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# Maintaining Connections during the Pandemic: Rural Arts Festivals and Digital Practices

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**Abstract:** During the COVID lockdowns of 2020/21, the transmission of live or recorded concerts grew exponentially as festival makers embraced digital technologies to a greater degree. Investigating how this digital pivot interrupted festival-making practices is now important given that online and hybrid modes will potentially be used in conjunction with in-person events in the future. This task has relevance for rural areas where digital infrastructures can be under-developed. Yet, place-based, community-organised festivals can play a significant role in sustaining local communities. In this context, we explore the recent digital programming practices of music festivals in West Cork, Ireland. Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative research design and generated data from fieldwork observations and in-depth interviews with festival practitioners in West Cork. This area was chosen for study because it is characterised by intensive arts and festival activity, high tourism activity, and a significant level of social change. The findings show that the ability of festivals to move practices online was variable and highly resource dependent. Overall, they suggest that in times of crisis the role of festivals became even more important than normal. Festivals played an important role in sustaining social connectivity, cultural participation and employment, with festival organisations demonstrating a strong sense of care and responsibility towards participants.

**Keywords:** arts festivals; online/hybrid; digital programming; sustainable rural development; Ireland; COVID 19



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## 1. Introduction

Digital technologies have been influencing arts festivals' practices for some time; however, the global pandemic that took hold in early 2020 significantly accelerated engagement with digital technologies [1]. Several studies now suggest that festival-making has a digital future [2]. A range of factors including growing digital literacy among artists, festival makers and festival audiences; the expansion of digital infrastructure; technological advances of various kinds; the creative possibilities of digital technology; the search for greater sustainability in festival-making practices; and growing efforts to foster environmental awareness through cultural practices are all at play. A key task now for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike is developing a better understanding of how, and to what effect, working in digital space is shaping festival practices. This task could be advanced from any number of perspectives, but here there is a particular interest in small-to-medium arts festivals operating in rural contexts. The challenge of developing sustainable digital infrastructures for rural areas is a contemporary priority for many countries [3].

Internationally, as festivals increasingly engage with digital technologies to create, produce and disseminate, there is uncertainty about the implications for small- and medium-sized festivals. This is especially true for those supported by under-developed digital infrastructures, as can be seen in the case of rural areas. Such festivals tend to be under-studied because festival studies have focused on urban areas [4]. However, festivals are very important for the cultural, social and economic development of rural places. Recently,

there has been a growing interest in the phenomenon of locally organised rural arts festivals and how they impact upon rural areas [5]. Gibson et al. have emphasised the role they play in reflecting the collective identities of place and people, Duffy and Waitt stressed the broad ranging significance of festivals to rural communities, while Qu and Cheer have linked them to sustainable rural revitalisation [6–8].

All these studies pertain to festivals physically produced in rural places, but if such festivals begin to produce and programme in digital space, what implications might ensue? This raises questions not only for cultural participation, but more broadly for community development, social inclusion and the rural economy. Even more fundamental is the matter of whether rural-based festivals have the capacity to avail of the opportunities that digital technologies offer to sustain cultural production and participation. To address some of these questions, this paper draws on the findings of an empirical study of 10 small-to-medium-sized arts festivals in a predominantly rural area of Ireland in West Cork. To generate insight into these ongoing changes, this paper uses a case study approach to investigate how festivals in this area were propelled into the digital arena by COVID-19. The intention of the paper is to: identify if and how festivals increased engagement with digital technologies during the crisis induced by the pandemic in 2020–2021; understand how they incorporated these technologies; and develop insights into what this meant for how they maintained connections with artists, audiences and host places. It also comments on possible future directions for arts festivals in digital space.

This paper begins by reviewing recent work on the digital transformations characterising festival practices before going on to discuss the role that festivals play in rural communities, particularly in terms of sustainability. This is followed by an overview of the methods employed before explicating how festivals in West Cork responded to the pandemic through digital means. This includes necessary description of activities offered and a discussion through four themes: importance of ensuring continuity; factors enabling/constraining digital transition; maintaining connections with artists, audiences and local communities and the continued relationship of rural arts festivals with their place. The paper concludes with a discussion on the ways festivals were supported in digitalising since the pandemic and considers the implications for future festival-making practice and policy making as well as the recognition of the continued importance of place for rural arts festivals in the digital sphere.

### *1.1. Festivals and Digitalisation*

Understanding how digital technologies are influencing festival practices is becoming an increasingly important research task. Ryan, Fenton, Ahmed and Scarf have written on the degree of digital maturity in the events sector. However, in the festival context, extant research shows digital influences developing to varying degrees, across different areas, such that the overall transformation of festival practices is quite complex [9]. To date, several quite different lines of research enquiry have opened, all with potential for further expansion. Some investigate the application of digital communications and marketing strategies in festival contexts, including the use of social media for promotional purposes, the use of social media for distributing festival content, as well as the impact of social media on the festival industry [10–12]. Other researchers have focused on the transformation of festival-goers' experiences at physically staged festivals, for example, through the use of digital tools and devices, in the context of mediated and hybrid festival offerings and in relation to digitally mediated connectivity pre and post live festival experience [2,13–15]. Others have begun to investigate the role that digital tools can play in respect of specific operational areas such as crisis management and the digital practices of specific genres of festivals like literary festivals [16,17]. Still, further research has begun to trace the evolution of music festival broadcasting in social media [18]. All this work offers potential for further development. For example, while researchers have been delving into the relative merits and specific capabilities of broadcasting platforms like YouTube, similar in-depth enquiries

have yet to be made about festivals where digital transmission, especially since COVID-19, is becoming a widespread practice [19,20].

