

# **Structuring the Social Impact of an Extreme Music Festival: an Analysis of Hellfest's Strategic Trajectory**

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## **Abstract**

The cultural and creative industries (CCIs) are significant for their value generation, including profits, innovation, and employment. Among these, the music industry and more precisely the live music remains under-studied, even though it is crucial for artists' income and post-pandemic recovery. Live music is mainly structured by festivals that act as socio-technical spaces, fostering innovation and interactions between stakeholders inside spatial and temporal boundaries. Festivals contribute to the creative industries by structuring resource transactions, symbolic capital and social dynamics. But beyond economic contributions, festivals' survival and growth depend on the structuring of a social impact, which remains little studied. To address this, we rely on a longitudinal case study of a major French extreme music festival: the Hellfest Open Air. Using primary and secondary data, including 128 interviews and more than 15 years of observation, we show how the structuration of the festival' boundaries shape the social impact and how it is intertwined with the economic over the time. This research enhances the understanding of festivals' roles in creative industries and the complexities of analyzing social impact over time. Overall, we contribute to the CCIs and boundary work literatures and provide recommendations to festival organizers.

**Keywords:** cultural and creative industries, music festival, boundaries, Hellfest.

## **Introduction**

The cultural and creative industries (CCIs) are among those that generate the most value (profits, innovation, employment, etc.). Within the CCIs, the music industry has undergone the most transformations, due to the rise of digital technology, the emergence of new players disrupting the value chain and overturning existing power asymmetries, and, more recently, the COVID-19 crisis (Ruiz et al., 2021). With the global music market generating \$28.6 billion in 2023, interest in recorded music as a research topic has grown over the past decade. In contrast, live music remains under-studied despite its importance for artists (Zhang and Negus, 2021) and its role in the post-COVID renewal (Davis, 2021). Live music includes any performance by an artist in front of an audience at a specific location, notably at festivals (Pizzolitto, 2023).

Recurring events such as festivals are a major source of live music. They play a crucial role in shaping the creative industries and contemporary society (Jones et al., 2015). Festivals, as true sociotechnical strategic spaces, act as 'temporary marketplaces' (Bathelt et al., 2017), defining the social and temporal boundaries of exchanges among stakeholders, fostering innovation and change (Lampel and Meyer, 2008). They contribute to both the maintenance and evolution of organizational fields within the creative industries by structuring resource exchanges, developing social and power dynamics, and participating in the creation and maintenance of symbolic and cognitive capital (Schübler and Sydow, 2015). Additionally, they play a strategic role in their capacity to create, deliver, and capture value during and beyond the festival's temporality (Wilson et al., 2017), thereby establishing a direct link with consumers and significantly contributing to the economic performance of local markets (Jackson et al., 2005).

However, beyond their economic impact, the survival and long-term growth of festivals also depend on structuring a social impact (Van Winkle and Woosnam, 2014). As spaces for exchange, festivals connect different groups of stakeholders and attendees by creating a sense of belonging to a community (ibid, 2014). In this perspective, the structuring of creative

industries by festivals demands the production of sociocultural and community outcomes (Organ et al., 2015; Vestrum, 2014). Yet, the literature remains limited in understanding *how a festival can structure such social impact*, especially in the long term (Wilson et al., 2017).

To address this question, we propose a longitudinal case study based on Hellfest Open Air, one of the most important extreme music (punk, rock, metal) festivals in the world. Organized since 2006 in Clisson (near Nantes, France) by Hellfest Productions, the festival has brought together over 200,000 festival-goers for more than 5 years across 4 days. We rely on multiple primary data sources (observations conducted over 15 years, 128 semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders—artists, organizers, media, festival-goers, partners, etc.) and secondary data. We highlight the structuring and evolution of the festival's social impact on different stakeholders, involving an analysis of effects over time. Our findings show that (1) the social impact of Hellfest depends on the structure of the festival's boundaries, (2) the social impact of the festival is linked to the economic impact, with both being intertwined in a lifecycle, and (3) as Hellfest opens its boundaries more and more, it restructures the social impact of the festival. Our findings contribute to reinforcing the structuring role of festivals within creative industries and fill gaps in the literature concerning the measurement of social impact and understanding the festival evolution process (Wilson et al., 2017).

This chapter first presents our theoretical framework, drawing on literature about festivals and boundary work. Next, we describe our unique case, Hellfest, and detail our methods. In the third section, we present our findings. Finally, we propose a discussion to highlight our contributions, limitations, and future avenues.

## 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 1.1. FESTIVALS AS KEY ECOSYSTEMS OF CCIs

The cultural and creative industries (CCI) are experiencing a rapid socio-economic boom. They encompass fashion and design, cinema and audiovisual, music and performing arts, visual arts and lifestyle, publishing, and video games. As a flagship sector of the French economy, CCIs represented €110 million, or 5% of the gross domestic product, and 1.7 million jobs in France in 2021 (BpiFrance, 2021[1]). CCIs, more than other industries, are structured around recurring events such as festivals (Jones et al., 2015), especially as they configure the field to which they belong (Schüßler and Sydow, 2015). A festival is an “*event, a social phenomenon, encountered all human cultures.*” (Falassi, 1987: 1). Festivals are structuring spaces that contribute both to the maintenance and evolution of organizational fields within the CCIs by organizing resource exchanges within spatial and temporal boundaries, developing social and power dynamics, and participating in the creation and maintenance of symbolic and cognitive capital (Schüßler and Sydow, 2015). They also play a strategic role in their capacity to create, deliver, and capture value during and beyond the festival's duration (Wilson et al., 2017). By fostering innovation and change, they contribute to the industry's growth and the social and economic dynamics of territories by connecting consumers to cultural products (EY, 2021<sup>1</sup>).

