**Collecting stories at a local festival to encourage the development of grassroots tourism in Bridgend**

This paper discusses the methodological approach to collecting locals’ stories via an interactive map during a combined arts festival as part of a wider project to develop grassroots-inspired destination packages as a route to post-Covid-19 sustainable tourism recovery throughout Wales.   The intention was to capture place-focused data from a cross-section of the local community through outreach work and events, during which locals were encouraged to tell their stories about the area and special places to visit to include specific grassroots elements such as heritage, culture, language, food and drink, and the natural environment.

In the light of post-pandemic recovery and increasingly competitive markets, destinations are seeking to differentiate themselves by creating sustainable competitive advantage over other destinations.  Consequently, many destinations are attempting to attract visitors through innovative packaging of destination characteristics, which are difficult to replicate in other destinations. This emphasises ‘difference’ which can counteract homogenisation of consumption spaces and provide areas with a vehicle to integrate cultural distinctiveness with economic development and community identity, creating a stronger ‘sense of place’ (Vanclay, 2008). This approach aligns to the UN Sustainable Development Goals on promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth; sustainable and resilient communities and fostering innovation.

The use of storytelling about tourist destinations increasingly influences traveller decision-making (Chronis, 2012; Mossberg, 2008). Stories carry a cultural and historical weight like no other when investigating a local area through the voices of the community and subsequently in building and communicating the brand of a destination (Youssef *et al.*, 2019).  This type of narrative research methodology also provides a way to include those who traditionally might have been excluded from research and highlights how individuals shape and are shaped by their culture and society (Hendry, 2007). It could be argued that it is only through the telling of these stories that we can truly get to know about the ‘hidden gems’ within a location that can then be highlighted as authentic tourism attractions, services and products.

However, the unique epistemological interpretative approach of storytelling can present a methodological and ethical challenge as it requires a setting that allows for the creative mind to be at ease in order for the full script to ‘come alive’.  In contrast to the interview technique, which consists of narrative, which is then interpreted by the researcher, stories are simply what someone tells (Redwood, 1999), with little or no prompt and therefore it is vital that something within the environmental setting should allow for the unlocking of memory and imagination.  Festivals are environments that build a sense of community (Derrett, 2003) and are often explicitly connected to the destinations in which they take place (Jarman, 2018) therefore providing what seemed an ideal space to collect stories from local people for the research project.  The festival, located in Bridgend, South-East Wales, is small (up to 1000 attendees including staff, traders and volunteers) and localised with a theme of science and nature.  The activities at the festival range from folk music, children’s activities, debates and talks, predominantly staged by local groups, artisans, musicians and creatives.  The environment of the festival, as indicated by its name – “Between the Trees” – is somewhat magical and inherently natural which allows for people to be themselves and relax.

The aim was to collect data from a variety of stakeholders at the festival, including attendees, traders, exhibitors, speakers and volunteers. An interactive map was produced of the area of Bridgend on which people (attendees in particular) could place post-it notes of places that they thought had significant interest for people that were visiting the area. This action was intended to encourage people to tell stories about these places, once the purpose of the project had been explained by the researchers. Unstructured interviews were also arranged with some of the speakers, exhibitors and traders at the festival. These participants were recruited via the festival organisers who had some knowledge of the research aims and objectives, in line with Silverman’s (2013) observation that it is not uncommon for researchers to use their existing relationships and contacts for their research.

Positive results from the research indicated that the festival environment was ideal in some respects for people to open up and tell their individual stories.  However, it also presented some challenges. Although people would often have liked to stay for longer to extend and embellish their stories, the busy environment of the festival meant that sometimes this was not possible and therefore there was a need to follow-up following the event.   Additional challenges related to the ethics surrounding informed consent when asking people to tell stories, as the researchers discovered that spontaneity was key and that disturbing the flow to either request informed consent or permission to record caused difficulties. The paper explores these and further challenges and makes recommendations for use of this methodological approach within a festival environment.

**Keywords:** Storytelling; festivals; destinations; grassroots

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