The potential that technology offers to improve festivals' sustainability credentials is another theme in researching festivals and digitalisation. Finding technological solutions to address the harmful environmental impacts of festivals is obviously important but there is also a consciousness that as technology changes how festivals are produced and experienced, new questions arise in respect of their social sustainability [21]. The increasingly mediated and networked nature of all kinds of cultural and political activities means that new social connectivities and communities of interest, as well as new and different forms of social and political activism, are being forged. More than ever before, festivals can be understood as nodes in complex, location-independent social networks [22]. As Quan-Haase and Martin explain, 'people's technology-mediated activities... (can have) ... wide-ranging repercussions surpassing the constraints of the physical space in which they... (were) ... located' [23]. Their analysis highlights the need to understand the implications of these developments in terms of how audience reach is extended across space. Fraser et al. investigated audiences' reception of music engagement online during COVID-19 lockdowns and found that performances facilitated social cohesion, intercultural understanding and community resilience [24]. These authors concluded that the YouTube platform emerged as 'an important bridge connecting musicians and producers with a wider audience' [24]. All this means that researchers interested in understanding how festivals are implicated in fostering social interactions and inclusivity, building community and cohesion must now increasingly think about community in terms of hybridity. Simons defines hybrid event communities as communities where the network infrastructure includes both a physical and a virtual component [25].

Yet, amid all the interest that exists in understanding how these location-independent social networks operate and create meanings, it remains important to continue to investigate how they relate to the physical places and communities where so much festival activity continues and will continue to be (re)produced. In her investigation of hybrid event communities, Simons acknowledges that part of the practices through which community is performed are place-based and occur during the event [25]. She goes on to argue that the event community is maintained independently of place. However, different kinds of event communities are formed through different kinds of practices. Festivals, for example, are always sustained by diverse place-based practices and activities that extend beyond the time-bound enactment of the festival and the cultural boundaries of the festival stage. Practices like planning, curating, managing, resourcing, volunteering, facilitating, hosting, and accommodating develop over time in ways that are often deeply rooted in place. In complex ways, these practices embed festivals into the economic, social, and cultural fabric of local places and generate the kinds of positive development outcomes that so many studies ascribe to festivals both urban and rural.

### *1.2. Rural Arts Festivals and Digitalisation*

Writing specifically in rural contexts, researchers have noted the role of festivals in reproducing collective identities and cultural practices, fostering social and cultural cohesion, developing cultural capital, fostering local development and generating tourism [4,5,7,26–28]. Moreover, festivals of all kinds can be understood as social and cultural experiences that diverge from the mundanity of everyday life and have the capacity to temporarily transform ordinary places into spaces that offer new meanings and sensations [24,29,30]. Community-centred festivals have the potential to offer bottom-up, locally oriented approaches to placemaking that veer away from the top-down economic and cultural strategies of city marketers [31].

Overall, rural festivals can be conceived as being part of a dense fabric that threads through many different elements of rural life. They enable a whole host of cultural and social practices that generate employment, training, upskilling and capacity building, social interaction, and community development [32]. Quinn interprets festivals as socially