Festivals are thus complex organizations that must simultaneously structure a business logic and a community logic to produce local and global effects (Ruiz and Gandia, 2023). This makes festivals a form of ecosystem, or in other words a “*community of organizations, institutions, and individuals that impact the enterprise as well as the enterprise's customers and suppliers.*” (Teece, 2007: 1325). According Adner (2017: 40), an ecosystem is also defined by “*the alignment structure of the multilateral set of partners that need to interact in order for a focal*

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<sup>1</sup> Source: [Panorama européen des industries culturelles et créatives – édition 2021 | EY - France](#)

*value proposition to materialize*". Indeed, festivals gathered various stakeholders (Larson et al., 2015) such as artists and artists booking agencies, employees and volunteers, food and beverage providers, government agencies, local authorities, media, sponsors, suppliers, tourism traders and organizations, (etc.) who working together to co-produce an experience (Fernandes and Krolikowska, 2023). The literature also pointed out the importance of festival-goers, representing the audience, a *"homogeneous and unified group of readers, listeners, viewers of a work or a performance"* (Détrez, 2020: 97).

In this ecosystem perspective, a festival must generate an economic and social impact at both local and global levels. At the economic level, literature often emphasizes the local economic impact of festivals, particularly in terms of tourism (Skandalis et al., 2024). There is also an interdependent relationship with territories benefit economically from the direct and indirect impacts of the festival (Finkell and Platt, 2020). Recent works addresses how festivals adapt to emerging technologies, incorporating online streaming, social media, and other platforms to reach a wider audience and maintain economic survival (Shipman and Vogel, 2024), especially since the COVID-19 crisis (Davies, 2021). At the social level, research is rarer. Festivals must foster a sense of community to satisfy and retain participants and to engage stakeholders over the long term (Van Winkle and Woosnam, 2014). Their social impact is also evident at the local level: the festive dimension of the city is particularly constructed through the investment of social and symbolic capital by promoting an image, which leads to the phenomenon of the "star system" (Crozat and Fournier, 2005). While this research is instructive, it primarily focuses on measuring social impact as an outcome rather than understanding how this impact can be structured over time. Festivals operate within a temporal framework, with their recurring nature necessitating the organization of business and community logics within temporal and spatial boundaries (Lampel and Meyer, 2008). Although these two logics coexist, their articulation can

be complex, as economic imperatives can conflict with social objectives. Therefore, the question of structuring social impact is crucial, and we believe that the literature on boundary work can provide valuable insights into this phenomenon.

## **1.2. BOUNDARY WORK AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO STUDY THE STRUCTURING OF A FESTIVAL'S SOCIAL IMPACT**

The literature on boundaries has developed significantly over the past decade. Dumez and Jeunemaître (2010) remind us that the notion of boundaries has its origins in biology, quoting Cadenasso et al. (2003: 757): *"a boundary is the regulation of flows across heterogeneous space."* In social sciences, the concept of boundaries is studied from multiple perspectives. For example, in sociology, *"symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space."* (Lamont and Molnar, 2002: 168). In the management literature, boundaries have been studied to delineate fields or to shed light on boundary work, defined as *"purposeful individual and collective effort to influence the social, symbolic, material or temporal boundaries, demarcations and distinctions affecting groups, occupations and organizations."* (Langley et al., 2019: 2).

Boundary work is a highly heterogeneous field, as it can be applied to different levels of analysis: groups, occupations, organizations, competition, environments, and more. This heterogeneity has led to the development of various boundary typologies, making it challenging to create a unified framework. However, some common dimensions exist. First, boundary work is often restricted to the spatio-temporal dimension, which describes a specific space and temporality such as experimental spaces (e.g. Bucher and Langley, 2016), field-configuring events (e.g. Thiel and Grabher, 2015), distributed teams (e.g. Cummings et al., 2009) or projects (e.g. Stjerne and Svejenova, 2016). Spatial delimitation can also refer to structural boundaries based on physical and material demarcations (e.g., Hernes, 2004), and more recently, even

virtual ones. Typologies often share social and symbolic boundaries, which can be combined, as the boundaries between individuals and social groups are typically reinforced by specific symbolism and identity (e.g., Lamont and Molnár, 2002). When it comes to studying boundary work within organizational contexts, the commonly accepted typology proposed by Santos and Eisenhardt (2005) suggest considering: (1) efficiency, with a *"legal-ownership view of atomistic boundary decisions"*; (2) power, which emphasizes *"the sphere of influence of the organization"*; (3) competence, i.e. *"the resource portfolio and its related configuration"*; and (4) identity, i.e., *"the often unconscious mindset by which organizational members understand 'who we are.'"*. However, this typology remains limited to the internal view of a single organization and is ill-suited to delineating the contours of more complex organizations, such as festivals. In this context, general boundaries shared by existing typologies are preferred. Therefore, we include spatial, temporal, structural, social, and symbolic boundaries, and we also add virtual boundaries, which have intensified since the COVID-19 crisis (Davies, 2021).

