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# Uncertain festival futures: how European music festival organisers navigate ‘loss’

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## ABSTRACT

Risk management and the navigation of loss are inherent to working conditions within the festival industry. With festivals cancelled, postponed or redesigned, the coronacrisis has deeply affected the already uncertain festival sector. Based on thirty-five interviews with Danish, Dutch and British music festival organisers, this article examines which losses organisers experienced when faced with a social trauma that disrupted their ontological security. Additionally, it analyses how they have coped and responded to this situation via organisational and emotional strategies. Three phases in how organisers cope with loss are identified, where organisational and individual responses play varying, complementary roles: (1) imminent short-term loss and its realisation, (2) acceptance of short-term loss and (3) moving beyond loss. The analysis reveals how managing potential personal loss and facing organisational crisis should not merely be seen in terms of a rational decision-making process but is also mediated by emotional losses organisers experience as not only their livelihood, but their work identity is existentially challenged. Implications are drawn on the nature of cultural work, with attention to the entwinement of personal and professional identities.

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## 1. Introduction

On 21 April 2020, the Dutch Prime Minister announced the extension of the ‘intelligent lockdown’ until 1 September 2020 and specifically noted the implications for music festivals: ‘This means there will be no Pinkpop, no Vierdaagse and no Zwarte Cross.’ Similarly, in Denmark, the Prime Minister spoke directly to festival organisers in her public address, saying that ‘to all of you who have worked hard to plan festivals, markets

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and other major events over the summer, I unfortunately have a serious message. The ban on large assemblies will be maintained until August'. While measures had become more lenient in most European countries by 2022, social distancing made organising a music festival a challenge at best, if not financially unsustainable. At the time of writing, many music festival organisations across Europe have been able to or are in the process of organising their first edition after two cancelled festival summers. Nevertheless, organisers' experiences during the first years of the pandemic remain relevant in describing the uncertainty present within the music festival industry and understanding the emotional work and risk management strategies as they were developed.

This article addresses the following question: How have festival organisers navigated loss during the coronacrisis? It first examines what losses organisers have *experienced*. Second, it explores how festival organisers *coped with* – and moved beyond – loss at the level of the organisation (e.g. postponing, cancelling or changing) and at the emotional level of the self (e.g. grieving, reminiscing). To answer the research question, we draw from unique interview data from Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, each affected by COVID-19 and subsequent government lockdown measures in different ways. Festivals make an ideal case as they are an increasingly popular and ubiquitous summer activity (Gajanan 2019). Moreover, the festival sector is among the last economic domains able to resume their activities in a financially viable manner.

This article builds on theoretical work of Andreescu (2021), who defined COVID-19 as a social trauma that disrupted ontological security. This form of security refers to being able to experience oneself as continuous, which is complicated by the pandemic as it 'destabilises values, guidelines and our trust in a predictable future, posing an unprecedented challenge to envisioning life ahead and formulating plans' (Andreescu 2021: 224). While Andreescu (2021) proposes the use of this concept to understand people's experiences in the first year of the pandemic, we empirically explore how a disruption of ontological security can affect strategies employed within a sector, while also attending to individual experiences and sense of selves. Especially for festivals, which require months or even years of preparatory work, the lack of ontological security that COVID-19 induced affected organisers on the level of their selves and the industry more broadly.

Within cultural sociology (and cultural economics), there is a wide body of literature addressing how cultural organisations deal with (demand) uncertainty and exogenous shocks (Caves 2000; Hirsch 1972; Schreiber and Rieple 2018). Similarly, within the sociology of loss varying authors have considered how people navigate uncertainty and loss (Jakoby 2015). In this article, we combine these strands of research, exploring the subjective meaning and emotional response to loss and how this is entwined with organisational response and work practices *during* COVID-19 as a long-lasting exogenous shock.

Usually, risk management for festival production is a decision-making process occurring within a delimited time span. However, COVID-19 created a longer-term, perhaps existential, horizon of risk for festivals and their organisers, possibly related to a society-wide lack of trust in a predictable future (Andreescu 2021). Studying this context provides the opportunity to see how risk management strategies develop over time, are adjusted to new contexts and regulations, and how new strategies are collectively learned and adopted by (nation-wide) networks of festival organisers. Moreover, it shows how these strategies are developed along the lines of emotional responses of loss and grief. Findings indicate that such reactions often inform organisational decisions.