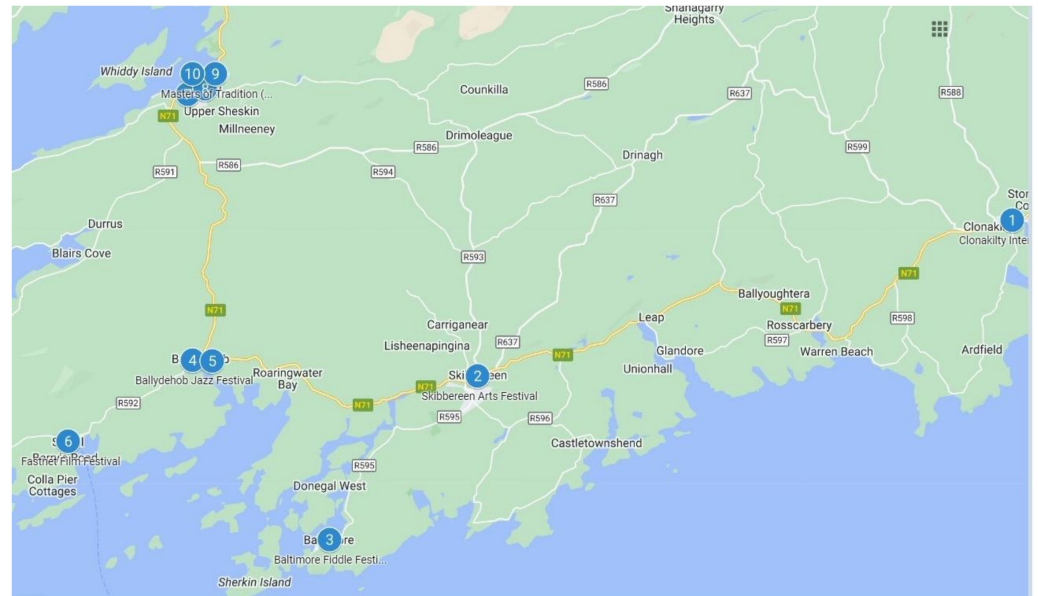
sustaining devices, while Mahon and Hyyryläinen highlight their capacity to act as a catalyst for other related activity [5,32]. Their study of an Irish and a Finnish rural festival concluded that arts festivals ‘represent a highly flexible resource that can be successfully applied in development in many forms’ [5]. While festivals as a cultural practice have a particular temporality and are commonly defined on the basis that they are temporary, ephemeral and short term in duration, more complete understandings point to the fact that while a festival in any given place may last no more than a couple of days, it is always supported by processes of production and dissemination that extend far beyond the moment of the festival itself [32]. Many of these processes extend beyond the cultural realm, while the arts activities themselves connect into wider, year-round cultural activities in complex ways that defy the temporally bounded nature often ascribed to festivals. As Quinn (2023) has argued, ‘arts festivals flourish everywhere in the guise of people, individually and collectively, developing and utilising resource networks of varying kinds in the acts of creating and performing culture’ [33]. In rural areas where ‘hard’, permanent cultural venues are often scarce or possibly non-existent, these networks are vital because of the input they make to sustaining not only cultural but also social and economic life. As festival organisations increasingly avail of the potential afforded by digital technologies, the availability and capacity of digital infrastructures adds a further layer of complexity to the practice of festival-making. Everywhere, but especially in rural contexts, there is uncertainty about what this might mean. Fraser et al. note that research into how ‘the collective social function of music gatherings translate in the absence of face-to-face encounter in digital environments is in its infancy’ [24]. For some commentators, there is a concern that rural areas risk being left behind by technological advances and that these advances are driven primarily by the desire to solve problems associated with urbanisation [34,35]. Certainly, the adoption of technological platforms and devices and the development of digital infrastructures including the emergence of digital hubs and shared working spaces are changing the workings of rural life. These technological adaptations are disrupting traditional patterns of creating festivals and changing the relationships between festivals, artists, audiences and the local places within which they are often strongly rooted.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Since the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, arts festivals have experienced a great deal of upheaval. In the second quarter of 2020, according to the CSO, arts sector activity fell by 67%. In County Tipperary, one of the most populated rural counties in Ireland, of 73 festivals that were approved funding in January 2020, 53 were cancelled and 20 went ahead [36]. Normal strategic planning processes were disrupted and most festivals have focused on dealing with the challenge of surviving under very difficult and uncertain operational conditions that persisted into 2022. In this context, it was reasoned that the best way to conduct research at this moment was to adopt a narrow and in-depth qualitative case study approach that brought the researcher close to informants in their real-world contexts. The West Cork region was selected for study because relative to the rest of rural Ireland, it has a particularly high number of arts and cultural festivals. These differ in size, make-up and range, and they include festivals that are solely volunteer run as well as those that function as companies limited by guarantee (CLG). The area is home to the West Cork Arts Festival Collective, which was set up in 2019 to support 11 of the area’s arts festivals by sharing resources and coordinating festival promotional activities. Member festivals celebrate a range of cultural forms from storytelling to fiddle playing. Some, like Bantry’s Chamber Music Festival, are located in towns and offer ticketed performances, while others operate in small villages, are largely free and open to wider communities. West Cork covers an area to the south and west of Cork city within the county of Cork. It is renowned for its picturesque towns and villages, beaches, rugged peninsulas and strong food culture.

Data were generated in the latter half of 2022 from 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews with practitioners and stakeholders related to 10 festivals in West Cork in the south of Ireland (See Figure 1). Many of the interviews and all the observations were

conducted in person, with some of the interviews conducted online. The interviews were all approximately 1 h long and were recorded, transcribed and organised using NVIVO software (v14.23.0). The transcriptions were then imported into NVIVO and coded in line with the research questions. The data were thematically analysed following Braun and Clarke [37].



**Figure 1.** Google Map of West Cork region with pins denoting the location of the festivals included in this study (Source: Google Maps with pins saved by author).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Festivals Response to the Pandemic

Nine of the ten festivals studied were found to have either adopted digital technology for the first time, or significantly increased their digital engagement since the onset of COVID 19 in March 2020. Three of the study festivals are organised by West Cork Music, and this organisation had previously had some digital experience, having traditionally broadcast content from the West Cork Chamber Music Festival on the national radio station, Lyric FM. However, its digital engagement from 2020 onwards was unprecedented. Eight of the festivals that moved programming online were single-genre festivals featuring music (6), film (1) and literature (1). One, Bantry Kupala, was a multicultural festival that went online in 2021. The one exception in the study was the multi-disciplinary arts festival Skibbereen Arts Festival which did not use digital technology at all.