If the festival is primarily represented by a space (Jamieson, 2004), this space is conceived, lived, and perceived by social actors (Lefebvre, 1974) in a specific temporality. The festival is thus a hybrid space, experienced across multiple dimensions (De Molli et al., 2020), whose boundaries extends not only to spatial-temporal boundaries but also to social, symbolic and even virtual boundaries (Gandia and Rüling (2022). It is also a vector of exchange, connecting different groups of stakeholders and attendees by creating a sense of belonging to a community (Van Winkle and Woosnam, 2014). The structuring power of a festival depends not only on its economic results, but also on the production of sociocultural and community outcomes (Organ et al., 2015; Vestrum, 2014) in the form of a social impact. In our view, understanding this impact and how it is structured over time cannot be reduced to a study of direct and indirect social outcomes, as this does not address the "how" question. Analyzing the structuring of an impact requires us to consider a number of dimensions that boundary work can provide. By

examining the spatial, temporal, social, structural, symbolic, and virtual boundaries of a festival, we believe it is possible to understand how the impact is created/produced, where it is created (space), when it is created (time), with whom it is created (social), by what means it is created (structural/virtual), and for what reason it is created (symbolic).

## **II. METHODS**

Our chapter relies on a unique study case, aiming to delve deeply into the intricacies of the individual case to uncover profound insights (Stake, 1995). of a major French music festival: Hellfest. This section presents (1) the case of Hellfest and (3) data collection and analysis.

### **2.1. CASE STUDY PRESENTATION**

Hellfest (or Hellfest Open Air Festival) is an extreme music festival featuring genres such as hard rock, heavy metal, death metal, black metal, punk, and more. Co-founded by Ben Barbaud and Yoann Le Nevé, the festival is organized by Hellfest Productions, a non-profit organization. Since its inception in 2006, Hellfest has been held annually at the end of June in Clisson, a town with nearly 7,500 residents in the Loire-Atlantique region of France.

Hellfest succeeded Furyfest, initially created by Ben Barbaud in 2002. It has grown to become one of France's largest and most attended festivals, attracting over 60,000 festival-goers per day. Since 2014, the festival has consistently sold out, with all passes being sold quickly, often without announcing any lineup details beforehand. For example, passes for the 2024 edition sold out within 30 minutes of release. Like many events, Hellfest faced cancellations due to the COVID-19 crisis, leading to the cancellation of both the 2020 and 2021 editions. The festival made a triumphant return in 2022 with a special edition spanning two consecutive weekends, accommodating a total of 420,000 festival-goers. In 2023, Hellfest resumed its regular format



with a four-day edition, drawing in 240,000 festival-goers. Table 1 gives an overview of the festival's trajectory.

**Table 1: temporal phases of the evolution of Hellfest**

Phases		Contributions	Effects
<b>FuryFest (Analepsis)</b>	Prologue : Furyfest	First experience of Ben Barbaud and some founders of the CLS CREW association (first organizing structure) First partnerships: Eastpack, Rock Sound magazine, Hard'n'Heavy magazine, Nuclear Blast, Century Media, FNAC A festival that was born in Clisson (44), moved to Rezé (44), then to Le Mans (72)	Development of a metal festival in France, which ended in a partnership failure in 2005
<b>Phase 1 : Initialization of Hellfest 2006 to 2009</b>	Hellfest : beginning	Birth of the Hellfest festival project in the town of Clisson (connected to the territory of its founder Ben Barbaud), Experimentation with the Champ Louet site (Clisson), consisting of a field, a gymnasium and locker rooms. Development of the site and with the local network (vineyards and camping, bars run by locals, interactions with the town, residents, and representatives - town hall)	Development of a festival in a rural area, despite protests from local Catholic movements. First form of acceptance by the locals, development of a 'festival-goers' welcome.
<b>Phase 2 Development 2009 to 2011</b>	Increase	Optimization of the Champ Louet site, economic and territorial development, first economic balance of the festival from 2010, development of the Hellfest forum (very active). Tribute to Patrick Roy in 2011, first fireworks display	Festival in development, optimization of accommodations: prefabricated units for artists, and of festival-goer services, toilets, showers, development of the extreme market.
<b>Phase 3 Consolidation and Renewal: New Site and Opening 2012 to 2014</b>	New site and opening	Change of site (across the street), due to the old site being used for a high school. Development of the festival's iconography: structures on the site, roundabout with a giant guitar (2014), Clisson Rock City inscription at the festival entrance (2014), connection to the territory with the Kingdom of Muscadet (2013), site gradually becoming open to the public year-round, Ferris wheel initiated in 2014.	First SOLD OUT edition in 2014, development of a strong local economy (temporary shops in town, stands outside the festival, start of the Leclerc Off festival).
<b>Phase 4 Optimization and Recognition 2015 to 2017</b>	Optimizing and recognition	Start of the Hellfest Off by E.Leclerc (2015). Mausoleum in tribute to Lemmy Kilmister (2016), creation of Hellfest Cult (2016), new permanent scenography (freight for stands).	Consolidation of structures and improvement of festival organization, development of the team and partnerships.