Organisers usually form personal connections to their festivals, so loss to their principle space of work impacts their professional selves, ways of life, and communities. In the exploration of developments during COVID-19, loss and grief were recurring themes as organisers were trying to make sense of the changes occurring in the festival landscape around them. It also accentuates the non-instrumental aspects of cultural work (see Banks 2006), and thus how the uncertainty surrounding the coronacrisis not only reaffirms the precarity of cultural work and music festivals, but also highlights wider concerns regarding the social impact of the possible loss of festivals.

## 2. Uncertainty and risk in the cultural sector

Cultural industries are characterised by their highly uncertain financial contexts and precarious work environments (Caves 2000; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Hirsch 1972).<sup>1</sup> The music industry, for example, must deal with processes that are highly trend-driven which go hand in hand with demand uncertainty. This means that there is a lack of certainty as to which cultural products will ‘make it’ in the market and which will not (Schreiber and Rieple 2018). Moreover, the ways in which music is created, produced and distributed continuously changes which also generates a highly uncertain environment (Schreiber and Rieple 2018). On top of that, the cultural industries are now largely based on projects – defined as short-term assignments that offer flexibility (Eikhof and Warhurst 2013) which generates uncertainty for individual workers (Menger 2006). In the context of festivals, this uncertainty stems from the fact that festivals are ‘at the mercy of market forces more than many other due to the high costs and low profit margins’ (Davies 2021:3), operating in an increasingly competitive market (Ashwin 2020). Besides economic risks, festivals are faced with other risks as a result of attracting large crowds, including crime and violence (Bennett 2020).

### 2.1. Organisational strategies and individual responses to tame uncertainty

Festival organisation requires a set of organisational strategies to deal with types of uncertainty relevant to the sector (Mulder, Hitters, and Rutten 2021). Organisers are for example dealing with legal and ethical compliance, health and safety measures, loss prevention and security and the preparation for emergencies (Silvers 2009). In order to effectively deal with risks, organisers make risk judgements based on knowledge gained from previous risk experiences, organisational memory and the risk knowledge that is shared through industry associations and expert resources. In the popular music industry one of the most important assets to thrive in an uncertain context is the ability to network with other firms (Schreiber and Rieple 2018). The possibilities to deal with risk also depend on the organisational culture and the individual organiser’s background and experience (Ashwin 2020; Schreiber and Rieple 2018). Moreover, organisers rely on a collective organisational memory to make decisions based on what they remember from previous risk events (Ashwin 2020).

Besides organisational strategies, working in a risky industry has required individuals working in the sector to develop strategies at the individual level (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). For instance, cultural workers usually have to take on other jobs because

of low and seasonal payment that is common in the festival and music industry (Haynes and Marshall 2018). Cultural workers are often celebrated for their entrepreneurial spirit which arguably helps them survive in an (increasingly) uncertain environment (Coulson 2012). They are 'presented as psychologically resilient, flexible, efficient and innovative, prepared to seek out new opportunities and to take risks, creative at finding solutions to problems' (Haynes and Marshall 2018). Furthermore, both on the organisational and the individual level, credibility and reputation are important assets for cultural workers (Everts, Berkers, and Hitters 2022). Developing these individual characteristics is deemed necessary for event organisers to navigate an uncertain environment.

## **2.2. Risk strategies during COVID-19**

The coronacrisis has put the cultural and event industry under pressure. COVID-19 can be considered an external 'dread risk', meaning a risk over which event organisers have no control (Ashwin 2020). Many festivals had been forced to cancel or postpone their 2020 and 2021 editions and many companies making up the industry were not doing any business (Davies 2021). Dread risks occur in an environment that can already be characterized by complexity and uncertainty (Davies 2021; Silvers 2009). The question remains as to whether risk management strategies organisers have employed worked, when during COVID-19 risk and uncertainty have become more prominent features of global life. Preliminary research suggests that conventional organisational responses to deal with uncertainty no longer work as uncertainty has become a (global) societal characteristic especially during the pandemic (Andreescu 2021). For instance, when the crisis started it appeared that not many event companies were insured against pandemics (Davies 2021), likely relating to the estimated likelihood of this risk occurring. Yet, little is known about the strategies festivals organisers did employ and what – in their perception – worked. Moreover, to understand the way in which organisers strategised against the long-term uncertainty COVID-19 induced, a broader understanding of the way in which the crisis emotionally affected organisers and how they coped with loss is needed.