The data analysis quickly showed that the singularly most important digital adaptation made by these festivals was to use virtual platforms to disseminate programme content. The priority was to ensure the continuation of activities during those times in 2020 and 2021 when government regulations prohibited in-person collective gatherings. Thus, it was not a matter of festivals commissioning or producing digital art, but ensuring they could continue programming and disseminating content and maintaining connections between art producers on the one hand and audiences on the other. In this, they were not unusual [16,38,39].

Table 1 below lays out the details of festivals participating in the study. The nine festivals which used digital technologies to transmit programming are Baltimore Fiddle Festival, Ballydehob Jazz Festival, Secret Song, Clonakilty International Guitar Festival, West Cork Chamber Music Festival, West Cork Music Masters of Tradition, Bantry Literary Festival, Fastnet Film Festival and Bantry Kupala Festival. The following sections draw on an analysis of the digital transmission practices adopted, focusing on the factors shaping



the digital transmission, the digital practices implemented and the implications of the transition for maintaining festival, artist, audience, and host place connections.

**Table 1.** Details on festivals participating in the study.

Festival	Genre	Location	Date	Digitalisation '20-'21
Clonakilty International Guitar Festival	Music	Clonakilty	September	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube; Streamed live via ReStream
Baltimore Fiddle Fair	Music	Baltimore	May	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube
Ballydehob Jazz Festival	Music	Ballydehob	April/May	YouTube
Secret Song	Music	Ballydehob	October	Facebook, YouTube;
Fastnet Film Festival	Film	Schull	May	Festival Website
Bantry Literary Festival	Literary	Bantry	July	Zoom, YouTube
West Cork Chamber Music Festival	Music	Bantry	June/July	Our Concerts Live, Vimeo
Masters of Tradition	Music	Bantry	August	Our Concerts Live, Vimeo
Skibbereen Arts Festival	Arts	Skibbereen	September	N/A
Kupala Festival	Arts	Bantry	June	2021: Facebook, Zoom

### 3.2. Factors Enabling/Constraining the Digital Transition

The findings are clear that COVID-19 was a catalyst for adopting digital practices and that the experience of 'going digital' occurred in the context of crisis. Festivals had programmes planned and prepared, but once government guidelines banned/severely curtailed collective gatherings, there was widespread uncertainty as to how to proceed. Boin and 'T Hart explain that in both Chinese and Greek, the term 'crisis' refers to a critical point, a fork in the road of development [40]. Thus, if the word 'crisis' implies threat, then it also presents opportunity, in this case, to try new ways of engaging with festival constituencies. In the study area, festivals were differentially positioned to react to the crisis and one of the 10 festivals studied, the community, volunteer-run Skibbereen Arts Festival, did not have the resources to continue once its normal modus operandi was unavailable. However, the remaining nine decided to digitise their management and administration practices by moving all communications and meetings online and to maintain programming by disseminating content online.

Once festivals decided to try converting to online or hybrid formats, they then had to decide how to transmit their audio-visual content. This decision was informed by several factors including familiarity with platforms, capabilities of platforms and the quality of broadband connectivity. Initially, the crisis created by the pandemic meant that time and speed, as opposed to production values, were critical decision-making factors. Basic questions to address were speed and ease of transition, available connectivity and familiarity of staff with platforms. For example, when the pandemic hit, one festival organiser (interviewee 29) noted: *I knew we were going to do something, we had to do something' and so they decided to host an event called 'Sitting Room to Sitting Room', where artists played directly from their living room and streamed their performances live through the venue's Facebook page and the Facebook Live function. While these recordings were not necessarily of a high recording standard, as interviewee 29 explained, 'that gave us a foundation. And look, it's not ideal, but it's possible' . . . . That was what really opened up the community aspect, the galvanizing aspect of it, and also the simplicity of it'. The speed and ease of use of technology was paramount in the decision-making process. Choosing Facebook, a digital platform which is free of charge and easily accessible to a wide audience meant that events could be programmed quickly and with ease, requiring little to no upskilling or training for either festival organisers, artists, or audiences.*

Table 2 below lays out the platforms that participating festivals employed. Cost considerations were important in the decision-making process. For the festivals that are community run, not-for-profit organisations that run mostly free events, using a free-

to-use platform was very important. West Cork Music CLG, which organises three of the festivals (Masters of Tradition, West Cork Literary Festival and West Cork Chamber Music Festival), operates as a registered charity. It is relatively better financially resourced and generally programmes fee-paying ticketed events with some free events. Here, cost considerations were different. These three festivals were able to balance cost factors with platform functionality in their decision-making. Some festivals had assets, or access to assets, that left them better placed than others to operate digitally. One festival, for example, is run by the owner of a live music venue. This gave the festival access to a physical space with high-speed broadband as well as to skilled sound and lighting technicians. These findings speak to the significance of being able to access certain resources and show how access to 'soft' and 'hard' infrastructures can support/curtail festivals' digital engagement.