<b>Phase 5 Opening Beyond the Boundaries of Metal Culture 2018 to 2024</b>	Oustanding the metal culture	Improvement of structures, hospitality: new sculpture of Lemmy in 2023, stages and scenography, the most significant and present international bands, fireworks, 'attractions' in and out of Hellfest like the Hellfest Tour in 2022.	Transition from an offer meeting demand to a demand 7 times higher than the offer, leading to the disconnection of purists and the arrival of new audiences.
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Hellfest is divided into three main areas: Hellcity Square, a bustling village featuring bars, various stands, shops, and a small stage hosting amateur concerts and activities throughout the weekend; The Corner, another area with bars, stands, and a stage; and the concert area, accessed through the festival's iconic cathedral. This area houses six stages: two Mainstage (heavy metal), the Altar (death metal), the Temple (black metal), the Valley (stoner rock), and the Warzone (punk and hardcore). Each stage's music program caters to a distinct musical aesthetic, drawing audiences accordingly. Both Mainstage exclusively feature internationally renowned (and “most listened”) bands. Hellfest is organized by Hellfest Productions, employing 30 permanent staff across more than 8 departments (2023), marking a significant growth from its inception to become the French festival with the most year-round employees. The festival also engages 900 temporary employees, 150 contractors and decorators, 200 suppliers (including investors in the festival), and relies on 7,000 volunteers. During the festival, approximately 80 stands gather in the Extreme Market and Hellcity Square, offering a variety of products (clothing, music, jewelry and accessories, etc.)

## **2.2. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

Our chapter is based on a longitudinal study of Hellfest conducted since 2006. A significant amount of primary data - both qualitative and quantitative (see Table 2) - and secondary data has been collected (a hundred documents e.g. press articles, documents produced by Hellfest Productions, TV documentaries, books, etc.)

**Table 2: primary data collected**

<b>Qualitative data collected</b>	Semi-structured interviews	128 interviews conducted between 2006 and 2024	Members of Hellfest Productions Festival goers Bands Professionals of the industry
	Observations	What? The festival itself - the festival goers - the market of the festival - the impact on the town - mutation of Clisson.  Where? Hellfest / Clisson / “Agglomération Sèvre et Maine”  When? Each year since 2006	
	Participations	Restitution of several research studies over the years (e.g. “Conférence Hellstats 2023 : qui sont les festivaliers du Hellfest à Clisson ?”)  Participation in several projects with the festival (one of the authors co-curated an exhibition dedicated to Metal, in partnership with the festival; Writing and directing a documentary about audiences with disabilities, etc.)	
<b>Quantitative data collected</b>	Survey	A quantitative survey for festival goers is conducted in 2022 (officially supported by Hellfest)	13059 respondents

Regarding the qualitative primary data, most of the 128 interviews and observation notes have been transcribed and analyzed using the iterative content analysis method (Miles and Huberman, 2003). This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the case and its trajectory. The longitudinal analysis of these data followed two methodological principles. Firstly, we applied Pettigrew's (1992) framework, emphasizing dynamic, contextual, and longitudinal insights. Secondly, to retrospectively compare these data, we followed recommendations of Geoffray et al. (2012), fostering dialogue among researchers to enrich conceptual discussions while maintaining sensitivity to the case's contextual nuances.

### III. FINDINGS

By studying Hellfest Open Air, we show that (1) the social impact of Hellfest depends on the structure of the festival's boundaries, (2) the social impact of the festival is linked to the economic impact, and both are intertwined in a lifecycle, and (3) opening up Hellfest's boundaries restructures its social impact over time.

### **3.1. THE SOCIAL IMPACT DEPENDS ON THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOUNDARIES**

Our findings demonstrate that the social impact depends on the structuring of spatial, temporal, social, structural, symbolic, and virtual boundaries over time. The festival has indeed progressively structured itself, and boundary work enables us to better understand its evolution and strategic trajectory across five key phases (see Table 3).

The experience of FuryFest, which only took place in Clisson in 2002 at the community center and in front of a few hundred people, is very insignificant in terms of social impact but can be considered as a start-up phase. However, the experience of an outdoor festival, held in 2004 and 2005 in Le Mans, allowed team members to acquire organizational skills and create legitimacy (small local impact). The establishment of the first Hellfest in the town of Clisson in 2006 attracted more than 7,000 festival-goers per day, in a town that at the time had barely more than 6,500 inhabitants. Over the years, our data show a first local social impact across various boundaries: spatial-temporal, social, structural, symbolic, and virtual.

*Phase 1 (2006-2009) - initialization:* the first phase is marked by the establishment of the festival in Clisson, thereby structuring its final spatial boundary and the symbolic representation of extrem music that Hellfest brings. During the early editions, the festival was subject to negative perceptions of metal music and the aesthetic appearance of festival-goers, implying a local negative impact. However, in 2007, the local residents who welcomed festival-goers into their homes due to inclement weather contributed to changing the public's perception. This solidarity was the first important social impact of the festival locally, which would lead a few years later to the development of a rental market by these residents (local economic impact).

*Phase 2 (2009-2011) - development:* in 2009, the festival was still in its infancy, with 20,000 festival-goers over three days. This phase is marked by the symbolic structuring of a religious iconography intrinsic to metal music (which can also be seen on a structural and virtual level).

