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SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN *EVENT MANAGEMENT*:
A CRITICAL COMMENTARY

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This critical commentary focuses on the development of research in *Event Management* on social sustainability in the context of events. Findings suggest that while there has been a plethora of articles published in the journal that touch on elements of what we understand to relate to social sustainability (e.g., resident impacts; sense of community, place, belonging, etc.) there are very few that have explicitly situated their work in the sustainability field. This means that it is somewhat difficult to pull together the various threads of disparate studies to comment on the evolution of research on events and social sustainability as a whole. There is considerable scope for articles published in *Event Management* to build on these growing efforts to think systematically and comprehensively about festivals and events through the lens of social sustainability.

Key words: Social sustainability; Community; Well-being

Introduction and Background

This article presents an overview of work on social sustainability published within *Event Management* since 2001. In doing so we seek to identify the changing themes, methodological developments, and approaches and through this suggest directions for further research within this important area.

There are many existing definitions of social sustainability, for example, "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission On Environment and Development, 1987, p. 41) is one of the most often used and, "development that leads to the harmonious evolution of society" (Gomaa & Sakr, 2015, p. 203), which is one of the broadest. However, an interesting picture emerges when examining the corpus of knowledge on events and social sustainability. We identified over 60 articles

published in *Event Management* between 2001 and 2023 that focus on topics we consider to fall under the umbrella of social sustainability. Many articles referred to "sustainability," "sustainable development," and related terms. However, only 5 of the 60 articles explicitly located themselves as contributing to the concept of social sustainability. Further, even when the concept of social sustainability was explicitly included, it was understood in various ways in these articles, as shown in Table 1. This highlights a significant issue with researching and examining social sustainability in that the term has not been widely used in the events literature, and where it has been used, there is no common definition.

Despite the lack of articles that explicitly addressed the concept of social sustainability, we argue that in fact a large number of studies have investigated issues that are closely related to social sustainability, and thus we included all those articles that focused on similar and parallel concepts (thus more than 60 articles in total). A plethora of concepts have been included: sense of community, sense of place, sense of belonging, social inclusion/exclusion, participation, diversity, and liveability. A definition that is commonly accepted and understood would arguably improve the rigor and application of social sustainability in the events context. A somewhat long but all-encompassing definition that could usefully be considered in future events research is that provided by Ross (2013):

Social sustainability is an ideal state of well-being which might be expected to occur when social, economic, and environmental interactions foster intergenerational equality and longitudinal equilibrium. That is, social sustainability refers to equality, well-being, and balance across quality-of-life indicators between sociocultural groups over time and from one generation to the next. It is an enduring state of reciprocal, non-exploitative relationships where social justice and peace are experienced in relation to achieving basic human needs and interests and resolving any conflicts which adversely impact on peoples' rights and needs. (p. 2245)

Ross' definition usefully highlights the necessity of longer lasting change (or stability) with a focus on inclusive well-being and quality of life. These are all pertinent within event studies where we are often seeking lasting positive social change via events.

Our overview of the social sustainability "state of play" is presented here first through a consideration of the methods and approaches taken, followed by a summary of the themes and trends identified within the articles, and finally, through a consideration of what we see as gaps, we suggest areas where further research could contribute.

Methodology, Approaches, and Limitations

In terms of methodology and approaches, the articles published in *Event Management* represent

Table 1

Definitions of Social Sustainability Within *Event Management* Articles

Author(s)	Understanding of Social Sustainability
Derrett (2003, p. 49)	"Communities seek to enhance the liveability quotient for their constituencies. They do this by encouraging local enterprise, serving the needs of residents, and promoting sustainable employment."
Brewster (2020, p. 614)	"Social sustainability can be achieved when the local population is actively engaged in the planning and decision-making process of event."
Whitford and Ruhanen (2013, p. 56)	"Five basic requirements that should be met for sustainable Indigenous development to progress, and these include 1) recognition of Indigenous diversity and difference, 2) a need for partnerships with communities, 3) realistic local and regional investments, 4) planning at the local and regional levels for sustainable outcomes, and 5) building local intercultural organizations and institutions and capabilities."[a]
Fiedler and Wickham (2022, p. 1194)	[Social sustainability refers to] "increased levels of inclusivity and diversity."
Stevenson (2023, p. 407)	[Social sustainability includes] "sense of community, social interaction, sense of place, social inclusion, and community participation."

Note. [a]Specific to the context of an Indigenous community.

an almost equal split between those taking a qualitative approach and those taking a quantitative approach. Additionally, there were a few mixed methods studies, conceptual works, and content analyses. This suggests that our knowledge of the concept of social sustainability is not heavily biased towards either qualitative or quantitative approaches, a strength of the body of work.

