdisciplinary theory formation’ to address the complexities of the festival (Getz, 2010: 54). The disciplines of geography, anthropology, sociology, psychology, public health, travel medicine, tourism and event management all have research contributions to offer to the study of visitors to festivals and other events, their health and the phenomenon of voluntary risk-taking. Their findings would surely increase theoretical and academic knowledge, and the practical applications of their research would be of assistance to festival and event organisers, and personnel with health and safety responsibilities.

Interdisciplinary research collaborations using universally accepted definitions, methodologies and measures offer great potential to further our understanding of positive health and voluntary risk-taking from the perspective of the festival visitor.

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### Author statements

*Ethical approval:* This was not necessary for these research notes as it does not involve any live subjects.

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*Competing interests:* None, however, these research notes present a part of independent research supported by Festival Medical Services (FMS), a not for profit, registered medical charity whose clinical volunteers provide event medical services. The author is grateful to FMS for facilitating access to the service. The views and opinions expressed therein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Festival Medical Services or the event organisers.

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