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## Should there be more showers at the summer music festival?

### Studying the contextual dependence of resource consuming conventions and lessons for sustainable tourism

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## **Should there be more showers at the summer music festival? Studying the contextual dependence of resource consuming conventions and lessons for sustainable tourism**

### **Abstract**

Summer music festivals that involve a few days of camping have often been linked to sustainability agendas. Yet relevant studies have so far overlooked how these events can themselves serve as experiments in less resource consumptive living. Building on a wider interest in the cultural evolution of cleanliness norms, this paper explores how attendees come to use water in personal washing at two UK festivals. Through survey, observation and interview research, it examines how current festival goers respond to the disruption of their usual washing regimes, paying particular attention to how a combination of social and infrastructural cues serve to encourage the emergence of a temporary new cleanliness culture. Doing so highlights the value of seeing human resource consumption as a matter of dynamic collective convention more than fixed personal preference since these respondents were seen to embrace a new relationship with washing that was otherwise deemed unthinkable. This leads to a broader discussion of how visitor needs and the social world are most usefully studied by both future festival organisers and the wider field of sustainable tourism research.

## Introduction

In the UK, as elsewhere in Europe, camping music festivals, in which masses of people congregate in dedicated fields to spend a few days watching live performances and relaxing together, are increasingly popular (Mintel, 2015). Sustainability has often been linked to these events. This is both because many organisers have been keen to demonstrate their green credentials by minimising their environmental impact (Zifkos, 2015) and because attendees appear particularly receptive to messages about curbing their consumption (Hall, 2012). However, researchers interested in music festival sustainability have said little so far about how these events themselves can often serve as experiments in less resource hungry living.

Nowhere is this more obvious than with regard to personal washing. We know that the younger groups who still predominate at summer festivals (Mintel, 2010) appear increasingly indifferent to broader anxieties about water scarcity by using more of this resource in washing themselves than they ever have before (Browne et al., 2014). Yet, when they arrive at the festival site, the showers and bathroom infrastructures that would otherwise seem to be an increasingly central feature of their everyday lives are, for the moment at least, suddenly relatively absent. This leaves us with questions about how young festival goers who otherwise appear prone to ‘hypercleanliness’ (Pullinger et al. 2013) handle such disruptions to their usual ways of using water in personal washing and what this tells us about the effective promotion of more sustainable living, both at the festival site and more widely.

In attempting to answer them, this paper argues for the value of linking sustainable tourism research and a growing body of work that sees resource consumption as an outcome of how people are contextually recruited into particular norms of action. It starts with a discussion of festival sustainability research and an argument about how this field of work might benefit from a closer examination of the lived festival experience. Then we introduce some key arguments from recent research on changing cleanliness norms to suggest that relevant concepts could usefully be applied to the festival. This takes us to the results of a survey, observation and interview study conducted at two UK festivals. First we set the scene through a discussion of the survey results. These suggested that, despite recognising they would likely be more ‘dirty’ at the festival, this was not understood as particularly problematic by our respondents. Then we use our interviews and observational work to examine how this

indifference came about, paying particular attention to how certain social and infrastructural cues served to encourage the emergence of a temporary new cleanliness culture.

The relatively prosaic question around which we structure our paper is whether there should be more showers at the summer music festival. This question, we contend, is not as easily answered as might first be imagined. This is because how we answer it rests on whether we conceptualise attendees as a set of individuals with predefined desires or an evolving cultural group whose wants are subject to change. It is also a question that may be of particular relevance to current festival organisers in view of how many of them in the UK are starting to provide a broader suite of washing facilities than they often have in the past. Finally, by allowing ourselves to dwell upon this question with reference to our data, we argue that we put ourselves in a position to reflect on how visitor needs and the social world more generally are best conceptualised in sustainable tourism research. We therefore end our paper by drawing out the implications of our study for the future staging of festivals that are both sustainable and successful and the further development of this field of academic work.

## **Music festivals: connecting the sustainability agenda and the physical experience**

### ***The sustainability agenda***

The uptake of services that enhance the environmental performance of events has become quite prominent at camping music festivals (Hall, 2012) with some organisers competing to demonstrate the strength of their 'green' credentials (Mair and Laing, 2012; Zifkos, 2015). Suspicions have been raised about how these attempts may be as much about gaining a brand advantage (Wong et al., 2015) as about any deeply felt concerns about the impact of sizeable events that are sometimes staged in fragile rural ecosystems (Cierjacks, Behr, and Kowarik, 2012; Henderson and Musgrave, 2014). Nonetheless the link is certainly there, as indeed it always has been with festivals long providing a home for counter cultural thought regarding the value of current norms and the sustainability of human consumption (Sharpe, 2008).

One way of demonstrating these green credentials is through the overt promotion of more sustainable lifestyles. Gibson and Wong (2011) suggest that festivals already offer a space apart from everyday life that encourage people to reconsider their relationships with the natural environment. As such, they would seem to provide an excellent opportunity to target

those who are already receptive by promoting ‘environmental messages in a way that is fun, creative and experimental’ (Gibson and Wong, 2011, p. 98). However, it would also seem that campaigners hoping to recruit festival goers to the environmental cause (see, for example, Henderson and Musgrave, 2014; Mair and Laing, 2012) should proceed with some caution (Sharpe, 2008). This is because, for many attendees, festivals are explicitly about being away from their everyday pressures. It may therefore be better quietly to encourage care for, and contemplation of, the natural environment at the festival instead of forcing overt political agendas into events that may be attractive precisely because they seem far removed from the everyday imperative to be an upstanding citizen (Foster in Lea, 2006; Sharpe, 2008).

