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Tom Turner

University of North Carolina at Greensboro, tfturner@uncg.edu

Nancy Hodges

University of North Carolina at Greensboro, nancy_hodges@uncg.edu

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Americana Music Festivals:
An Ethnographic Exploration of the Experiential Consumptionscape

Tom Turner and Nancy Hodges, Ph.D., University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA

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Popular music festivals such as Coachella, Lollapalooza and Bonnaroo are pioneers of the expanding outdoor multi-day music festival phenomenon in the U.S. and reflective of the tremendous recent growth in music festivals, with current revenues exceeding \$4.3 billion (Parker, 2013). As part of this growing phenomenon, Americana music festivals are also enjoying increased popularity. Americana is a music genre that incorporates elements of various American origins, including country, rock, folk, bluegrass, and blues, resulting in a distinctive roots-oriented sound (Dutton, 2006). Lasting from two to five days, Americana music festivals are typically held outdoors in rural locations during the early spring through the late fall. Hosting an array of live music on multiple stages, interactive outdoor activities (e.g. rafting, mountain biking) and marketplaces, Americana music festivals provide a distinctive setting for exploring the topic of experiential consumption.

Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) posited that experiential consumption highlights the hedonic nature associated with consumption of products for the purposes of fun, fantasy, amusement, sensory stimulation and excitement. Moreover, Kozinets' (2002) research of the popular *Burning Man* art festival revealed how communal consumption practices emerge within a temporary, localized market space. Despite the growing popularity of music festivals, no studies have examined the consumption experience specifically within such contexts. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine Americana music festivals as a particular kind of experiential "consumptionscape" (Ger & Belk, 1996) whereby festivalgoers' consumption of goods and services take place in a hedonic festival atmosphere crafted by festival organizers.

A qualitative, ethnographic framework was employed that allowed for a deeper understanding to evolve through the experiences of festival consumers (Van Maanen, 1982). Fieldwork was conducted at eleven Americana music festivals in the Southeastern United States that ranged in size from 800 attendees per day at the smallest festival to over 30,000 per day at the largest festival. A total of 33 days was spent in the field gathering participant observations, field interviews, and in-depth interviews with festivalgoers, festival organizers, and marketplace vendors. Data collection resulted in over 300 hours of observation, 53 interviews, and 400 photographs. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 65 and spanned a variety of occupations, including college students, entrepreneurs, musicians, retirees, teachers and other professionals. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed alongside field observations and photographs to reveal four emergent themes: *alternative artisan retail, mobile entrepreneurs, the duration effect, and consuming the experience*.

Alternative artisan retail describes a festival marketplace that offers a variety of artisan clothing and accessories including batik shirts, tie-dyed apparel, jewelry, leather goods, and custom hats. Handcrafted goods, organic materials and local products are promoted and sold in

temporary open bazaars interspersed among the music stages. Many of the sellers are *mobile entrepreneurs* traveling throughout the festival ‘season’ to earn a living. The unique and temporary market spaces function as an essential part of the overall festival consumptionscape, and festivalgoers seek to interact face-to-face with vendors. Participants talked about being motivated by the *duration effect*. That is, due to the short duration of the festival, the marketplace creates a sense of urgency to buy, especially for festival themed products and original items that may have limited availability due to small production quantities. Finally, although listening to live Americana music was a common underlying reason for attending the festivals, *consuming the experience* highlights the role of the marketplace in offering a means of symbolizing the overall festival experience for participants. Serving as symbols of the time spent at the festival enjoying the music and relaxing, much like other kinds of leisure travel (Iso-Ahola, 1982), t-shirts and other festival-related items were extremely popular among participants. These items were often observed to be the first to sell out, particularly at the larger festivals.

Findings of this study shed light on a particular consumption context that has not been examined in the literature on experiential consumption. Themes point to the importance of understanding experiential consumption behavior for creating a successful festival marketplace and for establishing lasting connections with the festival attendees. To extend the findings of this study more broadly, future research could establish the importance that consumers ascribe to the festival experience and product offerings as a means of developing an integrated festival marketing strategy. Similarly, given the impressive growth in festival attendance, future research could have practical implications for developing merchandising strategies that are designed to specifically target the festival consumer within the unique context of the festival marketplace.

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