The Hellfest thus creates a distorted vision of religion that serves as a “publicity stunt” and provides an ironic response to tensions with local Catholic associations. This symbolic anchoring extends social boundaries by attracting a wider audience. The festival becomes a “pilgrimage” as a significant element of metal identity for its festival-goers: “*We need to be there, to come back each year, it’s part of our life, part of being metalhead*” (S., festival-goer, 2011). Starting in 2011, the festival also expanded its programming (social boundary) to include a rock musical aesthetic, with ZZ TOP in 2011, which fostered recognition of the festival outside the metal scene and thus developed its global social impact. This was further supported by a pro-Hellfest speech in the assembly by Deputy Patrick Roy.

*Phase 3 (2012-2014) - Consolidation and Renewal:* this phase involves the development and optimization of the new site (spatial, structural and symbolic boundaries). Hellfest is relocated to a new site in 2012 due to the mandatory requisition of the original grounds by the region and municipality for the creation of a high school. In 2013, the festival established a connection with the local economy through the Nantes vineyard by installing the “*Kingdom of Muscadet*” gate (social and structural boundaries), behind which a bar run by local winemakers sold their Muscadet wines during the festival (see picture 1), strengthening local social impact.

**Picture 1: Kingdom of Muscadet's gate**



(Source: author)

Additionally, the programming of the band KISS forcing the development of new structures to organize a complex show. The connection to the municipality was further solidified in 2014 with the installation of a giant guitar over 10 meters high, created by Jean-François Buisson, at the festival's entrance roundabout (see picture 2). Adjacent to the festival's entrance, a 2-meter "H" logo, under which the slogan "Clisson Rock City" is displayed, solidifying the connection between the festival and Clisson. Thus, structural and spatial boundaries develop with various dedicated spaces. Symbolically, Hellfest begins to assert itself with a broader audience (social boundary): in February 2014, the festival was announced as sold out.



**Picture 2: guitar in front of the festival entrance**



(Source: author)

*Phase 4 (2015-2017) - Optimization and Recognition:* beginning in 2015, the E.Leclerc store in Clisson, located a few hundred meters from the festival and a key consumption site for festival-goers since the first edition, created its own festival link to Hellfest: the Off by E.Leclerc (indirect local social impact). This lighter, free extension of the festival features a few metal bands on an outdoor stage, demonstrating an expansion of its spatial boundary. In 2016, its image as a pilgrimage site was materialized by the construction of the first mausoleum for Lemmy Kilmister (a mythical icon) (see picture 3). The continuous structuring of the structural boundary reinforces the festival's symbolism and enhances its local social impact.

**Picture 3: Lemmy Kilmister's mausoleum**



(Source: author)

*Phase 5 (2018-2024) - Opening Beyond the Boundaries of Metal Culture:* this latest phase presents an extension of Hellfest's spatial boundary into other French cities through warm-up tours two months before the festival (initiated in 2014 but becoming as formal as an international band tour, with a tour bus, sponsors, etc.) and the opening of a bar in Paris: the Hellfest Corner (2019). The festival thus establishes itself among the most important festivals in France and the only one focused on extreme music. The decoration and technical elements are designed as integral parts of the Hellfest experience: according to the organizers (conference 2021), this economic investment represents 40% of the production budget. More recently, the festival undertook a 3-million-euro investment project, commissioning the local company Les Machines de l'Île (Nantes) to construct a giant structure called "La Gardienne des Ténèbres." The festival generates such enthusiasm that there are now seven times more ticket requests than available, which has altered the temporal boundary. Hellfest's effort to accommodate people



with reduced mobility contributes to the expansion of the festival's social boundary, as does the edition for children: Hellfest for Kids (2024).

**Table 3: the evolution of Hellfest's boundaries according to its trajectory**

<b>Trajectory (phases)</b>	<b>Spatial</b>	<b>Temporal</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>Structural</b>	<b>Symbolic</b>	<b>Virtual</b>
<b>FuryFest (Analepsis)</b>	3 site changes	Last fortnight of June	Confidential (festival known only to the metal community)	Small festival (from a few dozen to a few thousand over 4 years)	Music perceived as extreme	Social media for visibility Underground media
<b>Phase 1: Initialization of Hellfest 2006 to 2009</b>	Establishment in Clisson (rural)	Last fortnight of June	Confidential, local	Initial structures (gymnasium) KoRn cancellation (2007)	Event for and by locals (solidarity)	Development of the first Hellfest forum, Metal media
<b>Phase 2: Development 2009 to 2011</b>	Site development	Last fortnight of June First warm-up	Metal community: Our Music, Our Religion (2011)	Development of reception conditions and scenic structures	Religious iconography Tribute to Patrick Roy in 2011	Active forum +, metal media, some mainstream articles
<b>Phase 3: Consolidation and Renewal: New Site and Opening 2012 to 2014</b>	Installation of a roundabout (guitar), inscription "Clisson ROCK city" 2014 Inception of the Off by E.Leclerc	Last fortnight of June First sold-out festival beginning of 2014 (6 months after tickets went on sale)	Community expansion (team, partners and festival-goers)  Emergence of the Cult	Gate of the Kingdom Of Muscadet (2013) Arrival of a Ferris wheel (2014) KISS at Hellfest (2013) = milestone crossed	Pilgrimage site  Clisson Rock City	Facebook (under development) Metal media, some mainstream articles
<b>Phase 4: Optimization and Recognition 2015 to 2017</b>	Development of an off-festival stage (Off)  Site optimization	Last fortnight of June Sold out less than 2 months	Community expansion (team, partners, festival-goers) Formalization of the Cult	Mausoleum for Lemmy Kilmister (2016) Creation of the dedicated Cult space Development of structures	Pilgrimage site	Facebook, Instagram Metal media and numerous mainstream media
<b>Phase 5: Opening Beyond the Boundaries of Metal Culture 2018 to 2024</b>	Creation of a Hellfest bar in Paris  Decoration of Nantes airport	Last fortnight of June Sold out in less than 2 hours Transition to 4 days (trial)	Community expansion End of Hellfest Cult (2024) Creation of the Hellfest Kids festival	Lemmy's structure (2023), additional works by Pasqua (the Vanity of Butterflies), Guardian of Darkness	Hell'Tour (2022)  Demand 7 times > supply	Facebook, Instagram, Discord +++ Numerous metal media, many mainstream media

