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FESTIVALS AND PANDEMIC

Why Festivals And Special Events Matter Now More Than Ever?

After a year of on-and-off global lockdowns, the need to gather and experience collective cultural joy feels more pressing than ever.

The arrival of COVID-19 has transformed the world we live in and put all major cultural events and festivals on hold throughout 2020. From the Edinburgh festivals to Glastonbury, from the Tokyo Olympic Games to the European Capitals of Culture in Galway and Rijeka, all major event gatherings have had to be reinvented, postponed, downscaled, or cancelled altogether.

By 2021, festival and major event organisers are determined to make a come-back and show that it is possible to celebrate and showcase culture safely. But, how big is the thirst for mass gatherings? How much do we need them? How safe do we feel as audiences, participants, funders, and organisers?

I have spent the last 12 months debating the value of major events and festivals: from discussions on the future of mega-events (University of Liverpool) such as the Olympic Games and the World Expo. I've been discussing what makes place-based festivals such as Glastonbury (Victoria and Albert Museum) so special.

I've also explored why the UK is making 'cultural mega events' (Warwick Institute of Engagement) such a priority at present, with a packed calendar in 2021 (Coventry UK City of Culture), 2022 (Festival UK, Commonwealth Games) and 2023 (Leeds Year of Culture).

Common questions raised are: why do festivals matter? How do we capture their value? In the wake of a major pandemic, how sustainable are they? Somehow, an additional question is: at a time of a global health crisis caused by viral transmissions, how responsible is it to keep hosting grand spectacle and bringing people together?

Why events matter even more in a post-pandemic world

In 1991, Donald Getz defined special events as 'an opportunity for leisure, social or cultural experience outside the normal range of choices and beyond everyday experience.'

I study major art festivals and events that take over entire cities (at times, nations) with the aim to generate moments of collective joy and shared euphoria. We could understand this as a culture of spectacle, largely reliant on the outdoors and on bringing artforms and broader cultural expressions into unusual locations and innovative combinations. Often, the main goal is to generate ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ communal cultural experiences.

After a year spent largely in isolation, with solace being sought online almost exclusively, and digital entertainment (as well as socialising) platforms expanding exponentially, discussions have grown about our human need for culture and festivities that involve large physical gatherings.

Some have argued that we should seek alternatives, that it is no longer safe to gather in big crowds and that, given the safety and cost implications, we may be better without them: not just temporarily, but in general. I would, however, argue strongly against this.

Collective, and physical, gatherings make a difference. There is profound symbolic value in the opportunity to experience something together as communities. Festivals offer such a platform by condensing our exposure to cultural activities over a specific time and place. This means that festival participants must be there (present) and engage in culture simultaneously with others, which in turn will result in meaningful, often life-defining shared memories.

Festivals also offer the opportunity for this collective experience to take place among people that may not otherwise meet or believe they have things in common. A distinct value of many festival experiences (even more so within large international festivals and mega-events) is their transversal nature, which can appeal to people across generations, socio-economic background, or cultural tastes.

How do we understand festivals and explain their value?

These distinct characteristics have become particularly important in an era dominated by individual, virtual and ‘on demand’ cultural consumption. But we lack proper understanding of what these differences mean when it comes to cultural engagement. This is partially because the opportunity for ‘collective encounter’ was taken for granted until not so long ago.

The value and importance of collective joy or shared euphoria are aspects that are not properly encapsulated within economic impact analysis frameworks. Economic analysis will help us understand how cultural activity may lead into job generation or tourism development but not how it leads to happiness, wellbeing, belonging or creative inspiration. As such, if anything, the pandemic has brought to the fore the importance of expanding our definitions of value (Centre for Cultural Value) and our approaches to evaluating culture (Centre for Cultural Value) and cultural events.

How do we understand, document and assess, festivals in a way that takes into account their symbolic significance, their intangible impacts and legacies? How do we define joy and our human need for it? Why do we need collective experiences? Why does ‘time’, ‘place’ and ‘space’ matter when engaging with culture and the arts?