Either way, what is notably absent across all of the literature on festival sustainability is more than a passing interest in how festivals already encourage attendees temporarily to live in less resource intense ways. Turning to the particular interests of this paper, no festival in Zifkos’ recent review (2015), for example, marks itself out as sustainable by virtue of how attendees will likely use less water than they otherwise would because personal washing facilities are either absent or harder to access at the festival. Yet, in view of how, in countries like the UK, everyday cleanliness practices are much more water intensive than they once were (Browne, 2015), how attendees respond to this aspect of the festival experience could be instructive in terms of understanding, and potentially influencing, current levels of water consumption.

### *The physical experience*

Although music festivals have more often been studied as a commercial opportunity than an embodied encounter (Bowen and Daniels, 2005; Browne, 2009; Anderton, 2008), qualitative studies have provided a number of insights into the lived experience of festivals (Holloway, Brown and Shipway, 2010). One of the most common features explored in this research is how the enjoyment of attendance partly stems from how festivals present an ‘escape’ from, or ‘alternative’ to, the apparent drudgery of everyday life, often drawing on historical accounts of how festivals have long served as an effective means of maintaining the societal status quo by providing a ‘safety valve’ (Anderton, 2008) through which revellers are allowed temporarily to subvert wider social norms (Getz, 2010). As such, Browne (2009) discusses how a women-only festival in the US can be exciting, but is also something for which respondents must feel they ‘are ready’ and Jaimangal-Jones et al. (2010) describe how the

appeal of the music festival derives from the 'liminal' space of unexpected and unusual experiences that it offers. O'Rourke et al. (2011) similarly talk of the festival as a place that is explicitly apart from the pressures of everyday existence as rural locations help attendees to shake off the normalising constraints of demonstrable urban civility (see also Flinn and Frew, 2014). In this way, festival going can be linked to a broader nostalgia for 'simpler' living that may particularly influence how the middle classes make use of their leisure time (McKay, 1994). Finally, although we don't know how long this is imagined to last, Purdue et al. (1997) also position the music festival as a kind of 'cultural laboratory' in which predominant societal norms are temporarily scrambled in the shaping of experimental identities.

How much of this applies to personal washing is unclear. Surprisingly, in view of how the outdoor festival is both celebrated and vilified in the mass media when heavy rainfall encourages attendees to revel in muddy conditions (Anderton, 2008), how people cope with an environment that one could easily label 'dirty' has been only tangentially addressed in terms of how this features in the apparent 'escape' of the festival. Though some respondents in Browne's (2009) study talk positively about communal showers representing an enjoyable return to 'the land', others determinedly downplay the physical conditions in discussion with potential recruits for fear of deterring them. Regular festival attendees in New Zealand have also expressed a similar ambivalence since, for them, there is a fine line between mud adding to 'the memories' and the remembered disgust of 'walking in filth' (O'Rourke et al., 2011). In Denmark, Andersen (2013) notes a comparable contradiction. His study highlights the enjoyable communal experience of queuing together for showers. But he also points to how the festival 'liberates' people from 'norms of etiquette and decency' that are presumably partly why they are queuing in the first place. Lea (2006) meanwhile discusses how the appeal of festivals can stem from unusual embodied experiences, though her work focuses on massage tents more than the subversion of broader cleanliness norms. In short, the picture is currently mixed in terms of how festival attendees relate to personal washing. This is because there has been relatively little research on physical exposure to the potentially increasingly unfamiliar 'natures' found at the festival (Gibson and Wong, 2011). It is possible that the collective experience of festival environments might serve to create new social groupings united by an alternative sensory relationship with smell, sweat and dirt (Lowe, 2012).

Where the organisation of attendee washing does feature in the music festival literature is with regard to sufficient sanitation (Abubakar et al., 2012; Polkinghorne et al., 2013; Tam et al., 2012). This can be a pressing issue when some rural festivals involve the temporary installation of sizeable camp sites on otherwise functioning agricultural land (Crampin et al., 1999). Little is said here, however, about what attendees want in terms of washing facilities. This is surprising when, in countries like the UK, under the umbrella notion of ‘glamping’ (glamorous camping) a raft of new businesses have started to spring up in response to the apparent desires of some festival goers for easy access to luxury toilets, steaming hot tubs, and superior quality showers (Morley, 2016). Whilst water is clearly consumed in very many ways at the festival site (for drinking, for catering, for cleaning places as much as people), the arrival of these businesses suggested that the consumption associated with personal washing might be particularly on the rise.<sup>1</sup> This left us with questions about how these changes square up against the idea that festivals provide an escape from everyday routine partly facilitated by an enjoyable return to simpler outdoor living. Recent UK market research (UK Festivals Awards and Conference, 2016) has suggested a degree of attendee ambivalence about current festival washing practices. This study found that 2.8% of current festival goers felt that ‘getting back to the basics’ was one of the aspects they most enjoyed. But it also found that 8.1% felt the absence of toilets and showers was one of ‘their biggest gripes’. This therefore seemed like an interesting point in the history of UK festivals with the arrival of ‘glamping’ businesses hinting that wider norms of water intensive washing may currently be creeping into the festival site. It was this possibility that provided the impetus to our study.

### **Studying the contextual dependence of resource consuming conventions**

Our study drew on a wider academic interest in changing norms of personal washing and self-presentation and their implications for water demand. We see this work as underpinned by two key contentions. The first is that, despite recent efficiency improvements, Western societies are still using more water than they often have in the past in keeping human bodies and the clothes that encase them sufficiently ‘clean’. Though once a rather exotic experience, regular showering is now commonplace (Hand et al., 2005, Browne et al. 2014). Similarly, though clothes were once washed relatively infrequently, many people now routinely put

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<sup>1</sup> For the moment, however, per capita water consumption remains much lower at the festival. One attempt at benchmarking festival consumption put the average per head consumption at an event the size of the Glastonbury Festival (the largest UK camping music festival with roughly 730,000 attendees) at around 13.69 litres per day (Denny, no date). This is significantly below the UK average of roughly 150 litres per day.

them into the laundry basket after only one or two wears (Jack, 2013; 2017). The second is that everyday water consumption is not best thought of as a matter of personal choice. Whilst many conservation initiatives do appeal to the apparent ethical or economic reasoning of individuals, the argument here is that how societies come to use water is better understood as an outcome of how various cultural and infrastructural circumstances serve to shape our shared apprehensions of how everyday life should be organised (Pullinger et al. 2013, Shove, 2003). Viewed in this way, the normalisation of significant everyday washing is troubling because of its role in ‘entrenching and establishing new benchmarks for smell, hygiene and presentability’ (Strengers, 2009: 8) that will likely be difficult to unsettle afterwards.