		in 2019 then 2023)	Accessibility development Financial support (1M €) to Savage Lands		Presence of Metallica (2022)	
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### 3.2. THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACTS AS INTERDEPENDENT AND FOLLOWING A SPECIFIC LIFECYCLE

The social impact of the festival is intricately interwoven with its economic impact, albeit not always concurrently. Our findings demonstrate that the social impact hinges on the organization of spatial, temporal, social, structural, symbolic, and virtual boundaries over time. The festival has progressively structured itself, and through boundary work, we gain insights into its evolution and strategic trajectory across five key phases (see Table 3).

Initially (phases 1 and 2), Hellfest did not generate economic impact (the festival operated at a deficit in its early editions until 2010) as its development focused on building its iconography and community, which were still nascent and underground at that time. During this period, the survival is only possible with the financial support of partners. Despite initial unfavorable press coverage during its early years, the successful construction of the festival's identity and a sense of belonging to a community reversed this trend. The festival continued to grow, increasing the amount of festival-goers despite the lack of economic return.

*“To come at Hellfest, you needed to be part of the community, to have the infos, to know where to buy your tickets.” (J., festival goer since 2006, 2010)*

At the same time, the festival garnered partnerships from its inception with brands associated with hardcore scenes such as Dickies and Vans, guitar manufacturer Gibson, "rock" watch brand Vestal... Hellfest T-shirts are locally manufactured by Atelier du Grand Chic, a prominent

exhibitor in the Extreme Market. Various brands engaged in ephemeral partnerships with the festival, such as Electronic Arts during the release of Guitar Hero in 2007, and the "metal" game Brutal Legend in 2011 or even Blizzard with World of Warcraft (decorating Nantes-Clisson trains in the game's colors). Various "punk" and "rock" brands also operated shops at the festival for a few years, including Doc Marten's and Jack Daniel's.

*"It was interesting to become partner of the Hellfest, on events at the beginning and collaboration on some exclusive items like shirts... The Hellfest isn't the only one to grow, every brand that become a partner grows also but not in the same way as the festival itself" (P., seller, 2019)*

This first temporality allowed the festival to accrue positive social capital and gradually structure its economic impact to achieve financial equilibrium from Phase 3 (2012-2014) onward. This transition was initiated with the site change in 2012, a key step that propelled the festival into a new dynamic. From this point onwards, Hellfest's reputation increases the speed of ticket sales in France and Europe: In Phase 3, it sold out within 6 months, and in Phase 4, it sold out in less than 2 months. This reputation attracts new partners, and at the same time strengthen the social and economic dynamic and associated impact. The festival structures the Hell City Square, a merchandising area reminiscent of Camden in England, housing the most prominent (and thus more expensive) stands, thus improving the social and economic impact.

*"Being on the Hell City Square is an amazing opportunity to communicate with metalheads. Of course, selling is part of the job, but it's, contrary to every other metal festival I've been, a very beautiful place, that drains flow of metalheads between 9AM to 3AM, and they spend time to discuss, to discover, to take some selfies" (T. seller, 2023)*

In the town center, various businesses catering to the metal community have established themselves, such as Cross Over Tattoo (2015) and Sin City (2017). Ticket and pass prices have

naturally increased in accordance with the rising costs associated with the spatial, structural, and symbolic development of the new site, but this has not disrupted the social dynamic, as the festival has become a genuine place of pilgrimage. In its inaugural 2006 edition, a pass cost 86 euros for 3 days with 22,000 attendees, whereas by 2015, the cost had risen to 185 euros for 3 days with 150,000 attendees. The social dynamic has also significantly strengthened due to the number of volunteers: the ANIMAJE association has facilitated Hellfest's reliance on several thousand local volunteers (from 3,000 to 4,500 volunteers between 2012 and 2017).

For six years (2012-2017), Hellfest sought to strategically enhance its social impact while leveraging the economic benefits generated by the festival's vibrant social dynamics. This virtuous cycle continued until Phase 5 (2018-2024), when Hellfest achieved a level of maturity and firmly established itself as an integral part of the region and the town of Clisson. The adornment of Clisson in Hellfest colors a month before the festival illustrates that the event does not disrupt the city's spatial harmony but instead integrates harmoniously into its fabric. The town has adapted to accommodating an increasingly larger number of festival-goers, surpassing 240,000 attendees in 2023. However, with demand now seven times higher than supply due to the festival's expanded appeal, longtime attendees can no longer guarantee passes for the following year. Tickets for the festival sold out within just two hours of online ticketing opening, priced at 329 euros for four days. Hellfest's economic impact has taken precedence, preceding its social impact, evidenced by tickets selling out nine months prior to the next edition.