**Table 2.** Digital platforms used by festivals with descriptions of fees and capabilities.

Digital Platform	Cost	Capabilities
Zoom	Free option/More capabilities with subscription	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube (streamed live via ReStream).
Facebook Live	Free option/More capabilities with subscription	Facebook Live is a streaming video feature on the social media platform Facebook that lets you interact in real time with an audience. Once the livestream is finished, it remains on a page's Facebook feed and video archives, unless removed by admin.
YouTube	Free option/More capabilities with subscription	Online video sharing and social media platform. YouTube has a livestreaming function.
Restream	Free option/More capabilities with subscription	Enables streaming across multiple platforms (such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter) at the same time. The content streamed can be pre-recorded and scheduled to stream at a particular time.
Vimeo	Free option/More capabilities with subscription	Hosting, sharing, and services platform. Vimeo also has a livestreaming function.
Our Concerts Live	Fee	Manage production, streaming and monetisation of concerts/events/festivals.
Shift 72	Fee	Online video sharing platform that can also monetise content.

Irrespective of the platforms chosen by the festivals, broadband connectivity fundamentally influenced all festivals' digital activities. The term broadband connectivity refers to the level of high-speed broadband available to festivals. Ireland has a national broadband plan to roll out high speed services throughout the country, but connectivity remains incomplete and is unevenly distributed across the West Cork area. This fact was obvious from festival organisers' descriptions of connectivity as being 'hit and miss' (Interviewee 11, 15, 27) to 'very varying' (Interviewee 24). For many, livestreaming a live event was not an option 'We're in West Cork, so like, streaming is very problematic' [Interviewee 27]. Further, broadband connectivity for festivals varies across the sites used. Poor connectivity was an issue not only because festivals had to transmit content but also because audiences had to be able to receive it. Interviewee 14 explained: 'it wasn't perfect for everyone. And it caused some people to tune out, stop watching. And of course, you can't guarantee the quality'. While festivals worried about being able to stream content without disruption, they realised that for some audiences this was irrelevant because as one organiser quipped: 'I mean, obviously, if you didn't have good broadband, it wasn't an issue, you just couldn't watch it anyway and you didn't know you couldn't watch it' (Interviewee 20). Some festivals experimented with different means of transmitting content. For example, some organisers pre-recorded a concert an hour before streaming it live on the platform ReStream. Others had to take account of timing. As one interviewee explained: 'if we were streaming [the concert], and there was 100 people in the direct area, watching it, that would affect our streaming' (Interviewee 28).

Thus, there was a strong awareness that the possibility of maintaining digital activities into the future was strongly constrained by shortcomings in digital infrastructure. Festivals faced *'issues in terms of you know, the technology and being able to actually stream sufficient quality'*. Equally, they are constrained by resource availability: *'and just in terms of making the whole thing out, like we are very, like, we're a very small team, we don't have big amounts of resources to draw on, it just wouldn't have worked in terms of making sure everything was as you would want it to be to do like, broadcast'* (Interviewee 14). However, some festivals could see how digital activities could complement in-person festival activities in the future. For interviewee 14: *'you couldn't solely rely on it (digital) easily. . . But I think as a complement to the main festival, I think it's definitely here to stay. Just not as much as in during the pandemic, like a lot less. But in terms of, let's say promotional videos, and for let's say the Literary Festival, having events online, like having the odd book launch or the odd reading [ . . . ]'* (Interviewee 14).

Overall, the findings show that festivals' digital transitions tended to be very dynamic and not necessarily linear. West Cork Music's Masters of Tradition Festival tried a hybrid approach in 2020 before moving to a fully online festival in 2021. Bantry Kupala was cancelled in 2020 but reappeared online in 2021. As the pandemic wore on, a diversity of practices were adopted. In response to connectivity issues, some festivals upgraded their broadband to livestream performances from their venues. Some that availed of free-to-use platforms at the start of the pandemic progressed to use platforms with higher capabilities as resources became available to them. Sometimes, festivals transmitted live performances in real time (i.e., livestreaming), other times they transmitted pre-recorded performances in real time (still livestreaming but employing different platforms for different results), or hosted content on online platforms to be accessed on demand (e.g., concerts hosted on a YouTube channel). Sometimes, they adopted more than one platform simultaneously. West Cork Music even started professionally recording performances in places like Berlin, Amsterdam and New York using local teams where the music was recorded. One organiser noted: *'In 2021, we really went to town, we did 32 concerts, filmed all over Europe and in the US'* (Interviewee 13A). They explained how they *'did a pay model with Our Concerts Live, which is a US platform. . . where you could either buy the whole festival or pay concert by concert or buy a bundle of concerts . . . And the videos were much more professional'* (Interviewee 13).