However, the same cannot be said for the location of most studies into events and social sustainability. The vast majority have come from the Western world, with only three countries (Australia, the UK, and Canada) representing over half of all articles on this topic (this relates both to the country of origin of the authors and the countries in which the empirical research was undertaken). European countries (including Spain, Sweden, Norway, and Cyprus) further add to the Western perspective that has dominated. Few articles have focused on social sustainability in Asian countries, South America, Africa, or the Pacific Islands. This represents both a significant problem and an opportunity for events researchers—a problem because we have very little knowledge as to whether the studies into events and social sustainability have relevance in non-Western contexts, but an opportunity as this is a clear research gap.

In the articles that have been published in *Event Management*, a variety of event types have been included. However, by far the most common event types are sport events (of all sizes), festivals, and community events. Some studies have touched on other event types, including mega-events, LGBTQI+ events, and even virtual events, but our knowledge to date has largely been gleaned from festivals and sporting events. Very few studies have taken an approach that involves studying more than one type of event; in fact, a substantial majority of the articles we examined have taken a case study approach, collecting and analyzing data from one event. This represents another potential problem, in that our knowledge of the contribution of events to social sustainability is largely derived from studies of individual events, with potentially little generalizability across event types.

A review of the acknowledged limitations of published articles can be a very interesting and insightful way to consider the body of knowledge. One unexpected realization is that a small number of articles did not acknowledge study limitations at all; however, the vast majority of articles covered two or three limitations, some in considerable detail. Given that the vast majority of articles were empirical in nature it is not a surprise to realize that without exception, the limitations discussed related to some aspect of research design. Very strong similarities were evident among those limitations. For articles adopting qualitative methods, the most commonly mentioned limitations were those imposed by gathering data through a single case. Relying on only one case limits researchers to drawing conclusions about one kind of event, one kind of place, and one kind of event context. The implications of this for transferring and generalizing knowledge and for building metadata were noted several times. Within the context of single case studies, a frequently acknowledged shortcoming was the focus on just one, or a small number of stakeholders, at the expense of others (e.g., studying management perspectives to the exclusion of those of participants). Additionally, the difficulties experienced in gathering data because of problems related to the sampling frame, language, or literacy issues, or researcher positionality were mentioned. A very small number of researchers adopted mixed methods to try to overcome these issues, yet here too limitations related to, for example, sampling were noted. The inability to make generalizations about festivals and events is hugely complicated by the fact that these activities are so varied in size, scale, focus, intent, organization, governance, and funding structures. Addressing this issue clearly presents an opportunity for future research, yet capturing all the complexities at issue is a real challenge. A small number of articles noted the need for studies to adopt comparative approaches including cross-national perspectives and this would seem to be a promising suggestion.

As already noted, the methodological approaches adopted in the collection's articles were fairly evenly spread across qualitative and quantitative domains. Among the latter, prevalent limitations related to the sampling frame and the issues that this generated. For example, if the residents studied were very diverse then they may have interpreted survey questions differently. Constraints associated with limited sample size and variation were also mentioned by many authors, as were problems with the kinds of measurement scales employed, issues related to the

timing of the data collection relative to the hosting of the event, and the lack of a longitudinal approach.

Overall, the limitations identified in the articles could be said to be quite technical and narrowly focused on the mechanisms of gathering data. Interestingly, there was little suggestion that the nature of the research topics treated in the articles—all social sustainability related—influenced the limitations discussed. Furthermore, rarely if ever did researchers discuss limitations or indeed future research possibilities in the context of the theoretical or conceptual framing of their articles. The conceptual framings proposed by the articles differed quite substantially with researchers drawing on a variety of ideas from disciplines including sociology, community development, and management. Critical reflections on such framings with a view to suggesting their future usefulness for teasing out research problems could be beneficial for enhancing this corpus of work. Furthermore, picking up on a problem introduced at the start of this review, very few articles problematized the fact that the overwhelming focus of knowledge production in this subfield is rooted in North American, Australasian, and UK contexts.

Themes and Trends

In reviewing the "social sustainability" state of play in *Event Management* it was helpful to identify themes, to explore how these had been addressed through the lens of social sustainability, and to reflect upon how these had developed over the last 20 years. The main themes can be loosely grouped around sense of community and belonging, sense of place, host community involvement, community development, social impact assessment, social capital, volunteering, well-being, and social change and activism. There is considerable overlap between these themes and not all inherently entail elements of social sustainability, although the articles we include here all have relevance to sustainability, albeit to differing degrees.