## **2.3. What is loss?**

Losses can be divided into three categories: 1) relationship loss, 2) status loss and 3) (im)material object loss (Jakoby 2015). Most research done on loss considers the first category, focusing on experiences surrounding death of a loved one, or losing a pet animal. In this research however we will focus on the latter two, which for instance includes job loss. Job loss, which is particularly relevant to this research, can lead to a loss of income and a loss of self-esteem which relates to a reduced well-being (Jenkins, Wiklund, and Brundin 2014; Papa and Maitoza 2013). Jakoby (2015) points out that a common feature of loss across these categories is a subjective component whereby actors perceive losses as meaningful, and involuntary. For the loss experience, what matters is how the social actor relates to what has been lost. Loss can create a crisis 'which is based on the inability of humans to continue any longer in the accustomed way in the face of such an event' (Jakoby 2015:111). Thereby, loss

threatens the continuity of individuals' identities and their ways of life (Jakoby 2015), and in this sense becomes existential, which is similarly described by Andreescu (2021) as a case of a disruption of ontological security.

Jakoby (2015) discusses three techniques for the self in how to deal with loss: (1) grief, (2) nostalgia and memories, (3) artefacts. First, 'grief involves a reaction to a specific loss in terms of an active response to a separation distress (e.g. searching, yearning)' (Jakoby 2015:119). One can imagine festival organisers experiencing grief, yearning for better times. Moreover, grief might be over the 'deprivation of latent functions of the lost relationship' (Jakoby 2015:120). In the case of festivals, such latent functions may include its social or community function (Mair and Duffy 2017). Second, nostalgia is another way to deal with a transition as it connects the past with the future. It helps individuals to reconstruct or maintain their identities. Narratives have a role in this process, where individuals reconstruct and maintain their selves by talking about the dead (Jakoby 2015). As such, talking about festivals and reconstructing past festival experiences may be understood as a way to deal with the loss of festivals. Third, artefacts can help to maintain some sense of continuity with the past. Material objects, for example previously owned by a loved one, or signifying a significant relationship or event can help individuals to construct an identity that is felt to be continuous even across life transitions (Gibson 2008).

### 3. Data and methods

This article draws on data from thirty-five semi-structured interviews with festival organisers, gathered in Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom in the first eight months of 2020.<sup>2</sup> Multiple interviews were held with these organisers before and after the coronacrisis started in Europe, which provides unique data from three national contexts that were affected by COVID-19 and the ensuing public health measures in similar ways. Organisers in all contexts had to deal with similar governmental restrictions, having had to postpone, cancel or change the format, scale, and timing of their festivals from summer 2020 onwards. Moreover, in all contexts, both lockdown and social distancing measures changed continuously, creating uncertainty for festival organisations in each context.

The sampled festivals were selected based on a field analysis of the local music festival context. Within each context, festivals were selected based on specific criteria: ticket pricing, multiplicity of genres, size, location and maturity (i.e. number of editions). Moreover, different types of music festivals were selected to make comparison between different contexts possible (see 'Type' in Table 1). From each selected festival, 3–5 organisers were interviewed based on their role in the festival as directors or in marketing, promotion, and music or artistic production/programming. Some organisers were re-interviewed as the crisis unfolded, meaning data might come from different stages of the 'unfolding crisis'. Ethical approval was obtained via the university each researcher was affiliated with in each context.

The pre-COVID-19 interviews focused mainly on the story of the festival and organiser, and the work they engaged in before, during and after the festival took place. As the coronacrisis developed a new set of questions was developed, also entailing questions about their experience with the crisis. These interviews took place on- and offline, were transcribed and thematically analysed with support from qualitative coding software.

**Table 1.** Number of interviewees from each context.

Country	Festival	Type	Number of interviewees
Denmark	<i>Distortion</i>	Urban street	4
	<i>Heartland Festival</i>	Rock/Pop	3
	<i>Tønder Festival</i>	Folk/World	3
Netherlands	<i>Blijdorp Festival</i>	Urban cutting-edge/EDM	5
	<i>Metropolis Festival</i>	Rock/Pop	5
	<i>Magia</i>	Ethnic/World	3
	<i>Rotterdam Unlimited</i>	Street/Public	3
United Kingdom	<i>Boomtown Fair</i>	Global underground music/ Green-field camping	3
	<i>Bristol International Jazz &amp; Blues festival</i>	Jazz/Blues	3
	<i>Love Saves the Day</i>	Urban cutting-edge/EDM	3

## 4. Experiencing loss as unfolding uncertainty

### 4.1. Uncertainty of the sector

The already uncertain circumstances within the sector were amplified during the first months of the crisis, as organisers felt it will have a long-lasting impact on the festival sector and related companies. They clearly experienced a lack of trust in a predictable future (Andreescu 2021). As the programmer of Metropolis Festival argued:

So everything is undetermined, that's a bit the- maybe the all-encompassing if no one knows what it will look like- no one knows when we'll get to get going, no one knows if we can get going what we can do.