As other researchers like Davies have noted, festivals needed government supports to survive the pandemic [41]. These findings concur, showing that the availability of state supports was critical in festivals' ability to make these changes and to absorb the considerable costs associated with upgrading broadband connectivity and livestreaming performances with high production values (sound and lighting technicians, hiring cameras, etc.). In 2021, arts festivals in Ireland were eligible to apply for state-sponsored schemes like the Arts Council's Capacity Grant and the government's Live Performance Support Scheme. Simultaneously, artists and creative workers could avail of the government's Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) scheme. The value of these supports was well acknowledged by study participants, as exemplified in a comment from Interviewee 21: *'The Arts Council funding during 2021, without that, I don't think we would be here now. I think a lot of organisations would have gone under. Like, what would we have done? That was vital and I really believe that if the Arts Council said: 'Look, we are really sorry, but we can't fund any arts festivals until the pandemic is over [ . . . ], I think it was a vital source of income, which enabled us to keep going'*. These supports helped build capacity and enabled festivals to develop their approaches to transmitting material online. One illustrative example of this is the online series produced by the organisers of Ballydehob Jazz Festival and Secret Song. The series, *'Alive in the Cracks'* was created in 2021 because of the Live Performance Support Scheme (LPSS) (an initiative of the Irish Government's Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport & Media). *'Alive in the Cracks'* was *'a statement of solidarity with the artistic community'* (Levis' Corner House website, 2020) that highlighted local musicians from the West Cork/Mizen Head area. All performances were recorded live in Levis', and the performances were released every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday at 1 pm on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.



Thus, gradually, over the period from March 2020, when the pandemic began, through 2021 and beyond, a variety of distinctly different digital platforms, with different capabilities and different cost implications came to be adopted by the study festivals, as outlined in Table 1. A diversity of practices emerged in response to varying enabling and constraining factors. The data showed that for some festivals, the pandemic was a period for reflecting on their purpose and value: *'Our experience of the pandemic and the programmes we brought online shows, clarified, crystallised areas that we know we need to improve on, how we communicate things in a different way to before the pandemic'* (Interviewee 15).

### 3.3. Maintaining Connections with Artists, Audiences, Local Communities and Place

Central to these reflections was the fundamental relationship between the festival and its core constituencies of artists, audiences, communities and the place it is based. The findings suggest that one of the key reasons underpinning the decision to go online was a deep sense of responsibility to maintain these connections. The nature of small-to-medium, rural-based festivals meant there was a strong overlap between the latter two cohorts. Festivals appreciated that the conditions created by the pandemic were *'all so new, and it was all kind of scary, and some people were maybe on their own, maybe really freaking out'* and viewed their efforts as a means of allowing *'us all to connect together'* (Interviewee 21). Interviewee 27 explained that *'people need(ed) this more than they might normally need it even because everything else stopped, we wanted to make sure that we were doing our thing' . . . 'So that's why we did the hybrid thing we wanted to make sure that we (were) . . . catering to our audience of people who still wanted to . . . have something to go to, and the people who were afraid to leave the house had something that they could get at home'*. This desire to support people during the periods of lockdown fed into some festivals' decisions to extend their programming outside of the usual festival period. Digitalisation enabled them to do this. The earlier mentioned *'Sitting room to Sitting Room'* series staged by the Clonakilty Guitar Festival is one example. The 12 days of Christmas series introduced by Baltimore Fiddle Fair is another. Bantry Kupala normally operates as a one-day festival with a core programme of events that are repeated twice during the day. However, when they produced an online festival in 2021, events ran over the course of a week. The particular nature of the digital experience also influenced these decisions as Interviewee 14 explained: *'rather than having a [ . . . ] week and a half in the summer, it was dispersed throughout the year [ . . . ] I think we realized quite quickly that audience members don't have as much stamina for, let's say, an intense week of virtual things, virtual events online as they do offline'*. Festival audiences appreciated being able to stay connected. One organiser referred to *'those people probably who come every year, even just a little message on Facebook to each other . . . it (digital engagement) was really worthwhile . . . a lot of people (were) on their own and some lovely messages came in and people looking forward to watching every night and it really got them through Christmas'* (Interview 21). In going digital, there was also evidence that festival organisations saw sustaining employment for artists as vital and acted accordingly. As interviewee 21 explained: *'we set up a voluntary donation button. . . which we divvied up to the artists, so all the artists got paid, maybe up to 50% of what they would have got had they come, so it was great'*. Respondents explained how *'It was just a way to honour the bookings (with artists) that we had, and to connect everyone who weren't able to see each other and, you know, . . . connect our communities'* (Interviewee 1). For Interviewee 13, it was hugely important *'to get money into artists' pockets, that was the whole issue in that year'*. *'They all lost so much income from the lockdown. It was really appreciated by the artist, what we were doing. And trying to give them more work afterwards.'* Festival organisers consistently referred to the need to pay artists, a commitment that aligns with the Arts Council's Paying the Artist policy, launched in 2020. As Interviewee 29 explained, *'there was no mate rates for that, it was like, this is the industry rate. That's what the Arts Council or Department of Culture expect (artists) to be paid. That's what you have to pay. That's what your invoice has to show. So, it's all very transparent'*. COVID-19-related state supports were vital in enabling festivals to employ creatives. As Interviewee 28 explained, *'we were able to hire all these people, with cameras, . . . because the funding was being given to us'*.