After more than a year of lockdowns and the anxiety generated by a pandemic, at a time when mental health issues are on the rise, these questions have become pressing. They could be answered if we worked towards more diverse, holistic and flexible observations of festivals and cultural events as distinct communal experiences.

How sustainable are festivals?

Another important question has to do with what happens next. Sustainability and legacy became a critical area of debate for major events and festivals well before the pandemic.

There are concerns over tourism massification in festival host cities, top-down approaches to programming, over-simplification and standardisation of cultural expressions, excessive commercialism or lack of authenticity. These are just a few of the common criticisms raised against the most successful events and festivals, from the Edinburgh festivals to European Capitals of Culture and, indeed, any Olympic Games edition.

The pandemic has forced a sober reflection around these issues. The enforced cancellation or postponement of all major events has in fact both imposed and enabled much needed time to take perspective and revisit dominant practices. New cultural event networks and conversations have emerged throughout 2020, involving serious discussion.

Global debates, such as the one led by Salzburg Global seminar shone a light on the need for greater trust and solidarity between festival stakeholders, with more support between the big players and smaller ventures, greater attention to ongoing community concerns and, most telling, a return to values and the philosophy behind special events. For instance, why does each event matter in the first place? What can we do without?

The cultural events and festival sector is deeply bruised and may feel more vulnerable than most. But we may also argue that it has matured even further and reached a peak in self-awareness and commitment to best practices. Significant resilience may emerge out of this situation.

The future of festivals

We are social animals and we need opportunities for collective celebration. Festivals and major cultural events offer such a platform.

The choices available to experience culture keep expanding, and there is much to be praised about the new digital opportunities, and the benefit of exploring hybrid models for engagement.

Regardless, physical experiences matter, connecting with the places we live makes a difference to our wellbeing, and experiencing joy simultaneously with others makes us happier and more resilient as communities.

The immediate future of events and festivals will be strongly dependent on how the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve. It will depend on the capacity for organisers to follow new

health and safety regulations. But their medium to long term future also relies on a better understanding of their value and significance.

For this to happen, festival and event organisers must ensure they balance their efforts towards following regulations and developing feasible business plans with protection of their cultural values and vision.

Funders must understanding and supportive of these different dimensions of value. It is essential to account not only for social and economic impacts but also for cultural and symbolic value more broadly.

Together, festival and event stakeholders must work towards holistic platforms for evaluation and documentation, so that they can explain and demonstrate value in more appropriate ways. This means, at times of hardship and ever-evolving regulations, it is possible to identify, protect and prioritise what really matters when it comes to cultural experience.

SOURCE : <https://www.ukri.org/blog/why-festivals-and-special-events-matter-now-more-than-ever/>

How You Can Celebrate Festivals While Also Taking Care Of Your Health During This Pandemic

The global lockdowns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic brought life to a stand still for many across the globe. As we enter the 10th month since the lockdown was announced, many still await clearance guidelines and permissions to return to their normal, day to day life. However, for Indians, even a pandemic is no excuse to shy away from our bombastic celebration of festivals that is a permanent fixture in Indian culture. However, with limitations on the number of people permitted to gather at once, most mass event venues are still shut and a general fear of the virus in the air, we are tasked with the feat of figuring out a balance between celebration and health.

Celebrating festivals during a pandemic:

IN INDIA, WHEN IT COMES TO CELEBRATIONS, WE LIKE TO DO EVERYTHING KING SIZE. IT IS NO SURPRISE THEN, THAT THE ROADS OF MUMBAI ARE BOTTLENECKED WHEN LALBAUGCHARAJA, A BEHEMOTH STATUE OF LORD GANESHAIS BROUGHT TO THE METRO TO BE DISPLAYED FOR DEVOTEES.

However, in the pandemic, maintaining a certain amount of physical distance is essential as a measure to practice self-care. Therefore, practices were adapted to fit the situation. For Easter

for instance, most churches lay barren as the celebrations were shifted to the online sphere, and devotees attended masses through their phone and laptop screens.

