

# HOW IMPORTANT IS SUSTAINABILITY FOR VISITORS OF ROCK AND POP FESTIVALS? INSIGHTS FROM A BROAD AUDIENCE ANALYSIS IN GERMANY

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**Abstract:** *The study examines the significance of sustainability among festival attendees (N = 3,503), revealing that a substantial majority of 90.4% do not consider it a primary factor in their festival experience. The analysis highlights demographic influences, indicating that factors such as age, gender, and educational background have minimal impact on the perceived importance of sustainability. The paper synthesizes these findings, concluding that sustainability is not a central aspect of the festival experience for most visitors. Why is this the case? The answer lies in a key aspect of the experience that guests seek at festivals: escapism. The study suggests that traditional approaches, such as strict regulations on non-sustainable practices, may be counterproductive. Instead, it advocates for the development of innovative nudging strategies that promote sustainable behaviors while preserving the escapist nature of festivals. By fostering a culture of engagement rather than prohibition, event organizers can enhance the integration of sustainability into the festival experience, ultimately encouraging more responsible participation among attendees.*

**Keywords:** *festivals, sustainability, escapism, nudging strategies*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to a 2010 study, large music festivals leave a CO<sub>2</sub> footprint on a single weekend that is equivalent to that of a small town for the whole year. (Bottrill et al., 2010) Depending on the type of festival and its organization, the main factors responsible for this high environmental impact are transport (including logistics), food and high-emission energy production. (Aßmann, 2022) Festivals therefore have a special role to play when it comes to environmental sustainability within the event industry. However, the interplay between the individual protagonists influencing the sustainability of a festival is complex.

Legislation has already intervened in individual areas: One example is the so-called 'plastic ban', which has been in force throughout the EU since 2021 and prohibits single-use plastic products such as disposable cutlery, tableware and plastic drinking straws. (Aßmann, 2022). However, the main responsibility for sustainability lies in the hands of festival organizers and festival visitors. While the former—supported by associations, agencies and non-profit organizations—are already taking more and more measures, festival guests remain

an uncontrollable factor in this equation. Why is this the case? The answer lies in a key aspect of the experience that guests seek at festivals: escapism. (Kirchner, 2011; Taylor, 2016). The term refers to the perceived escape from reality—or to put it simply: an escape from everyday life. Escapism manifests as actions of avoidance tactics, unconscious or conscious, through which societal objectives and accepted norms are rejected. (Stangl, 2024) This phenomenon suggests that even people who are strongly sustainability-oriented in their everyday lives do not place any increased value on sustainability when attending a festival. The following explanations examine this hypothesis on the basis of a survey of festival visitors in Germany.

## 2. QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

### 2.1 Survey procedure

For this study, data was subjected to a secondary analysis. The data was collected in 2023 as part of a study on the determinants of *festival loyalty* based on a quantitative investigation of visitor satisfaction and loyalty and the derivation of recommendations for action for rock and pop festivals in Germany. (Michel, 2024; Bauer et al., in print) The survey was conducted using an online questionnaire. The data collection took place from January 2, 2023 to February 24, 2023. The quantitative data analysis was carried out using SPSS. (Michel, 2024). A total of 6,411 people took part in the survey for this study. Of these, 2,514 people (39.21%) dropped out of the survey, therefore their responses could not be included in the data analysis. Of the remaining 3,897 participants, 394 people (10.11%) answered “never” to the introductory question “How often have you been to music festivals of the pop or rock genre in Germany?”. These 394 people therefore did not belong to the population described and defined above and were therefore not included in the data analysis. The evaluable sample size after adjustment therefore ultimately comprised  $N = 3503$ . (Michel, 2024). 35.5 % of respondents were male, 63.3 % female, 0.8 % identified as diverse and 0.4 % did not specify their gender. (Michel, 2024)

### 2.2 Survey instrument

The questionnaire, which was created for the original study, was in German only and consisted of a total of 58 items in a largely closed format. In order to answer the secondary analysis carried out here, item 5 (“Which aspects are particularly important to you at a festival?”, 26 predefined aspects and one free field) and the demographic questions of items 6 to 9 (gender, age, relationship status and highest level of education) are of particular interest. (Michel, 2024)

In addition, items 19 (agreement with the statement “The festival site was clean [there was no garbage lying around on the site]”), 31 (“Public transport to the festival site was sufficient”), 47 (“Waste disposal on the festival site was well organized”) and 48 (“At the festival, attention was visibly paid to sustainability [e.g. deposit system for cups, no single-use plastic]”) were also considered. (Michel, 2024)

From question 12 onwards, the items of the questionnaire were to be rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). When designing the questionnaire, the items were formulated exclusively positively in terms of language and content (Porst, 2014, pp. 106-107). (Michel, 2024)

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### **2.3 Method of secondary analysis of the survey**

