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If festivals have sold out, we're still buying in

Music is just one part of British festival-time, argues **Andrew Bengry-Howell** visiting research fellow at the University of Bath

In recent years there has been a massive increase in the popularity of music festivals, with them replacing seaside jaunts, according to a recent article in the *Observer* newspaper, as the holiday of choice for many young people.

Since 2003 there has been a 71 per cent increase in the number of British music festivals and events have grown in size to attract larger crowds than any other type of event in the country.

As music festivals have become one of the most lucrative sectors within the live entertainment industry, most have come under the ownership or control of large corporations, or international entertainment companies like Live Nation.

Many of Britain's largest festivals are now commercially sponsored and in some cases are corporately branded spaces in which the consumption choices of festival goers are restricted to certain products.

The increasingly commercial and corporate nature of contemporary music festivals is a far cry from the counter cultural and anti-corporate ethos that used to characterise such events, which has led many to question whether music festivals have 'sold out' and

become nothing more than corporate theme parks.

This concern, along with concerns about how the corporate branding of music festivals by the alcohol industry might affect young people's drinking practices, informed a three-year study of music festivals that was conducted by researchers in the Psychology department at the University of Bath.

The study set out to investigate the different ways in which music festivals were corporately branded and consumption at festivals was regulated, for example, through sponsorship deals, which limit the range of products that can be sold and consumed on festival sites to products that are owned by the sponsoring company.

Since 2008, Tuborg lager has become the official beer at most of Britain's largest music festivals and sells hundreds of thousands of pints of its beer at large events like Glastonbury.

Large sales are ensured by restrictions that are imposed on the sale and consumption of other brands on festival sites.

The research that myself and my colleagues conducted set out to investigate how corporate branding has changed the festival experience, but also to find

out what these extremely popular events mean for the large numbers of people who now attend them.

The research combined an onsite study of three of Britain's largest music

festivals, which included onsite interviews with 98 festival goers, with an online study of the different ways in which people talked about festivals and documented their festival experiences on social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube and

Flickr, but also on festival-related web forums like 'e-festivals' and 'virtual festival'.

The study found that for many young people corporate branding and sponsorship of music festivals was not a major cause of concern, in

fact many young people regarded it as a 'necessary evil' which ensured the future of the events that they cherished. Despite becoming far more mainstream and corporate than prototypical festivals of the past like Woodstock, the Glastonbury festivals of the 1970s, and the early National Jazz Festivals of the late 1950s and early 1960s, for many contemporary festival goers today's music festivals still evoke feelings associated

with the summer of love and a sense of freedom and belonging, which many find they encounter within the temporary community that is produced on a music festival site.

One of the most striking findings of the University of Bath study is just how important events like Glastonbury are to those who attend. Although television coverage of festivals tends to focus primarily on the music and performers, for many young people this is just one element of the whole experience of temporarily escaping from the pressures of modern living into a different world.

The festival world is one in which they can put aside everyday concerns and worries and literally disappear into the crowd.

A world in which they can escape the pressures and mundanity of their everyday lives, and for a weekend they can express, or discover, a more 'authentic' and freer self.

The communal experience of festivals is also extremely important: the experience of spending time with people who share your interest in music and festivals, and, for some, the experience of camping, going to sleep and



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waking up with people that they perceive to be like them.

Lots of the people that Dr Andrew Bengry-Howell and Dr Yvette Morey interviewed drew comparisons between the sense of community they encountered at a music festival, and the lack of community they encountered in their everyday lives.

Many also talked about festivals as something that they waited all year for, which provided an escape from their otherwise stressful lives and helped them to cope with the pressures of modern day living.

Few noticed or were concerned about corporate sponsorship or how their consumption choices were being constrained.

If anything the involvement of well known companies and brands in music festivals had made these events seem less threatening and more accessible to a wide cross-section of people who identify with today's mainstream culture.

'The festival world is one in which they can put aside everyday concerns and worries'