*“To reach a ticket at Hellfest you need to take your day off, to have a huge web access and to cross fingers. I remembered 10 years ago, we’re buying or tickets 5 months before the Hellfest and it was so easy to have one. Today, too many tourists try to buy a ticket, and there’s always a risk to don’t come” (A, festival goer, 2022)*

The growing social pressure has a negative impact on the initial Hellfest community because an increasing number of individuals unfamiliar with metal now seek to experience the festival, thereby displacing many longtime festival-goers from their cherished pilgrimage site. However, this decline in social impact has not affected the economic impact, which continues to grow. Over the past five years, the festival site has even been listed as a tourist attraction by the Tourist Office of the Nantes Vineyard and the tourist sites of Pays de la Loire. The tourist office organizes year-round tours of the site and even proposed a range of activities between the festival (2022). The festival's growth has also spurred a commercial offering of accommodations within the commune: in 2022, 22.7% of festival-goers stayed with locals, in gîtes, or hotels, while 11.2% camped outside the official campsite. However, this economic success is now altering the festival's social impact, with consequences that are challenging to manage and predict.

*“Hellfest isn’t anymore the metal festival for metalheads that we knew at its beginning. Now you can see various articles on every newspaper, some TV shows still show metalheads (...) at Hellfest. In every part of the town you can check some H logo referring to the festival, it’s cool, but it also brings new festival-goers. I didn’t know what will happen in the next decade” (E. festival goer and communication manager for metal bands, 2022)*

### **3.3. THE OPENING OF BOUNDARIES TO RESTRUCTURE SOCIAL IMPACT**

The latest phase (2018-2024) demonstrates an increasingly significant opening of Hellfest's symbolic and social boundaries, which has had a negative social impact on the initial metalhead community. Hellfest has shifted from being a metal community where adherence to values, practices, and codes was essential to access festival-related information and experiences, to a

more open community comprised of individuals unfamiliar with metal but curious to explore the Hellfest experience.

This community shift can be clearly seen with statistical data from a survey of Hellfest attendees in 2022. Two distinct profiles emerge: first-time festival-goers whose initial Hellfest experience was in 2022 (comprising 40% under the age of 30, 22.7% male - 34.5% female, and 28.8% holding a postgraduate degree); and veteran attendees who have attended 7 editions or more (with 56.2% aged 40 and above, 23.8% male - 12.9% female, and 17.7% holding a postgraduate degree). The festival audience thus includes both "loyalists" and "tourists," representing pillars of the metal identity who have been present since phase 3 or even phase 1, contrasted with individuals who have recently discovered metal through Hellfest. However, the proportion of "loyalists" is declining due to the festival's mainstreaming. A key event in the decline of the initial metalhead community was the closure of the Cult in 2024, a truly emblematic Hellfest fan club embodying the symbolism and the spirit of the festival.

*"With all these people coming to Hellfest now, it's good to know that we can always get together [festival-goers from the very beginning] (...) we're open to newcomers of course, but there are still people at the Cult without whom the fest wouldn't be where it is."* (D. member of the Cult)

Over the last few years, the festival's excessive openness is evident in its programming strategies to attract new audiences, such as including adjacent musical styles/groups in the lineup, as seen with Shaka Ponk scheduled for the 2024 edition. Beyond programming, there has been a mainstreaming of media coverage: since 2006, Hellfest has partnered with Rock Sound and Hard'n'Heavy. By 2008, it had also aligned with Metallian and Rock Hard. Numerous mainstream media outlets have gradually taken an interest in Hellfest (approaching the metal scene primarily through the festival's lens). M6, which initially portrayed the festival

in 2007 as a gathering of bikers, goths, Satanists, and generally marginalized individuals, offered an idealized view of the festival by 2013, especially with the introduction of the giant guitar in 2014. Today, in addition to its partnership with Arte for concert broadcasts, Hellfest is covered by media such as TF1<sup>2</sup>, Le Figaro and Le Monde<sup>3</sup>, consolidating attention from numerous outlets less traditionally associated with metal culture. In 2022, media partners expanded to include C STAR and France Inter<sup>4</sup>, and for 2024, BRUT<sup>5</sup>, highlighting new media interest in metal. Finally, Hellfest has become a premier promotional platform, bringing together both French and now international metal artists and media.

Therefore, by expanding its symbolic and social boundaries to include adjacent musical styles (thus enhancing its economic impact), Hellfest has altered the social dynamics of its initial community and redefined its social impact.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

Beyond the findings presented, this chapter provides both theoretical and managerial contributions.

##### **4.1. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

From a theoretical perspective, our findings clearly illustrate the pivotal role of festivals in shaping the social and economic dynamics of CCIs, both locally and globally (Finkell and Platt, 2020). Festivals serve as drivers of cultural experience (Fernandes and Krolikowska, 2023), and the case of Hellfest exemplifies how such experiences contribute to structuring significant social and economic dynamics. Thus, we advance the field of field-configuring events (Lampel

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<sup>2</sup> TF1 is one of the main generalist television channels in France.

<sup>3</sup> Le Figaro and Le Monde are two renowned newspapers in France.

<sup>4</sup> C STAR is a French television channel. France Inter is one of the main public radio stations in France.

