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Valuing culture in times of an ecological crisis:

The potential role of festivals towards a sustainable degrowth transition



Abstract

Contemporary studies recognise the root of the current ecological crisis to lie within an economic system that is dependent on infinite and exponential growth. This system is inherently unsustainable considering the planet has finite resources. As the economy is embedded in culture (Polanyi 1944/2001), a solution to the climate crisis requires a cultural transition. This research fills the gap within the discipline of cultural economics to fundamentally discuss the role of the cultural sector in times of an ecological crisis. In these times, it is imperative to broaden the scope of the valuation of cultural goods. Hence, this study expands on the valuation approach within cultural economics by building a bridge between cultural economics and ecological economics. This connection responds to the call from the side of ecological economists (Costanza et al., 1997) for the need for a shared vision, which cultural goods are able to provide through their imaginative quality (Beckert, 2011). A central task of this new alliance is to research the value of cultural goods in the context of a sustainable transition. This research takes the first step in that task, introducing the main research question: what is the potential role of festivals towards a sustainable degrowth transition?

Festivals appear to be taking on a role in a sustainable transition as they explicitly position themselves as mini-societies in which sustainable practices, products and systems can be experimented with. Their transformational capacity is explored through the aspects of multiplicity, liminality and testability. During ten semi-structured interviews with Dutch festival managers and experts, these qualities together provided a framework to address the transformational capacity of festivals.

Subsequently, the notion of sustainability is conceptualised within the framework of the ecological theory of degrowth. Degrowth envisions a society that prioritises the wellbeing of the community over personal gain and profit. Following a discussion of degrowth literature and literature on sustainable transitions, six characteristics of a sustainable degrowth transition are specified. These fundamental principles are used to explore how the meaning of sustainability by the interviewees that participated in this study lends itself in the context of a sustainable degrowth transition. Although degrowth is not a direct source of inspiration for the interviewees, this research found that their meaning of sustainability can be connected to some extent to all of the characteristics of a sustainable degrowth transition. At the same time, the discussion of each of the characteristics revealed spaces in which festivals could grow to enhance their role in a sustainable degrowth transition.

* Front page image: Billie Eilish poses with a t-shirt that states 'no music on a dead planet' at the American Music Awards 2019. Retrieved from: <https://weheartit.com/entry/337755290>

Combining the ecological theory of degrowth with cultural economics' valuation approach, a new framework for valorising cultural goods emerges, within which this research serves as an example of how that path can be explored. As such, this research is an example of what pluralism in cultural economics can look like: connecting theoretical bodies to foster a broader understanding of the value of cultural goods.

Keywords: festivals, degrowth, sustainability, sustainable transitions, valuation approach, transformational capacity

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1. Introduction

As a student of the MA programme Cultural Economics and Entrepreneurship (CEE) in 2021, I am both worried and hopeful. I am worried, because of the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent measurements on the Dutch cultural sector (Goudriaan et al., 2021). In various ways, the pandemic shed light on a gap between the valuation of different sectors. The skewed distribution of governmental aid (Schepens, 2020) and the late lift of the restrictions for museums (Van den Enden, 2021) can be regarded as the result of a society that struggles to formulate value beyond money. In this sense, to what extent can this sector ‘recovers’ from the pandemic in the long term would depend not only on the success of the vaccination programme, but also on the ability to formulate and incorporate more and perhaps new ways of valuation. As a CEE student, I would like to take the opportunity to contribute to this task. Because even if the pandemic finally appears to be on its way out, other, more persisting global challenges lay ahead.

In the words of Jason Hickel (2020), the current global ecological collapse “is the breakdown of multiple, interconnected systems—systems on which human beings are fundamentally dependent.” (p.5). To tackle such a challenge requires more than the accumulation of ‘eco-facts’ (Morton, 2018). Rather, following an upstream approach¹, what is increasingly being recognised to lay at the root of ecological collapse is an economic system that is dependant on infinite exponential growth, which is inherently unsustainable on a planet with finite resources (Costanza et al., 1997; Hickel, 2020; Latouche, 2009; Raworth, 2017). Considering that economic systems are embedded in culture (Polanyi 1944/2001), it can be concluded that the climate crisis cannot be solved without a cultural transition. Hence, the task appears to formulate the potential role of the cultural sector in a sustainable transition to confront the climate crisis.

From the perspective of the discipline of cultural economics, this task implies a connection with ecological economics. Although an appreciation of the value of art in the context of the climate crisis is beginning to emerge in academic literature (Morton, 2010; Tyszczuk & Smith, 2018), contributions from the side of cultural economics appear to remain largely absent. This lack could at least partially be explained by the dominance of the neoclassical school of thought in the economic discipline (Tielemans et al., 2017). Without aiming to disregard the strengths of this school, the near-monopoly of its methodological individualism, instrumentalism and equilibration (Arnsperger & Varoufakis, 2006) has propelled the focus on economic growth and the market’s invisible hand as problem solver, while undervaluing its negative externalities on the planet that it feeds on (Raworth, 2017). As a response, Rethinking Economics calls for pluralism in the economic discipline,

¹ 'Upstream thinking' originates from the medical field, stressing the need to address the root causes of illness instead of merely treating its symptoms (Budrys, 2010).

including not only a multidisciplinary approach, but also an enhanced focus on real-world implementations and a restored valuation of qualitative aspects of the economy (Tielemans et al., 2017).