Organisers were uncertain about the consequences of COVID-19 for their industry and were fearing a loss of many festivals and tremendous changes to the industry itself. One Boomtown producer suggested that 'We're going to see festivals in survival mode' while a Love Saves the Days producer said that 'It may well be next year you start seeing [...] the writing will be on the wall'. Some organisers worried about what the sector will look like, for example what (local) organisations they would be able to work with in the future: 'which organisations I can still work with next year, that's the question' [Metropolis, Festival Director].

Besides the sector and related companies, the collective celebration and ritual associated with music festivals as a latent function (see Jakoby 2015) had come to a standstill and there was no certainty if and when this would come back. This was felt to be a loss not only to organisers, but also to their audiences. Organisers for example compared their festivals to birthday or Christmas celebrations: 'an important part of the year just drops out' [Blijdorp, Marketeer]. Festival organisers often described the importance of collective celebration:

The sense of anticipation leading up to it, you try and build up that sort of excitement. And then that whole sense of... I guess you get that... from a lot of musical events anyway, but I think... it is amplified in the festival experience, is that collective joy. [Bristol Jazz & Blues, Producer]

Some organisers were not if sure people would want to celebrate in such close encounters in the future, as they argued there might be too much fear surrounding the pandemic and the hygiene standards for festivals after COVID-19, although



others thought people will go to festivals as soon as they are able to. One Love Saves the Day producer hoped that normalcy would return but wondered 'if people are still too cautious to attend [festivals]' and whether we will experience 'sweaty concerts' again. Still, many organisers feared that this type of collective celebration had been irrevocably lost, creating a loss of the predictability of their social context (Jakoby 2015). The coronacrisis can therefore be described as a liminal phase which according to Andreescu (2021:224) confronted 'humanity with, not solely one, but all four givens of existence: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness'. Organisers were not sure if their festivals were alive (no loss) or dead (loss); instead, the festival was in limbo without any certainty as to when or whether it will appear again.

#### 4.2. Loss of self

This increasingly uncertain social context impacted organisers in two interrelated dimensions entwining material conditions and emotional contexts: 1) uncertainty of work and income and 2) uncertainty of identity and daily routine ('way of life'). The uncertainty of work and income remained the most obvious and recurring type of personal loss for festival organisers. Firstly, there was the quantitative loss: for many organisers, there was less work and less money. Within an uncertain sector this loss of income not only had repercussions for the festival organisation, but financial risks were immediately transferred to the personal level. Some organisers kept themselves busy by developing new projects; others were 'eating' their savings and often had to spend money that was meant for their retirement. This means that the crisis did not only affect the (predictable) future of the festival, but also the future of organisers themselves:

living off your savings is fun, but that's pretty expensive. And that's fun once, fun once [laughs], but if that happens again, yeah then-uhm. [...] I mean everything you've been working hard for, for years and investments that we've done, those have been lost. [Magia, Producer]

Other producers expressed personal concern about unpaid fees to their staff:

I have staff fees that are outstanding [...] a significant proportion of fees are paid at the conclusion of the festival [...] we were closed [...] 10 days before we opened [...] it was a real stab in the back. [Bristol Jazz & Blues, Producer]

The way in which this crisis immediately affected organisers at a personal level, shows the precarity and uncertainty inherent to the festival sector and cultural industries which has only been amplified during the pandemic. Some festival organisers saw such loss of income and work as part of 'what it means to be doing business' [Blijdorp, Festival Director]. Others saw it as a sign of an unhealthy sector and considered the coronacrisis as an opportunity to change. The sudden rupture of COVID-19 induced the possibility for emancipation (Andreescu 2021). One organiser for example described how cultural workers are expected to do their work because they love what they do and payment seems incompatible with that perception of work in the cultural sector. Often, she continued, this is maintained because cultural workers accept such



poor payment conditions to some extent and 'it would be nice if this time even though the means are scarce that we are looking at okay how does this arise and how could you prevent that best' [Metropolis, Collaborations].

Secondly, losing the 2020 festival season has changed organisers' way of life and has thereby created an uncertainty of identity. As one organiser put it: 'I had the idea that half of my life was cancelled' [Metropolis, Collaborations]. This organiser started to reconsider the meaning of her work to her identity: 'So that I attach a big part of my identity to the work that I do. Is that healthy? Is that good? Shouldn't I do that differently? Or is it good?'. Besides such existential issues, there was also a seasonal loss of purpose. An organiser told us about the lifestyle gap left from festival cancellations, noting that

I started in '93 doing this and it has been my summer and my whole living has been around doing concerts, festivals, and events during the summer period and all my social and family life ... I cannot do this .... and I still haven't, you know, found out what I'm going to do in June and July [Heartland , Organiser].