Overall, respondents demonstrated a strong awareness of how their festival formed part of a larger whole. Several organisers communicated concerns that a lapse in festival continuity, e.g., not running the festival, the closure of a venue, a person losing a job or being unable to sustain their arts practice would deliver a fatal blow for the respective arts ecosystems in the local place (festival, venue, music industry, arts communities). As one of the festival organisers related: *'... the first thing is—you always do a festival, if you don't do your festival, your festival does not continue, especially when it is community festival'*. Therefore, the concept of *'keeping the doors open'* or *'keeping the lights on'* was a strong theme. The process of transitioning programming online also brought greater clarity to respondents' awareness that the host place is an important identifier of the festival. Interviewee 14 from West Cork Music explained: *'You can't take Bantry out of it either. Bantry is an important character in the festivals as everything else. It's what makes our festivals unique ... what we're also reminding them, through the digitisation, is of Bantry itself'*. Accordingly, trying to capture and communicate a sense of the festival place in the digital realm was very important and several festivals (e.g., Baltimore Fiddle Festival, Clonakilty Guitar Festival, West Cork Music) described incorporating footage of the local area in videos posted online. As one participant described: *'we decided we were going to do some pre-records of artists booked for the festival, in iconic local venues that would be part of the session trail, you know, that's a way to bring in the town, the physicality of the town'* (Interviewee 29). Others decided to live stream from known and recognisable venues in ways that maintained the festival's identity and place as an integral part of the festival. Interviewee 21 talked about how they *'filmed little introductions with each act as if they were here around Baltimore, and ... and we put that out and it gave our audiences a chance to connect'*. For some, going digital created new opportunities to emphasise distinct place attributes. As Interviewee 20 said, *'it has opened up a new way of engaging with audiences and it's opened up a new way of ... representing the festival and representing the town. ... the values and ... the artistic statement, if you like, of the festival is always about the town. ... in that it couldn't happen anywhere else'*.

However, there was an overriding sense in the data that transmitting content online is *'nowhere near as good as the real thing'* (Interviewee 21). Festival organisers much prefer the traditional, in-person festival format. For some, this was because without a physical staging, the festival was not *'itself'*. For Interviewee 13a, *'the reason people have festivals in beautiful places like Bantry is to go there and enjoy the, you know, the whole thing. The ambience of the place, and people and music'*. Similarly, Interviewee 11 commented *'people need to come to Schull because it's not just what we screen, It's the whole atmosphere of the village and being beside the sea'*. Nevertheless, some festivals were of the view that digital activities could complement traditional in-person festival activities in the future. For interviewee 14, *'you couldn't solely rely on it (digital) easily... But I think as a complement to the main festival, I think it's definitely here to stay. Just not as much as in during the pandemic, like a lot less'* (Interviewee 14).

#### 4. Discussion

Globally, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was a severe disruption to arts festivals and represented a crisis of major proportions. This study's findings offer insight into how a cluster of small-to-medium-sized festivals located in a largely rural area in Ireland reacted once external conditions dictated that they could not operate as normal. The findings present a picture of arts festivals in a process of transition. Like other studies, the findings *'testify to the resourcefulness, adaptability, and creativity of festival organisers who had to, very quickly, find local solutions to a global calamity'* [42]. Of particular interest here was how festivals would maintain their socially sustaining role in the event of digital adaptations.

The nature of challenges faced by rural festivals are often distinct from urban festivals. Rural areas in general, and rural festivals in particular, face challenges such as underdeveloped infrastructure (i.e., transport, digital) that are less evident in urban areas. The rural nature of the study context also meant that the pandemic posed challenges linked to social isolation and broadband connectivity [43,44]. During the pandemic, the study festivals

were found to prioritise sustaining cultural production (among artists and creatives) and social connections (between festivals, audiences and local communities. This social interaction was often highly dependent on broadband connectivity, which in rural areas suffers from poor connectivity and limited infrastructure.

An early finding was that of the 10 festivals studied, nine transitioned during the study period and began disseminating their programme content digitally. Thus, there is definite evidence of a digital transition in progress in the rural area studied [35]. This study reports only on programming activities and so its insights are partial, but it found that the process of transition was very dynamic, even within the short period covered by the study. The transition could be described as tentative in the first instance, very much involving organisers doing their best in uncertain conditions with the skills, expertise and equipment available to them. As conditions changed, so too did the transition. Festival organisers gradually acquired more knowledge and confidence and gained more resources through their stakeholder networks. This process involved stops and starts and non-linear change.

Festivals' transition to online was strongly shaped by access to resources. Very notably, state supports acted as a critical enabler. Rentschler and Lee found the pandemic to have 'revealed the crucial roles played by local governments in arts ecosystems and the importance of national and state funds to address priorities and needs of local artists' [1]. This statement holds for the festivals in this study. Conversely, unevenly developed broadband connectivity operated as a major constraint. Furthermore, the findings show a disinclination to continue operating in the digital sphere post pandemic, at least in the immediate future, and poor broadband connectivity is a key reason for this. The findings of this study therefore include important insights for future policy making. It is clear from the data that festivals, and associated creative practices, continued as a direct result of the funding made available during COVID-19. This included the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the Capacity Building Support Scheme, and the Live Performance Support Scheme. This information can be used by policy makers in Ireland (to understand how funding was used and how vital supports were), as well by policy makers internationally (to understand why so many festivals and creative practices continued in Ireland throughout the pandemic). Further lessons can be learned from the introduction of these emergency measures such as how and when they can be efficiently and evenly distributed in future crises. Paramount in the findings is the recognition of high-level and high-quality creative work that was achieved by the provision of funding to festivals during this period. Of further significance is the recognition of the impact of previous policies by the Arts Council, such as Paying the Artist Policy launched in February 2020, on workers in the arts sectors during this period. The success of the Capacity Building Support Scheme (evidenced by how often it was mentioned in interviews with festival makers) demonstrates the impact it had, often in relation to upgrading digital infrastructure, such as broadband speed, or digital equipment. While capacity was built through this scheme, if festivals are to continue producing online or making digital content, they require continued resourcing (for example, continued funding to pay technicians to support the production of high-quality material for distribution online). While not all festivals intend to continue producing online festivals, or even hybrid options, the ones that show interest require continued investment to produce online and arguably, to make continued use of the capacity that has already been built.