The basics:

There are some hygiene principles that are essential for any public interactions, especially during a celebration or festival. You must always ensure that you have a mask covering your face. Additionally, in the name of healthy choices, you must ensure that your hands do not make contact with the inside of your mask, else the point of wearing the mask is beaten. Given the occasion, you might end up interacting with more than one person; you must always keep your hand sanitiser ready. You might also want to keep a separate bottle of it to offer others, so that they do not end up coming in contact with your personal bottle.

For public festivals such as Ganesh Chaturthi, Holi, Diwali or Christmas, there are some practices you could maintain in order to make healthy choices, consume healthy food and maintain good health.

For bigger celebrations:

- **Avoid public celebrations** : Even as places of worship and public spaces are gradually opening up, it would be in the best interest of your health to try and avoid such spaces for reckless enjoyment. Participating in public celebrations in crowded spaces will exponentially increase the risk of you contracting the virus.
- **Consider those around you**: While you might be of optimum age to not be adversely affected by the virus, contracting it still makes you a carrier and you could pass it on to others around you, including your family members. It is essential to practice self-care if you have elderly members such as grandparents living with you.
- **Don't overdo it**: While the public rhetoric seems to be condemnation of those recklessly flouting COVID-19 rules, being too much of a stickler to the point of paranoia could have significant negative effects on your mental health. While it is essential to practice actions, isolating yourself from the world might be counterproductive. The trick is to strike a balance between celebrating with loved ones whilst also ensuring that you make healthy choices. Online celebrations are a great way to ensure that you stay connected whilst keeping safe.

for smaller celebrations:

While attending a neighbourhood Diwali celebration might be a difficult temptation to beat, if you are determined to make healthy choices and practice self care, it is still attainable. BUT, WHAT ABOUT CELEBRATIONS THAT CANNOT BE MADE 'HEALTHY' SIMPLY BY AVOIDING THEM? When it comes to birthdays, anniversaries or christenings, a private invitation from loved ones might be difficult to resist. In this scenario, there are still some practices you could participate in that will help you practice self-care better.

Here are some ways you can celebrate with your loved ones without compromising on your health.

Maintain Traditions

Just because you cannot practice traditions in the 'traditional' manner, does not mean that you cannot maintain them at all. Finding new ways to rekindle old celebration habits through new means in order to be able to enjoy during the pandemic while ensuring healthy choices can be a great way to successfully celebrate in a pandemic

Online Gift Giving

Gift giving is a practice that cannot be halted in the 21st century, even if there is a pandemic. With the ease online retailers offer, you can easily send your loved ones the perfect gifts for their special day, making them feel special even in a pandemic

Avoid Excess Food Consumption And Keep A Fitness Regime

As we find ways to make up for missed celebrations and festivities during the pandemic, it is essential to ensure that you still consume in moderation and eat healthier food as this will ensure a healthier lifestyle. For instance, while you might not be going out to a restaurant to eat and celebrate with your family, you could still ensure that you consume food you make or order at home in order to capitalize on the health benefits of home cooked food already offers.

Key to this is also ensuring that you have a fitness regime in place. While you may want to avoid gyms and in-person classes, a number of trainers are offering online consultations and

classes. YouTube also has a number of at home fitness workouts that you can exercise alongside. Ensuring that you get at least half an hour of quality exercise everyday will be crucial during the festivities.

Conclusion

The pandemic has undoubtedly thrown a wrench in the celebration of festivities. However, this does not mean we must stop celebrating. We must simply practice caution and avoid methods of celebration that we know go against making healthy choices. Be it your birthday, anniversary or Holi celebration, it is important to remember that your health comes first. Ensure you eat healthy food and practice self care during celebrations in a pandemic.

SOURCE: <https://www.hdfcergo.com/blogs/health-insurance/how-you-can-celebrate-festivals-while-also-taking-care-of-your-health-during-this-pandemic>