Within these broad themes there are considerable differences in how certain concepts are defined and then employed within the articles. For example, in the earlier articles there is considerable discussion of, and focus on, residents and the "host community" (e.g., Delamere et al., 2001; Derrett, 2003;

Fredline & Faulkner, 2001). These are often geographically determined in that the host community is defined as the residents within a, sometimes unstipulated, radius of the events. This might be the immediate vicinity of the event venue, or the wider town, region, or country. See, for example, Rogers and Anastasiadou's (2011) study of community participation in Edinburgh festivals. More recently, Jaeger and Mykletun (2013) considered geographical areas where there are innate cultural differences and considered the role of festivals in the development of both individual and collective identity. Similarly, Schulenkorf et al. (2011) considered how events might contribute to cohesion in areas of community conflict in Sri Lanka.

In other, mainly more recent, articles the term "community" is used more broadly and includes communities of practice or communities of interest. For example, Lee et al. (2016) looked at the serious sport community and how social identity is created through events, and Webster and Klaserner's (2019) article focused on events for creating a sense of support and belonging in the BDSM community. Generally, the articles that view communities more broadly than geographically based tend to look at social sustainability through belonging and identity whereas the articles that limit community to local residents tend to focus on participation and involvement.

In terms of social sustainability that moves beyond immediate and short-lived impacts the articles that take a community development approach are forging a new and interesting path. An example of this is Whitford and Ruhanen's (2013) work, which explored the role of festivals as a means of strengthening belonging for Australian Indigenous people as part of a community development program. This work fits well with Ross' (2013) definition of social sustainability "equality, well-being, and balance across quality-of-life indicators between sociocultural groups over time and from one generation to the next" (p. 2245). This suggests that events must create social benefits that last beyond the event in both time and space. We argue that for resident participation to add to social sustainability it should, therefore, result in new skills, continuing engagement, greater social connection, etc., rather than merely one-off volunteering or simply attendance.

Another theme that has continued is social impact measurement and assessment. The earlier

studies looked to develop quantitative methods to evaluate the social impacts and in turn the social sustainability of events (e.g., Delamere, 2001). This frequently involved scale validation and calls to create robust longitudinal methods for assessing attributable change (e.g., Wood, 2008; Woosnam et al., 2013). There is possibly little to add to this area now as theory of change models and qualitative evaluation have advanced quickly in other fields and are readily adapted to events (see Le Grange & Maas, 2023 for an innovative example of this within *Event Management*). However, aspects that are specific to events still have scope for further development; for example, Marques et al. (2021) usefully built upon the evaluation models to develop a scale for assessing social interaction.

A social capital approach has also been taken by several authors looking to evaluate the social sustainability credentials of events. Despite its quantitative origins social capital in events has been explored through largely qualitative methods (e.g., Fiedler & Wickham, 2022; Finkel, 2010; Greenwood & Fletcher, 2021) although Hallmann et al. (2023) recently took a quantitative approach in exploring the extent to which volunteering develops social capital.

Volunteerism has been a recurring area of interest within event management, although this does not always take a social sustainability approach. We have excluded articles where volunteer experience is not considered in terms of a lasting effect on the individual or community. However, there is growing interest in volunteers as a community (e.g., Fairley et al., 2016) and in the continued and repeated act of volunteering and its benefits. For example, Kim et al.'s (2010) study of volunteering and pride development, and Shipway et al.'s (2020) study of the legacy of Olympic Games volunteering.

Well-being in its many forms has appeared in more and more articles over the last 15 years reflecting global concerns (e.g., around mental health, physical activity, and social connection) and the role events can play in influencing well-being. Well-being is differently defined with most articles focusing on the concept of subjective well-being. For example, Chou et al. (2018) argued that festivalscapes can have a transformational impact on local residents' subjective well-being, and Walters and Venkatachalam (2022) discussed the importance of cultural events to the subjective well-being of minority communities.

Others use well-being more generally or relate well-being to the community (e.g., Azara et al., 2018). The term well-being seems to have replaced what was once more often referred to as "social or community benefits"; however, it also addresses the personal benefits that have been largely missing from earlier event impact research. There is, as with volunteering, work to be done in terms of research into smaller, regular events versus mega-events, and the well-being aspects of social sustainability.

Events and protest or social movements have been gaining greater interest in wider academia but, as yet, there appears to be little within *Event Management*. A notable exception to this is Ong and Goh's (2018) study of LGTBQ events in Singapore. Although critical of the case events' efficacy in bringing about major social change they presented a conceptual framework to evaluate the efficacy of using events as agents of social change.

The relatively new area of social entrepreneurship has begun to showcase how events can lead to transformational social change. Chen et al. (2023) discussed how private sector and community/charity partnerships can develop around events and bring about community development. Many events involve these types of partnerships and therefore a call to coalesce work in this area around the concept of social entrepreneurship should be beneficial in better understanding its role in social sustainability.