This work belongs to a broader social theoretical attempt to embed human action, and its associated resource use, more fully in its material and social circumstances (see, for example, Shove and Spurling, 2013). The core argument here is that, whilst positioning what people do as an outcome of their personal desires is popular both in research and wider society, the reality is that what they want to do often depends on the situation at hand. In terms of sustainable travel and tourism, this work has already started to garner some interest. Through these means, a young person’s choice to take a ‘gap year’ has been recast as a product of how teachers, parents, and previous participants conspire to create a context in which doing so is recognised as an attractive option (Luzecka, 2016). Then there is Hui’s (2013) leisure subcultures study, which reveals how, far from a simple matter of being enjoyable, more travel can also be a requirement of fuller participation in identified hobby communities. These ‘theories of social practice’ have also been used to highlight how the smaller ecological footprints of backpackers may have little to do with any commitment to the cause and be much more about the effective embrace of a recognised backpacker lifestyle (Iaquinto, 2015). They have also informed analysis of how changing normative and infrastructural injunctions have served to compel today’s older Britons to holiday further afield than they ever have before (Fox et al, 2017). These studies are united in seeing the travel desires of particular groups, and the resource consumption entailed by acting upon them, as context dependent and dynamic. The logical corollary of their endeavours is that sustainability researchers should attempt to explore, and potentially influence, this dynamism.

Our study advances this body of work by looking at this dynamism in situ and over a comparatively short time scale. In other words, our study sought to extend this field of work by examining how desires can develop a matter of days in specific social and physical



contexts, rather than gradually evolving through broader processes of societal and technological transformation. Returning briefly to our empirical interest, relevant studies have explored the changing social organisation of dirt removal as the relationship between everyday life and water use has been seen to mutate in response to the arrival and institutionalisation of new sewerage structures (Marvin and Medd, 2006; Neves, 2004) and bathroom technologies (Hand at al 2005; Quitzau and Ropke, 2009). Such studies have particularly highlighted how certain infrastructures encourage unthinking consumption by making the extent of their water use increasingly invisible to those that inhabit them (Kaika, 2004; Sofoulis, 2005). Our study, by contrast, sought examine how site-specific ‘disruptions’ to the practices of everyday life can help us understand how norms of resource use change (e.g. Chappells et al., 2011; Trentmann, 2009). Our assumption was that the music festival would likely entail a relatively drastic reconfiguration of the personal washing practices that attendees were otherwise unthinkingly reproducing. This seemed particularly likely when many of today’s young people appear especially wedded to frequent showering (Browne et al., 2015; Gram-Hanssen, 2007, Stanes et al. 2015) and have been seen to display new levels of personal aversion to bodily secretions like sweat (Hitchings and Lee, 2008; Waite, 2014).

By starting with these concerns, our study took a rather different conceptual approach to that which has often been seen in relevant music festival research. A focus on how collectives develop conventions, instead of the apparently fixed preferences of individuals, is less common in the festivals literature. This literature, building as it often does on marketing approaches, can tend towards visitor segmentation in the hope of identifying how the seemingly specific needs of particular groups of customers are most effectively met (see, for example, Pegg and Patterson, 2010; Bowen and Daniels, 2005). By contrast, we were interested in whether, by providing certain facilities, festival organisers could be creating new visitor needs as much as catering to those that were assumed already to exist. Taking such a conceptual approach allowed us to recast the question of whether there should be more showers at the festival in terms that direct our attention to how ideas about how we want to wash are partly the outcome of how groups respond collectively to their circumstances.

## **Method**

Data was collected at two rural music festivals in the UK over the summer of 2013. The first was the ‘End of the Road’ (EOTR) - a 4-night ‘boutique’ camping festival aimed at a young

professional audience that took place in Wilshire and attracted 11,000 attendees. The second was 'Bestival' - a more mainstream event targeted at a younger audience. That also lasted 4 nights and attracted 60,000 attendees on the Isle of Wight. Both festivals were in Southern England and both were accessed relatively easily by public transport. Importantly for the present paper, the weather was mild at both festivals, with temperatures between 10-22 °C and little rain. This made for comparatively easy camping and a relative absence of mud. These festivals were chosen partly because of ease of access for the research team and partly because we wanted to explore whether processes of collaboratively adapting to an alternative washing context were common across two potentially quite different groups.

**Figure 1.** Living conditions at the studied festival sites – a typical Bestival camp area. Photo: removed for reviewing

As is common at camping music festivals, both were host to exhibition tents that promoted various sustainability initiatives including those focused on carbon reduction, recycling, and locally produced and organic food. More interesting for this paper, however, was the extent to which the cleanliness facilities available at these festivals went beyond the standard provision of a relatively small number of shower blocks with individual washing cubicles scattered across the festival site. Additional facilities were particularly present at Bestival with additional luxury toilets and hot tub services to which attendees were granted access on pay-by-use basis and 'Boutique' camping areas reserved for those who had paid in advance. These provided pre-erected tents, 'high-end' toilets, easy access to hot showers and dressing huts with a variety of personal 'pampering' facilities (hairdryers, mirrors etc.) that allowed a select group to prepare themselves for their return to the main festival after having showered. Nonetheless, although present to differing extents, we saw evidence at both festivals of the wider trend towards festival 'glamping' that provided the initial impetus to our study.