Others framed this as a loss of festival community normally affirmed through the visceral experiences of working together: 'there's been the other side of it which is not living, breathing, working in a field to kind of work together with loads of different teams and loads of different people' [Boomtown, Producer]. This dimension of loss also relates to the feeling of not being able to 'give back' to their communities:

I just wanted to do something because I need to do something. I need to give something out ... I know all my colleagues on all festival all events have the same feeling they want to give something back [Heartland, Organiser].

The broader meaning of a loss of work and the uncertainty that accompanies it thereby shows how the loss of this edition represents a threat to the continuity of everyday life and a loss of self and community in the long run (Jakoby 2015).

## 5. Dealing with uncertainty in times of crisis

The loss of a predictable social context and an interpretable social environment impacted the way in which organisers felt they could strategise against the loss and risks they experienced. As shown below, the way in which organisers responded to the crisis on an emotional level and the way in which they felt they could strategise against it fluctuated between different perceived phases of the crisis as it continued to unfold: 1) imminent (realization of) short-term loss, 2) acceptance of short-term loss and 3) moving beyond loss.

### 5.1. Imminent short-term loss and its realisation

Many organisers were continuously switching back and forth between hope, fear, worry, anger, disappointment, sadness and pain thereby highlighting how the grieving process is not static (Jakoby 2015). First, there was a likelihood of short-term loss, referring to the start of 2020 before actual cancellation began to occur. This phase went hand in hand with emotional responses of hope, fear, worry, and the feeling

of 'standing still'. One Boomtown producer aptly described it first as being 'strange' but then suggests that,

since March, you know, having to make the decision whether to cancel, if it was too soon to cancel, if it was too late to cancel, when's the right time? Like all of that, is quite confusing as well. [...] It's a very uncertain road in front of us.

During this initial phase, a related dimension was set in: the realisation of loss. For some contexts this realisation coincided with a national press conference being held (in Denmark and the Netherlands). For example, an organiser at Heartland in Denmark recalled how the team heard about the cancellation:

we all knew that the Prime Minister's press conference was coming up on that night. Everybody's sitting ready and then half an hour before we all got a text saying they're not only going to cancel this initial date in June, they're going to cancel the whole summer.... Mmm. So it was it was like crazy....

Similarly, in the UK scheduled government statements about social distancing and restricted gatherings determined the end for summer festivals in 2020. Nevertheless, realisation for festival organisers had already kicked in before that, for example with the cancellation of prominent festivals, such as Glastonbury (United Kingdom) and the postponement and later cancellation of Primavera Sound (Spain). Slowly coming to the realisation that this festival season would not happen was described by one organiser as a 'rollercoaster' [Blijdorp, Artistic Director]. Hoping that at least their festival would survive because it was smaller or held later in summer and thus more flexible, was soon reframed as 'being naïve':

The realisation doesn't come all at once, like yeah, everything is out- it's sort of more like it's being cancelled there too that's a risk for us and then [break] at some point the picture just becomes clearer then you saw a message in the media- it was even before the press conference that a message was distributed from the Hague that festivals will be cancelled until the 1<sup>st</sup> of September ... So that's why I knew by then for 99% sure that it was going to happen, yeah and then I immediately accepted it together with the team. [Blijdorp, Artistic Director].

Even though this press conference was experienced as liberating, as it gave organisers certainty to take next steps, it has also been experienced as painful as maintaining hope for the 2020 season was not an option anymore.

The way in which organisers strategised against the (possible) losses differed before and after there was clarity about the festival cancellation. The latter will be discussed in the next section. In all cases, dealing with this crisis was described as a continuous process of risk management and contingency planning, of 'making sure that we don't fall over' [Rotterdam Unlimited, Festival Director]. Due to the loss of predictability, many organisers felt overwhelmed by uncertainty, framing their predicament as a high stakes card game, 'do we sit on our hands and do nothing because that's actually safer, or do we take a risk knowing that it might well save your business, but also might break your business. It's like stick or twist' [Love Saves the Day, Producer]. Festival organisers used three main strategies to deal with short-term uncertainty: (1) pause the organising process, (2) pass on part of the (financial) risk, and (3) continue the organising process.