For this secondary analysis, only descriptive statistical methods were used to describe the data in terms of its frequency distributions and to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relevant characteristics examined. The methods used include, in particular, the calculation of mean values and the presentation of cross-tabulations. As this is a secondary analysis, inferential statistical methods were deliberately avoided. (Gisske, 2021)

## **3. RESULTS**

### **3.1 Sustainability as an (un)important aspect**

This analysis (item 5, see above) sheds light on the importance festival fans attach to the aspect of sustainability when attending a festival. It also examines whether demographic differences such as age, gender, relationship status and level of education have an influence on the relevance of sustainability to the participants

#### ***3.1.1 Results on sustainability and gender distribution***

Only 9.6% of respondents stated that sustainability is important to them at a festival, while 90.4% did not consider this to be a priority. However, this does not necessarily mean that sustainability is completely irrelevant to the majority—nevertheless, the topic of sustainability was not important enough to mark it as one of the maximum six most important aspects of a festival in the survey.

The gender distribution shows that sustainability is considered important to 10.14% of women compared to 8.69% of men. Despite the slight difference between the genders, however, this result was not statistically significant. Respondents who indicated their gender as diverse and those who did not indicate their gender tended to find sustainability even less important, but these groups are so small overall that they are not meaningful here.

#### ***3.1.2 Differences between age groups***

A comparison of the age groups shows that Generation Y (millennials) and Generation Z in particular rated the aspect of sustainability as less important (92.24% and 89.42% respectively). Surprisingly, this proportion is lowest among Baby Boomers, although 83.33% of them also stated that they considered sustainability to be less important. At 86.26%, Generation X occupies a middle position within the groups. Overall, it can be observed that younger generations such as Gen Z, contrary to common assumptions about their higher environmental awareness, do not consider sustainability to be significantly more important than older generations.

#### ***3.1.3 Marital status and the importance of sustainability***

Marital status also has little influence on the prioritization of sustainability. 100% of widowed respondents, whose share of the total is extremely low (less than 1%), did not cite sustainability as an important factor. The relevance of this aspect is equally low for divorced people (94.47%; also less than 1% overall) and for participants in a relationship (91.45%). Married respondents (91.06%) and single respondents (89.3%) follow this trend, albeit to a lesser extent.

### ***3.1.4 Educational background and importance of sustainability***

An analysis of the respondents' level of education shows that the proportion of those who rate sustainability as important varies depending on their level of education, albeit only slightly. For example, 87.1% of participants with a bachelor's degree stated that sustainability was not particularly important to them, while this proportion was 95.45% for people with a doctorate and even 100% for people with a professorship. In contrast, the figures for the groups with secondary school and lower secondary school qualifications were 93.19% and 92.98% respectively, indicating that higher academic degrees do not necessarily contribute to greater environmental awareness.

### ***3.1.5 Discussion***

The results indicate that sustainability does not play a primary role for the majority of festival visitors. Interestingly, the data does not indicate a systematic increase in the importance of sustainability with younger generations or higher levels of education, which calls into question the assumption of a generally higher level of environmental awareness in these groups. These findings may suggest that a targeted nudging (Aßmann, 2022; Bär & Korrman, 2020; Bär et al., 2022) is needed from event organizers to make sustainability a more attractive and central aspect of the festival experience. Initiatives that communicate more conscious sustainability measures and actively involve the commitment of visitors could be effective approaches here.

## **3.2 Other aspects of sustainability and their significance for visitors**

In order to understand the priorities and preferences of festival visitors in more detail, they were asked in the survey (also item 5, see above) to rate various aspects of the festival experience according to their importance. The results show clear differences in the weighting of the factors of cleanliness and waste or transportation options. This provides information about which features are important for the positive experience of a festival and how important these aspects of sustainability are for visitors.

### ***3.2.1 Cleanliness of the premises***

The aspect of "cleanliness of the site", which includes the presence of garbage cans and the absence of litter lying around, was named as an important factor by 27.4% of respondents. This indicates that a certain group of festival-goers certainly value a well-kept and tidy environment, which is perceived as a pleasant part of the overall experience. However, 72.6% of respondents rated the cleanliness of the site as less important, suggesting that this factor is not a priority for the majority of participants.

### ***3.2.2 Transportation to the festival site***

The vast majority of respondents (94.2%) rated transportation to the festival site as unimportant and did not select it as a relevant factor. Only 5.8% of respondents stated that this aspect was important to them. This low priority could indicate that most visitors either do not see any problems with their journey as such—or they prefer alternative means of transportation. It is also possible that the accessibility aspect takes a back seat if the festival content and the on-site experience are the main motivation for attending the festival.

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### ***3.2.3 Importance of cleanliness and transportation options***

The evaluation shows that the preferences of festival visitors vary greatly with regard to the two sustainability factors of site cleanliness and transportation options. Overall, cleanliness and transportation options appear to be less important or at least less important than other factors.