The same mixed-method approach involving observation, interviews and questionnaires was adopted at both festivals. Participants aged between 18 and 40<sup>2</sup> were approached randomly at both sites. To account for the daily rhythm of the festival, data collection generally began by 10am and was concluded by approximately 4pm each day. Those respondents who were willing then completed a questionnaire. In total, 265 complete, usable questionnaires were collected on site (128 from EOTR and 137 from Bestival) with the questionnaire being organised into three main sections: 1) usual cleaning regimes before attending the festival; 2) coping with dirt and restricted washing facilities at the festival and; 3) possible changes to their cleaning regimes and ways of relating to cleanliness afterwards. These were then used to recruit participants for deeper, semi-structured field interviews of approximately half an hour.

All three authors and a research associate undertook a similar number of interviews at each festival. In total, thirty interviews were recorded at each festival (N=60) with each participant being given a £10 voucher as recompense. These interviews adopted a relatively loose format as the interviewers drew on their own observations of festival life to encourage a relatively relaxed discussion of the festival experience. As part of our wider interest in the most effective means of staging useful talk about what are often otherwise relatively unthinking private practices (Hitchings, 2012, Browne, 2016), our assumption was that the disruption of the festival might have already prompted attendees to talk amongst themselves about their washing. Our task was therefore merely one of encouraging these conversations to also take place with us. In doing so, however, we paid particular attention to what their modes of response revealed about the degree to which our respondents found certain topics to be personally important (Hitchings, 2012) and how the strategic deployment of humour can help people negotiate notions of situationally (un)acceptable social conduct (Browne, 2016).

Though some background data was collected on individual respondents in terms of gender, age, current profession, and the number of times they had previously attended music festivals, we did not collect further information than this. This was partly because, conscious of how respondents might not want to give up too much of their festival time, we wanted to move quite quickly to questions of cleanliness and washing. But it was also partly because the explicit purpose of our study was to explore how the group, namely all of those attending the

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<sup>2</sup> The sample was restricted in an attempt to focus on the personal washing of younger UK populations who are both using more water than other groups in this respect (Pullinger et al., 2015) and who also predominate at UK music festivals (Mintel, 2010, 2015).

festival at hand, functioned as a whole. In this regard, our methodological and analytical strategy was also informed by our theoretical framing. Our overt aim was to understand and explore personal cleanliness as a matter of shared and situationally developing conventions instead of identifying how washing relationships vary according to some of the traditional social science analytical categories such as ethnicity, class and gender. There will no doubt be interesting variations in how different categories of festival goer relate to cleanliness and we do not claim here that this variation is not worth studying. However, we do not do so in this paper because, as we have already argued and as we will return to later on, a tendency to focus on variation can lead to a picture of the social world that may not always be either that accurate (in the sense that such a strategy can tend to overplay distinctions between groups) or helpful (in the sense that it can sometimes be better to explore how commonly experienced cultural processes take effect). On that matter, it is also worth noting that we did often observe certain changes in how festival goers related to personal washing over the festival lifetime were common across both of our sites. This field observation has further encouraged us to include data from both our two studied festivals interchangeably in this paper.

**Figure 2.** A context in which erstwhile strangers might start to discuss their festival washing: shower queues at the EOTR Festival Photo: removed for reviewing

Our mixed method approach aimed to use the survey exercise to generate an overview of how common certain actions and feelings related to festival washing were at each of these two events before building on that by using the interviews and observation to develop a fuller appreciation of how festival goers had come to undertake and understand their festival washing. During our time at each festival, all four researchers met each evening to discuss their interviews and identify effective lines of questioning for the next day. Once fieldwork was over, all interviews were fully transcribed and analysed using ‘Dedoose’ as an online coding platform particularly suited to team working. Potentially fruitful themes were identified early on at a two-day researcher meeting to establish analytical protocols. These were then explored across the entire qualitative dataset, with certain themes particularly shaping the account presented in this paper. Table 1 compares the English population and our sample. Notable is the higher proportion of females (although we had even splits across the genders for our interviews) and of young people (although only three years younger than the UK average for music festival attendees, Festival Awards, (2014).

## **Table 1: Our survey sample compared to the English population**

### **Summary of relevant quantitative results**

The aim of the survey work was, as stated above, to provide an overview of how respondents related to the festival experience in terms of personal washing. Multiple choice questions were combined with statement ranking exercises to give them the opportunity to select the answers that most closely aligned with their views. 79% of respondents indicated that they usually had at least 7 showers per week. Our sample of respondents cannot therefore be said to belong to an atypical group of festival goers with ways of personal washing that were significantly different to the broader UK norm (Pullinger et al., 2013). Yet despite the intensity of their showering in everyday life, 55% did not anticipate showering during their 3-4 days at the festival. Furthermore, during their preparations for the festival, only 20% expressed concern about the alternative washing regime they would find there (ranking being ‘bothered’ about being more dirty at the festival as a statement that captured their feeling well). This, however, is not to say that they did not prepare in terms of bringing cleanliness equipment. The most popular were toothbrushes and paste (98%) and deodorant (96%) and other popular items were baby wipes (81%), toilet paper (80%) and bath towels (77%). In view of how few survey respondents expected to shower at the festival, this finding suggests a curious situation, which we will attempt to explain later in our analysis, with many more of them bringing towels than subsequently using them to dry themselves after showering there.