First, the financial survival of festivals already started before the 2020 editions were cancelled officially. Many organisers talked about how they stopped or delayed spending money to 'keep as much money in as possible' [Blijdorp, Festival Director]. For some organisers this created a tense situation, as some of the festivals were scheduled for March or April and they had to continue working but to stop spending money. The financial risk for festivals that were planned earlier on in the crisis was higher, as these festivals had already paid many of their partners and artists. The discontinuation of money flows was one of the ways in which festival organisers tried to decrease the financial risk that occurred due to the uncertainty of cancellation.

Second, the cancellation of all festivals during the summer created some certainty with regards to planning because that is when organisers were able to 'stop the machine' and prevent bigger losses. It was important that the government cancelled the events because that would be labeled a 'force majeure'/'Act of God' (Silvers 2009), which *usually* means that insurance premiums cover any loss and it is always something organisers put in their contracts with suppliers. However, insurance companies had already added a COVID-19 clause well before the pandemic was declared. A Love Saves the Day producer said that

I went back and looked at our [insurance] quote [dated from] 14th of January [2020], COVID-19 was already listed [...] as not being covered. [...] so any cancellation caused directly or indirectly by COVID-19 [...] was already written out of insurance. So, they already knew, their... their risk assessors already had it...on their radar.

A final reaction was to keep going and present stuff. As the festival director of Rotterdam Unlimited put it: 'I don't feel the need for a lamentation'. Some organisers even felt that their past experiences with crises have helped them cope with this one, stating that 'I think we're pretty hardened by those festivals because there's always so much chaos in the last week. [...] each year we have had [...] bizarre things happening, now you have corona it is- it makes you tough I think' [Blijdorp, Artistic Director]. As crises go, this one is also experienced as one of opportunity and risk/loss at the same time (Ashwin 2020).

## 5.2. Acceptance of short-term loss

In the 'realisation-phase', organisers kept working on contingency plans, making sure that their festivals and businesses could keep existing. After that, in the next phase of a grieving-process, came acceptance: 'You know it, but it doesn't hit home yet till the pressure is off and everything is taken care of. Only then you have time to think shit hey the plug has been pulled for real and then you're fed up with it' [Blijdorp, Artistic Director]. It seems that, especially in the first months after the press-conference, organisers agreed with government measures and were therefore able to accept them rather than being angered by them. Once some of the financial support for workers became available in the UK – e.g. the furlough scheme – one of the Love Saves the Day organisers expressed a sense of relief, 'you can't really moan about that and actually,... knowing those timescales, we need to now think creatively about how we can get our staff back working and how we might be able to do things creatively'. Other organisers also discussed how cancellation offered the opportunity to better

prepare for further expected problems the sector would soon face, 'I think having that break is so needed so that we can have clear brains over what's going to happen' [Boomtown, Producer].

The feelings that prevailed at the start of this phase are mainly sadness, feeling powerless and hurt, with one organiser also describing the togetherness that was felt in this loss:

Personally I felt bad for a couple of weeks, because you see everything you're working on sort of collapsing- and everyone has that. So no one is pulling anyone else up, everyone is in this negative spiral and we had- personally I needed a couple of weeks for that. [Blijdorp, Marketing]

Many other organisers described how the whole sector was in the same boat and how they, especially on the festival days, got together with others in their team to celebrate (or commemorate) the festival with colleagues (Andreescu 2021; Stroebe and Schut 1999). Others, however, felt the need to deal with festival days alone and even preferred to stay away from their festival location on the festival day, whereas one festival producer suspected that lamenting their festival cancellation may be viewed negatively given wider concerns around COVID-19, 'we weren't sure what to say, because ... you don't know how people are going to take it really. But, you know, people would be like, 'Oh, you know, get over yourselves, there's bigger problems' [Love Saves the Day]. Some others felt a disconnection from the festivals they were working for as they were doing project-based work only. Without a payslip, these organisers could not help but feel left out as they could not work for the festival anymore.

After the acceptance of the loss of the 2020 festival season, a third phase was set in of whether festivals would proceed in 2021 or whether there was a possibility of long-term loss, the actual 'death' of festivals and where future responses were being considered. Feelings of acceptance changed as some of the measures were relaxed, although there was some variation in the speed at which this occurred depending on context: 'Some things are getting more normal already, but we still can't have our festivals this summer' [Metropolis, Producer]. Once further restrictions were beginning to lift however, festival organisers expressed doubt about how they could stage a music festival given that they are about bringing people closely together around music, for instance one organiser said: 'You can't put pens in, you can't put loads of fences in, you can't allocate space. That doesn't work. It's not an event then. It's not a festival' [Love Saves the Day, Producer].