Within the themes discussed above it could be argued that there is an over emphasis on larger scale or mega-events. To some extent this limits a social sustainability approach that considers multiple smaller scale events. Indeed, mega-events and social sustainability appear to be at odds despite the increasing role of social legacy in the bidding and hosting process. Similarly, the focus has remained largely on sports events with fewer studies of art, music, cultural events. This lack of variation in size and type of event may well be limiting the meaningful discussion of events and social sustainability, which requires consideration of benefits that are maintained and developed over time for multiple stakeholders.

Future Research Directions

Advancing a body of knowledge on any subject matter requires critical reflection so as to identify existing gaps and possibilities for further research.

On a positive note, more attention has been given to future thinking than to identifying limitations, with the vast majority of articles making suggestions for future research. These suggestions tended to fit into two categories: proposals for addressing methodological limitations and ideas for new lines of thematic enquiry. It seemed that quantitative studies were more inclined to focus mostly on methodological matters when writing about future directions. The need to alter the sampling frame was mentioned several times (e.g., Lachance et al., 2021; Ziakas & Boukas, 2016). In articles dealing with sports events, for example, the need to reach cohorts of people not involved in the event was mentioned. Other suggestions were to improve construct validity, reconsider the timing of data collection entry points (how many years prior to an event should preevent data be gathered?), adopt a more longitudinal approach, and complement the enquiry with qualitative research. Articles with qualitative research designs also proposed methodological adaptations going forward. These usually involved suggestions for more fully capturing festival and event complexities by including more or other kinds of events or more or kinds of stakeholder groups (e.g., Brewster, 2020; Shipway et al., 2020).

Qualitative articles often focused on proposing new research thematics. Sometimes, researchers were working on well-studied topics and thinking through how that area could be further developed. For example, many articles dealt with community events, and some highlighted unexplored terrain like the role played by community events in diaspora contexts (Yu et al., 2022). Volunteerism is another well-studied area but one that still requires further consideration on a host of issues including the effectiveness of volunteer recruitment, the relationship between event volunteerism and established volunteer infrastructures and the complexities of volunteer experiences. Sense of community has been a key idea in this literature for a long time, and still researchers consider it important to continue researching how different kinds of events and differential involvement in events help build community. Other articles were pushing outwards from established subjects into themes that are as yet underresearched. For example, some of the articles on community festivals and events called for more inquiry into questions of individual

and community well-being (Stevenson, 2023). Still further articles advocated moving inquiries into different kinds of geographical and cultural contexts. One article called for more studies to be conducted in lower- and middle-income countries (Schulenkorf & Schlenker, 2017) and a few pointed to fruitful avenues of inquiry in events associated with Indigenous and ethnic communities (Whitford & Ruhanen, 2013). Very recently, an article put the spotlight on virtual events in research querying the relationship between events and social connectedness (Kitchen et al., 2023).

As established at the outset, this review has identified that while many contributors to *Event Management* are preoccupied with matters that are arguably intimately connected with social sustainability, the concept itself is very infrequently used. What's more, its relative absence is not noted by researchers in their suggestions for future research. This surely is a matter that merits investigation. Are the various thematics running through this body of work so disparate and/or so substantial in and of themselves that researchers don't see a need to draw them together into a cohesive framing such as might be offered by social sustainability? Is it perhaps that the lack of coherency and consistency in conceptualizing and operationalizing social sustainability noted earlier means that researchers don't see any value in interpreting their specific thematics in line with this concept?

Outside of this journal there has been a growing interest in conceiving of the social dimensions of festivals and events through a social sustainability lens (Black, 2016; de Jong & Varley, 2018; McClinchey, 2019; Quinn, 2018). In 2021 the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* published a special issue addressing events and social sustainability. Edited by Smith and Mair (2021), the volume highlighted the need to develop a better understanding of how events contribute "to sustainable cities, communities and societies" (p. 1740). Given that other journals are publishing articles on events and social sustainability it is important that *Event Management* aims to keep pace with this evolving development in the literature.

Conclusion

In summary, while noting that a significant body of work that is situated in what we might broadly

term the field of social sustainability, this commentary has highlighted a lack of clear and workable definitions of social sustainability that should be addressed. A further gap uncovered was a dearth of studies in non-Western contexts. Conceiving of sustainability in terms of international and indeed global connectivities, mobilities, and also circularities could usefully encourage researchers to broaden the geographical base of their inquiries. Finally, this critique has identified a preponderance of articles focusing on case studies of individual events, often large sporting events, or music festivals, limiting our ability to generalize from this research. Thinking in terms of multiple cases and international comparisons in the context of qualitative work and internationally comparable data sets in respect of studies adopting quantitative approaches would be very valuable.

There is considerable scope for articles published in *Event Management* to overcome these gaps by thinking systematically and comprehensively about festivals and events through the lens of social sustainability. This would be of great value for both academic and practical purposes, underpinning the development of rigorous, empirical, and theoretically informed scholarly works and providing a foundation for evidence-based policy and practice to enhance the contribution of events to social sustainability.

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