After being presented with a range of options (Figure 3), respondents were asked to rank a series of statements on coping with the potential for being dirty at the festival. 54% said ‘these things are just part of the festival experience’ was the statement that most captured their view. This was the most popular response to this question. Beyond that, the picture was more mixed. Saying ‘better’ personal cleaning facilities would be preferable was second most popular answer at 13%. However, a broadly similar number also stated that they liked not having to think as much as they otherwise did about ‘keeping clean’ (10%). In this respect, our results were similar to those of the market research study discussed earlier.

**Figure 3. What statement most captures how you feel about dirt and cleanliness during this festival? – overview of those statements that were ranked highest.**

Despite many respondents both ‘thinking they were dirtier’ than usual at the festival (45% ranked this as a statement that captured their view well) and ‘feeling dirtier’ there (61% ranked this as a statement that captured their view well), a significant proportion also indicated that they were relatively untroubled by this. 50% participants ranked the ‘this bothers me’ statement at that which was least in line with their feelings about festival dirt and cleanliness. So though many ‘felt dirtier’, and many also thought they were objectively less clean at the festival, this was not something that, according to our interpretation of the overall survey dataset, represented a significant source of anxiety for our respondents.

**Figure 4. Looking Ahead to a Return to your Normal Everyday Life, which statement most effectively captures your feelings (5 – least captures; 1 – most captures)?**

Respondents were also asked to rank a series of statements regarding what they might take away from the festival in personal cleanliness terms. The results clearly indicated that respondents would not be taking current festival cleanliness practices back into everyday life, with 63% ranking the statement ‘I could easily keep going with how I do things at the festival and probably will’ as the statement which least captured their view. Yet 62% of respondents also ranked ‘this experience has made me aware of how easy it is to change routines but I will probably go back to my normal routine’ highly, even if 64% of them were in agreement that they ‘can’t wait’ to return to normal facilities. This data suggested to us that many of our survey respondents found that new ways of relating to personal washing were easy to embrace at the festival. But they were also quite happy to leave them behind afterwards.

Overall our interpretation of the quantitative results was that most respondents were willing to embrace an alternative festival cleanliness regime, with many thinking themselves unlikely to shower there and many being relatively sanguine about this prospect. Being more dirty – although recognised as quite a different state to that which many of them were evidently more familiar in everyday life – was deemed contextually unproblematic, partly because this was also recognised as a state that would end with the festival. Returning to our organising question, what do these results suggest about whether there should be more festival showers? Many seemed to have prepared without thinking for them, and some were certainly of the initial view that they would have liked to have seen more. Yet their routines of significant

personal washing were also quite easily left behind after arriving at the festival. This change was, however, short lived since these respondents were clear that they would return to these routines afterwards, irrespective of whether they enjoyed the festival alternative. In order to understand how this process took shape, we now turn to the qualitative dataset.

## **Qualitative results**

### ***1. Encountering an alternative***

30 interviews were conducted at each festival. The average respondent age was 26, with a stratified sample of 30 from each gender. Respondents were working in a range of sectors from education to office work. Many had some experience of musical festivals – with the average number of times they had previously attended camping festivals being 8. Interviews generally started with how respondents prepared beforehand, before moving to their current experience. In this respect, one striking aspect was the limited amount of advance thought that attendees had given to festival cleanliness. Responses like the below were rare:

‘I think that actually before you go to the festival, you think that's the last time I am going to use a proper toilet, have a real shower’ (Female, 25, 15 festivals)

Much more common were accounts of how packing for the festival involved putting their usual holiday items into a bag with little thought about how they would be used at the festival. As one respondent put it, she ‘packed some stuff, but didn’t make any special effort’ (Female 23, 1 Festival). There were some who took pride in the cleanliness adaptation skills they had acquired through repeated festival attendance (the strategic use of wet wipes, dry shampoos and other tricks). But in terms of washing, much more common were accounts of how, because they had approached the festival with little trepidation, most had done a relatively ‘standard’ cleanliness provisions pack, irrespective of what awaited them there.

Then a new relationship with washing developed. This process was, however, rarely discussed as a necessary, but unavoidable, descent into a temporary life of distasteful dirt. Rather it was much more often described in terms of a pleasurable realisation that usual standards could slip in this context as the idea of frequent washes and clothing changes suddenly seemed a ‘little bit strange and pretentious’ (Male, 35, 9 festivals). This helped us understand the many unused towels revealed by our quantitative results – items brought out of habit but ignored after discovering the ‘freedom to be dirty’ (Male, 19, 10 festivals).

But how exactly did those who hadn't thought a great deal about festival cleanliness beforehand, and who were generally using significant amounts of water in everyday washing, come to click into the festival alternative? This is what we explore next, paying particular attention to how certain social and infrastructural cues played into this process.

## ***2. Social cues and an emergent cleanliness culture***

Embracing this potentially more enjoyable relation between bodies and environments was not without its challenges. In this regard, the concerns expressed by our respondents were less about adhering to personally set standards, the disgust of sweat lingering on skin, or other senses of physical grubbiness. More frequently expressed were anxieties about potential condemnation from the collective. Based on the answers our respondents often reached for when talking about festival washing anxieties, social sanction was of greater concern than physiological sensation or sufficient hygiene. Though many respondents were unfazed by feeling dirty, there were worries about how they aligned with others in this regard. A new normal was emerging. But it came slowly, and it often depended on a close calibration between the cleanliness practices of respondents and those they observed around them.