### **5.3. Moving beyond loss**

The strategies organisers employed were mainly used to deal with uncertainty in the two dimensions of loss mentioned before: the loss of the sector and the loss of self. Related to the loss of self, it seems that, especially in the first months, organisers were trying to keep up their daily routine and way of life as much as they could. These work activities were continued depending on the size and type of the festival, the structure of the festival organisation, and the role of the organiser within the festival. For example, some organisers were responsible for the financial survival of their festival or for festival alternatives, and therefore needed to continue working,

whereas the responsibilities of others were either needed less in COVID-circumstances or they were furloughed workers. Organisers from the more established and bigger festivals felt they needed to come up with alternatives, whereas most organisers from younger, smaller festivals agreed that organising alternatives was not worth the effort.

Although some organisers argued that continuing their work activities helped them to remain sane, referring to the emotional loss they have experienced: 'we have to stay busy otherwise we will go absolutely crazy together. I believe that. Especially with how busy it usually is during this time' [Blijdorp, Festival Director]. Others did not see the use: 'I have this idea that on the short-term everyone is trying to hold onto a thread instead of trying to get people to work somewhere else' [Magia, Producer]. By keeping up their daily routine and way of life as much as they could, they tried to cope with or, as some organisers would say, deny the loss that had occurred within their work-lives. Even though some organisers continued their work for the organisations' survival, which could be considered a risk management strategy, the continuation of their work was also informed by emotional responses to loss as it appears that individuals at certain times confront and at other times avoid grieving (Stroebe and Schut 1999). This attitude is summed up by an organiser of Heartland in Denmark who told us that one of her main goals in planning alternate activities is to get 'our key guests to have our festival still close to their heart'.

At the organisational level, some festival organisers decided to develop other projects that they were able to work on within COVID-restrictions. For example, one of the festival organisations in the Netherlands decided to focus more on the outdoor café they had wanted to build that was connected to one of their clubs. One of the organisers described their situation:

the event life, the festival life is just, is insecure because, yeah, imagine it rains on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, then we could have a ton less for drinks. Yeah so it is about serious sums of money. But it is kind of hard, especially for smaller festivals to take that step that you- and that's what you see now- with all the corona misery [break] that festivals have to be cancelled. The question remains how many will survive that. Because we don't have to break the bank because of other projects we do, other jobs we take on. There are enough festivals that do not have that [Blijdorp, Safety Producer]

As the festival sector itself is perceived as too uncertain to strategise and organise within, these organisers decided to move beyond the festival sector and do different work in the meantime. Love Saves the Day organisers in Bristol teamed up with local restaurants as co-organisers of an outdoor dining experience (Breaking Bread) held in huge tents in a local park thereby shifting their infrastructure from festival organisation and management to outdoor dining. From September onwards, other organisers were also trying to strategise against risk by coming up with other types of solutions for live events, such as with rapid testing (fieldlab events).

Although it might seem that festival alternatives, such as livestreams and drive-throughs, were similar side-projects that some organisers had taken on for financial survival, all organisers argued that they only cost money and they were just not the same. Especially the community function of festivals, in which people are brought together to celebrate in mass crowds, seems difficult to replicate in alternative versions (Vandenberg 2022). As one of the organisers described it: 'it is like going to a restaurant where they don't serve food. That is, then you take out the essence'

[Blijdorp, Artistic Director]. Besides the inability of alternatives to establish contact and interaction, alternatives are different in other ways. For example, some organisers talked about how the ‘liveness’ of livestreams is often missed as they are very often prerecorded. Moreover, online versions miss the dynamics of a festival: the ability to move across a festival space has not been replicated thus far. One UK festival director chose not to organise any alternative virtual festival-type activity because as he explained, ‘it’s not really what I got into festivals for... I don’t get the same feeling out of watching a band and watching a DJ [...]sitting in front of a laptop’ [Love Saves the Day, Producer]. Thus, online alternatives have difficulties replicating the tangible spatial and emotional effects of festivals and can therefore not be seen as an effective strategy against this loss (for example see Vandenberg 2022).

If it is not the same and financially unsustainable, why organise alternatives? It seems that alternatives were set up to create some sense of continuity and to maintain the emotional connection audiences and organisers feel with their festival. Therefore, it can be argued to be a form of ‘nostalgic remembering’ as that helps one deal with a transition by connecting the past with the future (Jakoby 2015). One festival producer said they had been creating podcasts with musicians which he framed as ‘a nice way of keeping people up to date and keeping the musicians, giving them a platform as well as to what’s going on and generally being able to generate some content for our website because at the moment, content is really important’ [Bristol Jazz Blues, Producer]. Alternatives were about keeping up festival presence: ‘I think it’s cool that festivals are doing this because you’re keeping your visibility and also show that you know the festival isn’t continuing, but we’re still here. I think it’s also important that sort of the presence stays that it’s not like festivals aren’t happening, so then everything disappears’ [Metropolis, Producer]. This form of nostalgia is however particular because the festivals themselves had not actually been lost yet. Rather than only being about nostalgia, these alternatives can therefore also be considered an active form of preservation, which might eventually help these festivals to survive financially.