<sup>5</sup> BRUT is a digital media platform known for its videos focused on news and information.

and Meyer, 2008; Schüßler and Sydow, 2015) by demonstrating that festivals are not merely temporary marketplaces or arenas where field norms are established (Bathelt et al., 2017); rather, they represent hybrid spaces (De Molli et al., 2020) that integrate spatial, temporal, social, structural, and virtual boundaries to shape their strategic trajectory and impact over time. This dynamic perspective is compelling as it surpasses the limitations of static analyses (Santoro et al., 2018), and our findings contribute to conceptualizing festivals (and events more broadly) as dynamic entities whose strategic success hinges on generating both economic and social impact (Organ et al., 2015).

However, our data show that this social impact does not originate from a single organization but emerges through a process of co-construction involving numerous social actors, particularly at the local level. Thus, our results empirically validate the notion of a festival as a business and community ecosystem (Ruiz and Gandia, 2023) that brings together diverse stakeholders in pursuit of a shared value proposition (Adner, 2017).

Furthermore, our study underscores the importance of boundary work in understanding how a festival's social impact evolves over time. Going beyond the traditional view of spatio-temporal boundaries (De Molli et al., 2020), we demonstrate how social, structural, symbolic, and virtual boundaries contribute to a nuanced understanding of a festival's effects within CCIs. In doing so, we contribute to recent scholarship (Langley et al., 2019) by highlighting the strategic role of boundaries, particularly the interconnectedness between symbolic and social boundaries. This interdependence (Gandia and Ruling, 2019) is exemplified in Hellfest's recent evolution, where an expanded symbolic boundary has attracted a broader audience unfamiliar with metal. Given the significance of symbolism in CCIs (Lamont and Molnár, 2002), it plays a crucial role in shaping social dynamics, as stakeholders and individuals draw on symbolic references to construct their identities (Schüßler and Sydow, 2015). From this perspective, the symbolic



capital of a festival can influence the social dynamics and commitment of stakeholders, particularly through the festive dimension (Crozat and Fournier, 2005). In the case of Hellfest, the symbolic opening of the festival to adjacent musical genres disrupted existing social boundaries, leading to a transition from a community of practice to a brand community (Parmentier, 2015), which can potentially affect community cohesion (Van Winkle and Woosnam, 2014). While openness may yield economic benefits, excessive openness can be detrimental (Lauritzen and Karafyllia, 2019). Therefore, the festival is a complex entity, and understanding the systemic nature of its boundaries is crucial for comprehending its social impact and associated socio-cultural and community outcomes (Organ et al., 2015).

#### **4.2. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Our findings offer several insights that can guide festival managers and organizers.

Firstly, it is crucial to consider boundary analysis as a diagnostic and reflective exercise to optimize decision-making. By considering spatial, temporal, social, structural, symbolic, and virtual boundaries, managers can conceptualize the festival as an ecosystemic entity. This boundary work aids in defining objectives and priorities more effectively. For instance, the case of Hellfest underscores the importance of symbolism in establishing the festival's identity and cultural positioning. Without these elements, achieving economic impact becomes challenging as the event lacks the social capital necessary to build its reputation and attractiveness within the local context. Symbolism also serves as a potent lever for fostering community cohesion (Van Winkle and Woosnam, 2014), which is crucial for stakeholder loyalty.

Secondly, it is essential to perceive the festival as a dynamic ecosystem that must adapt and potentially reconfigure itself over time, particularly within the evolving landscape of CCIs (Jones et al., 2015). The example of Hellfest demonstrates that economic success is not solely

dependent on financial impact but is preceded by social impact. Understanding social impact requires careful consideration of boundaries, addressing questions such as: (1) Who are our stakeholders and where do they come from (social boundary)? (2) What shared symbolism can sustain long-term relationships (symbolic boundary)? (3) Where do stakeholders interact physically and virtually, both inside and outside the festival (spatial and virtual boundaries)? And (4) How can stakeholders be effectively engaged, supported, and empowered to facilitate meaningful transactions (structural boundaries)? This foundational work minimizes the risk of disengagement and ensures the ecosystem's resilience.

Lastly, strategic emphasis must be placed on structuring social impact, particularly in CCIs where cultural experience often outweighs economic considerations (Lena and Peterson, 2008). Social impact should be viewed from multiple angles, aligning with the diverse social actors involved. Considerations should extend to local versus global impact and real versus virtual impact. Hellfest's case illustrates that initially focusing on local social impact can establish sustainable partnerships, demonstrating potential for future economic and social dividends. The virtual dimension also plays a pivotal role in cultivating the symbolic and social capital necessary for a fledgling festival's attractiveness. Ultimately, global social impact can be envisaged once sufficient symbolic and social capital has been cultivated.

#### **4.3. CONCLUSION: LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE AVENUES**

Beyond these contributions, this work presents several limitations that open new avenues for research. First, the uniqueness of our case and its specific context necessitate caution when generalizing our results, despite Stake's (1995) recommendations. A pertinent extension would involve studying a larger number of cases through two research paths. The first path would continue research in the extreme music festival industry by investigating more extreme music festivals. The second would be to compare with other CCIs related festivals (e.g. Gandia and

Rüling, 2022). Also, our study did not take into consideration relevant hot topics such as sustainability (Pizzolitto, 2023). It is nevertheless likely that the renewal of the festival and the broadening of its boundaries, particularly social ones, will lead Hellfest to new considerations, for example in relation to corporate social responsibility.

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