Seeing others who were seemingly indifferent to their usual routines (particularly with regard to morning cleanliness) helped respondents through this transition. One described how 'they' (other festival goers) pushed through the expectation of a morning wash:

'But once you're past that sort of routine in the morning you start to get into the festival spirit. They may start with a couple of drinks or things and then get more relaxed and then they've forgotten about their routine' (Male, 34, 10 festivals)

Staying in fields of tents that blurred the boundaries between public and private also helped. For example, observing those in neighbouring tents start their day with only a brief face wash in the porch provided an immediate morning reassurance when you 'know you don't need to' [wash] but you also 'don't want to be mankier than everyone else' (Male, 21, 9 Festivals). Related to this was the pleasure of recovering a sense of 'shared humanity' (Male, 40, 30 Festivals) as others were seen waiting for toilets with toilet paper in their hands or quickly applying deodorant before rushing back to the music. Personal proximity and a degree of public access to otherwise private practices aided the emergence of a new cleanliness culture underwritten by the idea that, despite being required to adhere to certain standards elsewhere,



festival goers, as fundamentally simple ‘creatures’ (Male, 39, 4 Festivals), could still escape them. Crucially this was also a collective process which ‘since everyone is around each other, you don’t notice’ (Female, 23, 20 Festivals).

This transition was also aided by how people spoke of festival washing, both amongst themselves and to us. Those who preferred to maintain their usual washing routines ran the risk of undermining the festival escape in which people ‘liked the idea of the festival being a kind of leveller’ (Female, 30, 1 festival). Accordingly, when respondents admitted that they craved a festival shower, a confessional tone was sometimes adopted – as, for example, one respondent cautiously admitted to liking ‘the option’ of a ‘really quick shower’ (Female, 36, 2 Festivals). In this respect, proclaiming the pleasure of showers was socially unwelcome. More confidently expressed were declarations such as ‘no one has showers here!’ (Male, 23, 5 festivals). Significant personal washing was ‘not in the spirit of the thing [the festival]’ (Male, 39, 10 Festivals) and showering was only ‘secretly’ desired (Female, 34, 10 Festivals) since being seen to act on these desires was ‘breaking the rules’ (Female, 31, 1 Festival).

The biggest challenge to these fledgling cultures of enjoyable dirt was the aforementioned suggestion of ‘glamping’ areas reserved for those who had paid in advance for extra services and a cleaner experience. Though respondents who didn’t stay in these areas were often at pains to emphasise how they didn’t judge those who did (because to do so would undermine the idea of festivals representing a positive experience of collective communion), those who were more willing to condemn did so because the point of the festival was that ‘nobody’s fancier than anybody else’ (Female, 28, 10 Festivals). The idea here was that festival goers were ‘supposed to all be in the same boat’ (Male, 21, 9 Festivals), such that any departure from the new norm was unwelcome. However, it should also be said that equal disdain was reserved for those who were ‘rolling around in the filth’ (Female, 39, 4 Festivals) as those who spent too much time on personal presentation by treating the festival as a ‘fashion parade’ (Female, 23, 20 Festivals). There was a delicate balancing act here. Our respondents wanted to encourage a degree of cleanliness standard suspension without condemning those who, for whatever reason, were less willing to join them in that.

### ***3. Infrastructural cues and creatures of context***

A ‘holiday from hygiene’ (Female, 28, 12 Festivals) was therefore only possible through the establishment of a shared sense of the acceptability of standard suspension that came about

through the workings of various social cues. But it was also partly, as we now discuss, dependant on how the existing washing infrastructure played into this process:

‘We shared jokes with the tent next door about how it’s much nicer here [in the fenced off glamping area at Bestival], oh yes that is the way I’ll do it from now on. But some people said they wouldn’t go back, once you had a taste of the glam then you wouldn’t return. I mean when the facilities are there, you just use them and if other people are using them, you use them too’ (Male, 21, 9 Festivals).

As individual conversations with our respondents developed, an ambivalence about festival washing facilities became gradually apparent, both to them and to us. When we discussed in a relatively abstract way whether there should be more showers provided to festivalgoers, the answer was apparently quite straightforward and easily offered. In view of how tickets were expensive, and easy shower access were unthinkingly taken to be a positive thing irrespective of context, the answer given by almost all was an immediate ‘yes’. Why would they argue against this when showering, in everyday life at least, was understood by them as necessary, pleasurable and important? Yet, as discussions gradually moved towards the enjoyment of escapism, collective communion, and opportunities for suspending wider social norms, their answers drifted towards the opposite position. At this point, respondents began to realise they had started to assume a different stance. Showers were evidently good, but going without them could also be good too – indeed going without them might, on further reflection, ‘even be part of the attraction of it’ [attending the festival] (Male, 32, 20 Festivals).

In this respect, the current absence of showers, provided an ‘excuse’ (Female, 36, 2 Festivals) for embracing an enjoyable bodily state they would not have experienced but for the apparent absence of showers. For example, a relatively common refrain in both festivals related to how individuals (both our respondents and others) had heard that showers were available but had also heard of the ‘massively long’ queues (Male, 20, 5 Festivals). This was, however, rarely expressed as a matter of genuine annoyance. Rather it seemed to justify not using them. In other words, it helped them in ‘collectively deciding that we weren’t going to [use the showers]’ (Male, 22, 12 Festivals). Repeated talk of shower queues helped respondents click into ‘a different mind-set’ (Female, 39, 4 Festivals) as the collective came to the conclusion that frequent festival showering was impractical, irrespective of whether it was desirable.

This connected to the above ‘no one showers here’ refrain which, as previously discussed, furnished attendees with a social sanction that aided the emergence of an alternative

cleanliness culture. Respondents said they would ‘automatically’ (Female, 30, 3 Festivals) use showers if they were present since ‘humans are lazy’ and ‘if it is in front of you, you use it’ (Female, 23, 20 Festivals). Yet it could also be enjoyable not to shower, if showers were not immediately present. This tension was most apparent in how one respondent effected the change towards less strict personal cleanliness. Towards the start of her festival experience she felt compelled to find the showers because, at that time, she naturally assumed she would use them just as she ‘did at home’. Yet, on discovering the queue, her reaction was more of relief than disappointment. Limited provision provided the excuse to embrace an ultimately more enjoyable ‘festival experience’ (Female, 29, 10 Festivals). In this way, our respondents emerged as ‘creatures of context’ as the cues associated with the limited provision of showers eased them into an enjoyably alternative relationship with washing.