### **3.3 Visitors' perception of sustainability measures**

Although aspects of sustainability are an increasingly discussed topic in event planning, the previous results indicate that this aspect does not play a primary role for the majority of festival visitors. The analysis of the perception of sustainability measures, cleanliness and transportation options by the visitors themselves (items 19, 31, 47 and 48, see above) can be contrasted with this.

#### ***3.3.1 Perception of sustainability measures***

Overall, 56.9% of respondents agreed or completely agreed with the statement that the festival they attended “visibly paid attention to sustainability”, while 26% were neutral and 17.1% disagreed (item 48). Although this indicates that sustainability measures such as a deposit system or the avoidance of single-use plastic are definitely perceived, the other results show that this is not a decisive factor for the majority of visitors (see above).

#### ***3.3.2 Cleanliness of the festival site***

The answers to the question on the perception of the actual cleanliness of the site (item 19) show a mixed picture: 28.8% agreed with the statement that the site was clean and only 8.1% completely agreed. A considerable 31.6% took a neutral stance, with 23.9% disagreeing and 7.7% strongly disagreeing. This indicates that although cleanliness is perceived, it is less important for the satisfaction and experience of many visitors than other quality features.

#### ***3.3.3 Availability of public transportation***

The perception of transportation availability (item 31) is mixed: 15.4% disagreed and 7.9% strongly disagreed on whether public transportation options to the festival were sufficient. A neutral position was taken by 43.9% of respondents. 19.5% agreed and 13.4% completely agreed. Transportation options and accessibility of the festival site were not a decisive factor for 94.2% of respondents. Only 5.8% of visitors rated this aspect as important (see above). This also shows that although many visitors are aware of this aspect, they consider it to be relatively irrelevant.

#### ***3.3.4 Evaluation of waste disposal***

The statement that waste disposal at the festival site was well organized (item 47) was completely disagreed with by 5.8% and disagreed with by 17.7%. 33.0% were neutral. 30.9% agreed with the statement and 12.6% completely agreed. This also shows that although waste disposal is perceived, its importance is not the focus of visitor interest (see above).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS ON THE NEED FOR NUDGING STRATEGIES

This study leads to the conclusion that sustainability is not a central aspect of the experience for the majority of festival visitors. Regardless of socio-demographic factors such as gender, age or level of education, it is clear that ecological considerations at festivals are of little to no importance to many participants. These results reflect the hypothesis mentioned in the introduction that festivals offer many people an opportunity to escape from everyday life, in which normative ideas and obligations—including the sustainability principles often internalized in everyday life—are consciously or unconsciously disregarded. The phenomenon of escapism therefore seems to play a central role in this context. (Bennett et al., 2016; Kirchner, 2011) Thus, festival organizers need a special approach to promote ecological behavior. As the relevance of sustainability for festival visitors is limited, a strategy based on restrictive measures, such as a comprehensive ban on non-sustainable products and practices, appears to have only limited success. A culture of prohibition aimed at strict adherence to sustainability measures would surely meet with resistance and reduce the willingness of visitors to comply with such regulations. (Aßmann, 2022) Instead, alternative strategies are needed to promote sustainable behavior at festivals without compromising the experience-oriented and escapist motivation of participants. One approach that can be used in this context is *nudging*. Nudging (Aßmann, 2022; Bär & Korrman, 2020; Bär et al., 2022) refers to subtle incentives that aim to steer people's behavior in a certain direction without explicitly forcing them to change their behavior. (Stangl, 2024) This approach stems from behavioral economics and could make it possible to integrate environmental measures without compromising the event experience. By gently 'nudging' visitors towards more sustainable choices, it could be possible to promote pro-ecological behaviors without visitors feeling coerced. (Aßmann, 2022)

The use of nudging methods is now well researched and has already shown positive results at many festivals. (Aßmann, 2022; Bär & Korrman, 2020; Bär et al., 2022) Even though this study does not focus on specific nudging strategies, the results nevertheless underline the relevance of such measures, as they could offer an effective way of influencing visitors' behavior in the long term without restricting their escapism. The results of this study make it clear that the sustainable design of festivals requires not only technical or organizational solutions, but also a deeper understanding of the motivations and needs of festival visitors. The central challenge is to promote sustainable behavior in such a way that it contributes to the value of the experience and does not contradict the intention of escaping everyday life. Research such as that by Aßmann (2022) and Bär (2022, 2020) investigated which nudging measures are particularly suitable for festival settings and how they can be used effectively to support environmental behavior change. For example, if vegan food is cheaper than non-vegan food, visitors may choose this more sustainable option. If a free train ticket is included in the festival ticket, more people may travel by public transport. (Aßmann, 2022)

In summary, the way to more sustainable festivals is not through restrictive measures, but rather through the targeted steering of behavior through positive incentives and subtle changes in event design. By integrating innovative nudging approaches, festival organizers could not only reduce their environmental impact, but also increase the long-term value of their events and thus create a broader awareness of sustainable action in the event industry. Or to put it in a nutshell: No sustainable festival without nudging.

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