The findings show that despite constraints, and in the face of crisis, opportunities arise [45]. From a business model perspective, the decision to transmit programming online can be interpreted as innovative and adaptative [39]. One effect associated with an online move is an increase in audience reach [38]. This in turn can open new forms of community engagement that may be more participatory and co-creative in nature [46]. The current findings support all these assertions. Indeed, not only did a majority of festivals studied manage to maintain programming during the period of their normal festival, some of them disseminated programme material outside of this time. The drive to maintain programming 'no matter what', reveals an emotional reflexivity among festival organisers whose curatorial practice during this time was informed by an ethics of care

that recognised the vulnerability of local rural communities that they served and the loss that loyal visiting audiences were experiencing because of not being able to attend in person [47]. Furthermore, these rural arts festivals were conscious that they had to keep going to support the economic livelihoods of artists and other creatives. It was clear that the crisis created by the pandemic not only emphasised the interconnectedness of the local cultural scene; it also revealed its fragility [6].

This evidence supports arguments by Jeannotte and others about the role that culture plays in building citizenship capacity [48]. The understanding that festivals can help combat social isolation is particularly significant in the rural context, where rural isolation is a recognised issue. Participation and inclusion are core principles in Ireland's national rural policy, *Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025*. Overall, these findings point to the significance of rural festivals as socially and economically sustaining devices and further support the host of studies that speak to the value of festivals for rural places [5,26]. In transitioning programming practices online, the festivals studied were, by definition, becoming more networked with actors located elsewhere. Some researchers hold that as festivals become more networked, the role of place subsides in importance; however, these findings do not concur [25]. On the contrary, the digital transition emphasised the particularities of place and what this can mean operationally as well as symbolically. Festival organisers' desire, ability and capacity to produce festivals digitally varied across the study area based on a whole range of influential geographical factors. Thus, while digitalisation holds the promise of accessibility anywhere and at any time, in terms of both production and consumption, it always remains contextualised by, and connected to, a particular time and place. In some senses, the digital presence amplifies the importance of place. Several festival organisers went to great lengths to communicate a sense of place in how they developed their programmes. The physical attributes of place, like venues, social spaces as well as the festival's geographical location itself, not only remain important but perhaps have an amplified significance in the context of festival digitalisation. As articulated earlier, 'online' does not mean that festivals become detached from the places in which they are produced. They are still very much part of the ecosystem, whether this is through the location of the people who produce the events (i.e., festival makers, sound technicians, camera crew, artists, etc.), the infrastructure that supports them (i.e., physical buildings where festivals are recorded and/or streamed online, or digital infrastructure of broadband networks) or the resources that are available (i.e., funding). This paper thus shows that place remains central to the character of the festival both on- and off-line.

## 5. Conclusions

Arts festivals are in a constant state of change as they dialogue with their dynamic host places, with changing cultural production and consumption trends and with a host of much broader socio-economic and political transformations. However, the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020 has undoubtedly constituted a significant period of transformation for the sector. Many commentators have noted that the impacts of the pandemic have been unevenly felt by places and communities around the world, and it is very likely that arts festivals have also been unevenly affected. This paper has tried to shed light on the transition experienced by small-to-medium-sized arts festivals located in a rural area in Ireland. It found the arts festivals studied to be in a process of digital transition, a process that was challenged and shaped by enabling and constraining factors. The latter, in combination with a strong desire to return to live in-person festivals, conspired to produce a disinclination to sustain online programming as a central preoccupation in the immediate future. Future research into festival digital transitions is needed to identify whether the findings are particular to the rural context.

In investigating the transition, the study found festivals to be highly adaptive and open to programming online, although this was contingent on resource availability. This study was, however, very limited in its focus on the three years of the pandemic. Further research is needed to investigate how the transition will evolve in the absence of crisis conditions. In



asking questions about why festivals made the transition, the study identified a curatorial practice that was imbued with a strong caring dimension comprising a sensitivity to the needs of local audiences and local communities and a responsibility to other actors in the local cultural ecosystem. The pandemic has prompted a growing interest in understanding how various practices, including cultural practices, imbue their activities with an ethics of care, and this paper strongly advocates further research on festivals from this perspective [49]. Ultimately, the festivals that made the digital transition revealed themselves to be deeply rooted in place. This finding supports the need for ongoing research into the complex nature and important functions of arts festivals as they continuously evolve in contemporary times.

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