#### ***4. Back to the expectations of everyday life***

But would the experience of less water intensive festival washing translate into less water intensive habits at home? The overall response from our respondents was that it wouldn’t. The festival was a space apart from reality, a more or less self-contained experience. Accordingly, irrespective of whether the emergent festival washing culture was more sustainable and enjoyable, the usual approach would immediately return. They had merely ‘pressed pause’ (Male 40, 6 Festivals) on normal life. Certainly narratives of ‘complete escape’ (Male, 40, 8 Festivals) were more common than those of transformation. Yet, in view of how some respondents said they had discovered, or perhaps returned to, a more enjoyable relationship with washing at the festival, we probed further about why this was. Whilst many, when reminded of their home facilities, would immediately light up with excitement about a return to frequent washing facilitated by easy access to the infrastructures that allowed this, a resignation about social expectations outside the festival was also apparent:

‘I don't even know what it is but I love it here. And then outside these gates, I'm back to boring work and actually I really like my job, but it's a little bit like, well the whole country is very routiney [routine focused]’ (Female, 25, 15 Festivals)

Indeed, and building on our earlier discussion of how certain patterns of talk helped define correct conduct, showing excitement about the first post-festival shower seemed to underline how the speaker was still a ‘proper person’ (Male, 38, 5 festivals) in everyday life. Many discussed a return to ‘the office’ as a context in which many festival goers spent much of their time and in which the new cleanliness norms discovered at the festival would be, at best,

frowned upon. Jokes were made about how poor hair care, potential odour, or a general sense of being dirty would be particularly unacceptable and especially uncomfortable there. When leaving the house without washing would be 'horrifying' at home (Female, 30, 0 Festivals), this horror was seemingly largely derived from the potential bad opinion of others - this anxiety was a 'cultural thing' (Female, 23, 0 Festivals). Indeed, some respondents spoke of how, a fear of social condemnation would arrive immediately after leaving the magical festival space as they suddenly found themselves on the train home alongside commuters who were palpably continuing to uphold the cleanliness standards of wider society.

So whilst a number of our respondents said that they might, on reflection, be personally happy to continue with the new fledgling cleanliness regimes that had started to emerge at the festival, they were clear that 'others wouldn't like it' if they did so (Female, 36, 7 Festivals). Our respondents were returning to a situation in which more washing was sometimes eagerly anticipated. But it was also, and perhaps more fundamentally, expected. Though their broader everyday lives were, some thought, now too 'removed' from the physical and embodied reality of the human condition (Female, 31, 1 Festival) this was still the society to which they belonged. As one respondent put it, I 'may miss it (her festival cleanliness strategy) but I wouldn't change' (her usual washing practices) (Female, 23, 1 Festival).

## **Conclusions**

In view of how camping music festivals have been growing in popularity, some of these events have sought to gain competitive advantage by demonstrating their sustainability credentials. This has been either by showing themselves to be low impact or by promoting environmental lifestyles to attendees thought particularly receptive to such messages. Yet these ways of defining and promoting sustainability at the summer music festival have largely ignored how these events themselves can often serve as experiments in less resource intensive living. These are, for example, spaces in which attendees are compelled by the context to wash differently in pursuit of their personal cleanliness and self-presentation goals.

There are signs, however, that this may be changing since many UK organisers would appear to be of the view that offering a broader suite of washing possibilities than they often have in the past may be a good way of catering to some customers. Accordingly, in recent years at festival in the UK, we have seen the arrival of various new options including 'glamping'

areas that providing enhanced washing facilities nearer to the tents of those who have paid to stay within them. Based on the evidence that younger people who still predominate at the music festival are using more water in washing themselves than they ever have done before, providing such options would seem to make a lot of sense. Yet the argument for doing so also rests on a vision of attendees as a set of individuals with a series of relatively fixed preferences and expectations derived from their more general experience of everyday life.

There are other ways of defining the festival-goer. By contrast, this paper sought to explore how they responded to the circumstances of the festival as a collective. Drawing on broader cleanliness norm research that positions our ways of routinely using water as the product of the cultural and physical arrangements at hand, we sought to examine festival cleanliness practices as the outcome of a collaborative negotiation of a new set of social and infrastructural cues. Our quantitative results indicated that new ways of washing emerged relatively easily at our two festival sites. Our qualitative results then helped us to understand how responding to these cues permitted the temporary emergence of a new cleanliness culture. In so doing, what was particularly apparent was how washing desires, far from being predefined and personally cherished, were instead dynamic, partly defined by the actions of others, and contextually established in response to the situation at hand. Building on a growing interest in how the human desires that lead to resource consumption may be usefully recast as circumstantially produced we saw how, in two festivals in South England, people adapted to absent or uneven cleanliness infrastructures in ways that often resulted in an appreciation of the temporary license to do something different in personal cleanliness terms.

Over a short period of only 3-4 days, we saw the emergence of a collective of people characterised by less regulated, frequently dirtier, and often smellier bodies. This was despite the fact that this group was otherwise inclined to wash a lot in everyday life. Though this temporary suspension of cleanliness standards was unexpected for some, for many the process facilitated a return to a less controlled, almost less repressive, relation between human bodies and their environments. In this respect, altered personal washing regimes were much more than insignificantly mundane features of the current festival experience. Rather, our data suggested that the context-dependent cleanliness conventions that currently emerge at camping festivals represent an important means of coming together at the festival. We saw how there was a pleasure to be had in working together to affect an enjoyable escape from the demands of demonstrable urban civility. However, this was a matter of escape only. Though

existing research on the festival experience has been equivocal on whether this should be characterised as ‘transformation’ or temporary ‘escape’, our data suggest that, in cleanliness terms in the UK at least, the current experience is much more aligned with the latter.