## 6. Concluding discussion

The aim of this article is to better understand how music festival organisers navigated loss during the coronacrisis, focusing on several music festivals in Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Based on semi-structured interviews with thirty-five festival organisers, it first examines which losses organisers have experienced. These losses are mostly related to the uncertainty already present in the sector, which the crisis has exacerbated: organisers mostly lost a predictable economic, and thereby also social context, and an interpretable social world. We explored empirically, through a sensitive and comparative qualitative approach, the way in which the disruption of ontological security that Andreescu (2021) proposed is mediated in everyday work practices and personal lives of organisers, within a context where all festivals face uncertainty about their future. The loss of a predictable future affected the way organisers experienced the crisis on two levels: uncertainty in relation to the sector and uncertainty in relation to the self. Firstly, it seems that organisers fear losses within the sector, for example related to the number of festivals and organisations in the sector they can work with. Secondly, individual organisers were enveloped by

an uncertainty relating to their selves. COVID-19 affected their day-to-day working lives, their incomes and changed their perceptions of their professional selves and work identities, which was similarly found in earlier research on the effects of job loss (Jenkins, Wiklund, and Brundin 2014; Papa and Maitoza 2013).

We explore how festival organisers were coping with and tried to move beyond the losses they experienced, both at the level of the organisation and of the self. Due to the severity and duration of the crisis, it was possible to explore risk management strategies as they were being developed, paying more attention to the details than would usually be the case as those strategies are commonly developed in short-term moments of risk and uncertainty. The way in which organisers dealt with the crisis and developed strategies against the uncertainty it induced differed between different phases of the crisis: (1) imminent (realization of) short-term loss, (2) acceptance of short-term loss and (3) moving beyond loss.

As context and regulations changed between these different phases, organisers had to adapt and find out how to strategise accordingly. For example, prior to the cancellation of summer festivals in 2020, organisers strategised by retaining existing funds, whereas as time elapsed they started to develop alternatives because that was in the range of their possibilities by then. It appears that in some phases coping is more prevalent, in others it seems to be more about organisational strategies and responses. For instance, after organisers realised the short-term losses of their festivals with the cancellation of summer 2020, strategies to prevent any further financial loss quickly took shape, whereas prior to the acceptance of short-term loss they were focused more on emotional coping processes. Moreover, in some phases these strategies come together. This was particularly visible in the last phase, where organisers started to develop their festival alternatives. It seems that these alternatives are not only set up for organisational survival, by being visible, but also as a form of nostalgia to connect the past with possible future festival editions.

The opportunity to see how organisers navigate uncertainty, risk and loss during a crisis, has on the one hand confirmed previous lessons from risk management literature. The analysis shows a prolonged process of risk-management and changes to the festival industry which affects the way in which organisers cope with and engage with the losses they experience. It shows, in congruence with earlier research (Mulder, Hitters, and Rutten 2021; Schreiber and Rieple 2018) that risk management strategies are collectively developed, learned and adapted to new contexts. On the other hand, our findings teach us an important new lesson, showing that risk management cannot be merely seen as a rational decision-making process. It appears that many organisers are informed in their strategising by the personal attachment to their festivals and their working lives. The emotional connections they form to their festivals should not be underestimated, as they too affect the way in which organisers choose to strategise against the uncertainty they experience.

These analytical insights therefore contribute to ongoing debates about the nature of work and identity within the cultural industries and in particular the extent to which non-instrumental aspects of cultural work tend to be overlooked. The data points to the way in which festival organisers were struggling not simply because of a loss of work, personal income and lifestyle, but they were also concerned about the possible consequences of their festivals not surviving and the detrimental social impact this might have on local communities without the opportunity to interact with and around music.



## Notes

1. There is a lively academic debate taking place on how to relate the current pandemic to Beck's concept of the risk society (Beck 1992; Arias-Maldonado 2020). This is however beyond the scope of this study. Moreover, we do not engage with coping strategies as conceptualised by Hirsch (1972), as these focus on dealing with uncertainty in the production of new cultural goods. Our focus is however on dealing with uncertainty and risks once a festival has been established.
2. A cross-national comparison is beyond the scope of this study, due to the limited number of interviews per country.

## Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

## Ethical approval information

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