We now return to the core question with which we set out: should there be more showers at the summer music festival? Our response is that, were we to define attendees in one way, providing more makes sense. If festival organisers understand their purpose to be one of meeting the assumed washing needs built into the physical infrastructures and cultural expectations of broader everyday life, this should logically improve the experience. It also makes sense in terms of catering to an imagined diversity of market segments in the context of an increasing commodified festival experience. Our data partly support a move towards increased provision since we found that, if more showers were provided, festival-goers would use them. Our respondents emerged as creatures of context such that, if familiar facilities were there, why wouldn't they use them? However, on closer inspection, our data also suggest something important could be lost in the process. Our analysis revealed respondents who were largely unfazed by the comparative lack of showers and, on reflection, considered that the provision of more cleanliness facilities might even discourage them from coming to enjoy a shared suspension of cleanliness standards. Furthermore, if, as we have done in this paper, we conceptualise sufficient cleanliness as a dynamic cultural benchmark that is collectively set, this could happen even if additional showering facilities were provided to only a select group of festival goers. This is because the emergent sense of enjoyable escape that we saw in our study partly rested upon those involved feeling secure in the knowledge that everyone around them was likely doing something similar in terms of personal washing.

We should, however, emphasise how the two festivals that we studied were not especially dirty in the sense that the weather was warm and sunny for both such that neither made for an excessively wet or muddy experience. Nonetheless there are still some lessons to be taken from this in terms of how future festivals are organised. Raising the availability and standards of cleanliness infrastructures (more showers and areas of comparatively luxurious camping with extra washing facilities) could feasibly, if we follow the implications of our findings through, make festivals both more resource intensive in terms of water use (when being sustainable may be a selling point for many attendees) and less enjoyable (since temporarily experiencing an alternative cleanliness culture may be an important part of the current festival escape). One positive strategy could therefore be to celebrate the combination of

environmental benefit and enjoyable escape associated with less festival showers and showering. Care would be need to be taken with this, however. Future festival organisers should not be too heavy handed when grafting environmental messages onto actions that are comparatively laudable in terms of water conservation but currently not often thought about in these terms (Hitchings et al. 2015). Organisers would also need to craft their messages quite sensitively such that potential attendees who shower a lot in everyday life are not immediately put off by the idea of suddenly stopping. Either way, marketing festivals as proudly ‘low water use’ in personal washing terms does hold some sustainability promise.

By contrast, the prospect of the festival sparking a broader sustainability transformation in the personal washing practices of attendees seems, based on this data produced in our study, comparatively bleak. Advocates of less water consuming lifestyles might take some comfort from the fact that the young people that we studied do not yet feel so wedded to frequent washing that a short period of abstinence was personally repellent. In this respect, our data suggest that a central focus for those wanting to encourage less resource consumptive cultures of cleanliness in everyday life should be on how social and infrastructural cues shape perceptions of social acceptability. But we can offer them little more than this in terms of the broader transformative effects of the festival washing experience as it currently stands. In everyday life, our respondents felt compelled to live up to perceived wider expectations in terms of personal cleanliness, and there was little appetite for challenging them after the festival. The broader lessons from this study are therefore rather related to how sustainable tourism is more generally promoted and studied. This is in terms of: 1. the assumptions that are made about visitors and 2. the means by which apparent preferences are researched:

**1. Catering to visitors when desires are recognised as dynamic.** With regard to the former, our argument is that festival organisers hoping to attract more visitors, along with tourism providers more generally, shouldn’t assume these visitors have predetermined requirements. They may come to develop them if they are increasingly cocooned from the challenges of experiencing anything that dips below the levels of service to which they are otherwise increasingly accustomed. However, as our data suggest, a pleasure can also be had from escaping the expectations produced by societal infrastructures that ironically only seek to please. There are many other tourism parallels we can think of here. One would be about limiting the use of air-conditioning in contexts where people have presumably gone to experience climates that are unusual for them. Another would be about engineering an

enjoyable escape from the social media to which people otherwise appear increasingly compelled to turn. Whilst such arguments for selling the sustainability and personal benefits of the unusual can be seen in a variety of contexts, our study adds particular weight to them when we recognise that, though the respondents in our study never set out to be dirty, they subsequently came to enjoy the temporary suspension of usual cleanliness standards.

**2. Studying the social world in sustainable tourism research.** With regard to the latter, our argument is that care should be taken about how human desires are defined and examined in the broader field of sustainable tourism research. Here we return to the research agenda we introduced earlier that conceptualises these desires as a product of their circumstances. Building on this vision, we conclude that, if we see visitors as a mass of individuals with a relatively established and easily expressed set of preferences, we will necessarily produce a particular picture of what they want. Our respondents, when approached in this way, generally had no hesitation in agreeing that more festival showers were welcome. But this may not be the most productive way of conceptualising them. When we examined them as a cultural group within which shared desires developed gradually in response to a series of context specific cues, the picture was rather different. Then we were able to explore the pleasures of collectively adapting to an unfamiliar context. How we conceive of the social worlds that we hope to understand and influence, and how we study particular sets of people as a consequence, clearly colours the conclusions that we draw. If we conduct our studies in one way, we could be unwittingly complicit in furthering an unsustainable vision of standards to be met and people to be pampered. Yet, if we design them in a way that is sensitive to group dynamics and how the context can kick in, we put ourselves in a position to identify some original strategies for increasing both the sustainability and enjoyment of events. We therefore end by arguing for further conversation between those who see human resource consumption as an outcome of context dependent conventions and those hoping to promote more sustainable norms of albeit temporary living to visitors at any number of attractions.

## **Acknowledgements**

To follow

## **References**



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