As cultural economics has been established as a sub-discipline of economics (Dekker, 2014), the call for pluralism should not exclude cultural economics. It could even be argued that the observation that a connection with ecological economics is not fundamentally addressed within cultural economics is at least partly due to its neoclassical roots. However, an opportunity to fill this gap can be created by extending on the emergence of the valuation approach within the discipline of cultural economics (Dekker, 2014). This approach draws inspiration from the concept of 'economies of worth' (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). This concept introduces the idea that in different spheres, quality can be evaluated along several justifications. The emergence of the valuation approach not only signals a certain openness of the discipline to evolve, but also encourages a more qualitative conceptualisation of worth. These conclusions indicate a potential for cultural economics' valuation approach to both contribute to the 'pluralising' of economics as well as to investigate the possibility of a combination with ecological economics. A central task of this new alliance would then be to research the value of cultural goods in the context of a sustainable transition. This research takes the first step in that task, introducing the main research question: what is the potential role of festivals towards a sustainable degrowth transition? The explorative nature of this question fits the novel ground it treads. Furthermore, it specifies the concept of cultural goods as festivals and provides the necessary clarity by interpreting sustainability in the context of degrowth. To clarify this explanation, as well as the following introduction of the sub-questions, Figure 1 provides an illustration.

First, 'cultural goods' are specified as festivals. This research starts from the empirical observation that a significant amount of Dutch (music) festivals explicitly share their sustainable ambitions (e.g. DGTL, n.d.; ESNS, n.d.; Into the Great Wide Open, n.d.; Motel Mozaique, n.d.; Welcome to the Village, n.d.). Of course, a focus on sustainability can be seen across different sectors. However, in addition, these festivals also often see themselves as a mini-society, allowing for sustainable practices to be tested in a temporary and controlled environment (Van Wetten, 2020). In other words, it appears that some festivals might already be playing an active role in a sustainable transition. From a theoretical point of view, cultural goods have been valued because of their imaginative qualities (Beckert, 2011) and festivals specifically have previously been associated with transformational qualities (Quinn & Wilks, 2017; Rowen, 2020). Nevertheless, a theoretical structure that connects these theories to the potential role of festivals in a sustainable transition is lacking. To respond to this, the first step in this research is to determine what capacities of festivals enable them to contribute to a sustainable transition. Hence, the first sub-question emerges: what is

the transformational capacity of Dutch festivals in a sustainable transition? Here, the main goal is to define the transformational capacity that allows festivals to play a role in a sustainable transition, rather than to focus on sustainability. Through addressing this question in semi-structured interviews with Dutch festival managers, the premise that festivals have a role to play in the first place is discussed and a framework for evaluating this capacity is presented.

Second, in order to specify what is meant by sustainability and a sustainable transition, this research builds on the theory of degrowth, which aims to devise new, sustainable structures for organising society (D’Alisa et al., 2015; Hickel, 2020; Latouche, 2009). It is an emerging field within ecological economics, proposing alternatives to the previously mentioned unsustainable growth imperative. Instead, degrowth scholars propose viable alternative economic structures that replace the growth imperative with a focus on thriving, flourishing and wellbeing (Pouw, 2020, Raworth, 2017; Trebeck & Williams, 2019). In existing degrowth literature, some hints are given for the potential role of the arts in a sustainable degrowth transition, but this remains unexplored (Hickel, 2020; Latouche, 2009). Banks (2020) is the first to explicitly connect the theory of degrowth to the cultural industries, and this research expands on that. To understand the potential role of festivals in a sustainable *degrowth* transition, it is imperative to understand in what ways the meaning of sustainability as defined by festivals compares to the meaning of sustainability in the context of degrowth. Accordingly, the second sub-question arises: how do Dutch festivals define sustainability and how does this meaning lend itself in the context of a sustainable degrowth transition? In the interviews, the festival managers and experts will be asked questions on how they put their sustainable ambitions into practice, where they draw inspiration from, the role of the arts in a sustainable transition, how sustainability is measured and how they envision a sustainable future.

Now that the research questions have been introduced, the outline of this research will be presented. [Chapter 2](#) provides the theoretical framework in which this research is situated. It consists of three major parts. First, in [Chapter 2.1](#), the connection between pluralism, the valuation approach and ecological economics is analysed. This provides the broader context that is necessary to understand the position of this research within cultural economics. Second, [Chapter 2.2](#) introduces the concept of degrowth and sustainable transitions, in order to arrive at a set of characteristics of a sustainable degrowth transition. Third, [Chapter 2.3](#) addresses the theoretical arguments for the value of culture and the arts in times of an ecological crisis, theory on the transformational capacity of festivals and theory that discusses the connection between festivals and sustainability.

[Chapter 3](#) serves to present a description of the methodology used in order to translate this theory into tools for empirical research. It expands on the argument for choosing a qualitative

research method, describes the sample, discusses the operationalisation of translating the theoretical findings into an interview guide, data collection and analysis and finally the methodological limitations.

Chapter 4 presents and discusses the results in relation to the theory. It is divided into two main parts, based on the two sub-questions. Chapter 4.1 addresses the transformational capacity of festival based on the festival’s qualities of multiplicity, liminality and testability. Chapter 4.2 is aimed at answering the second sub-question, using the six aspects of a sustainable degrowth transition described in Chapter 2.2.3.

Finally, Chapter 5 offers the conclusion by summarising the results, presenting the research's limitations and offering suggestions for further research.

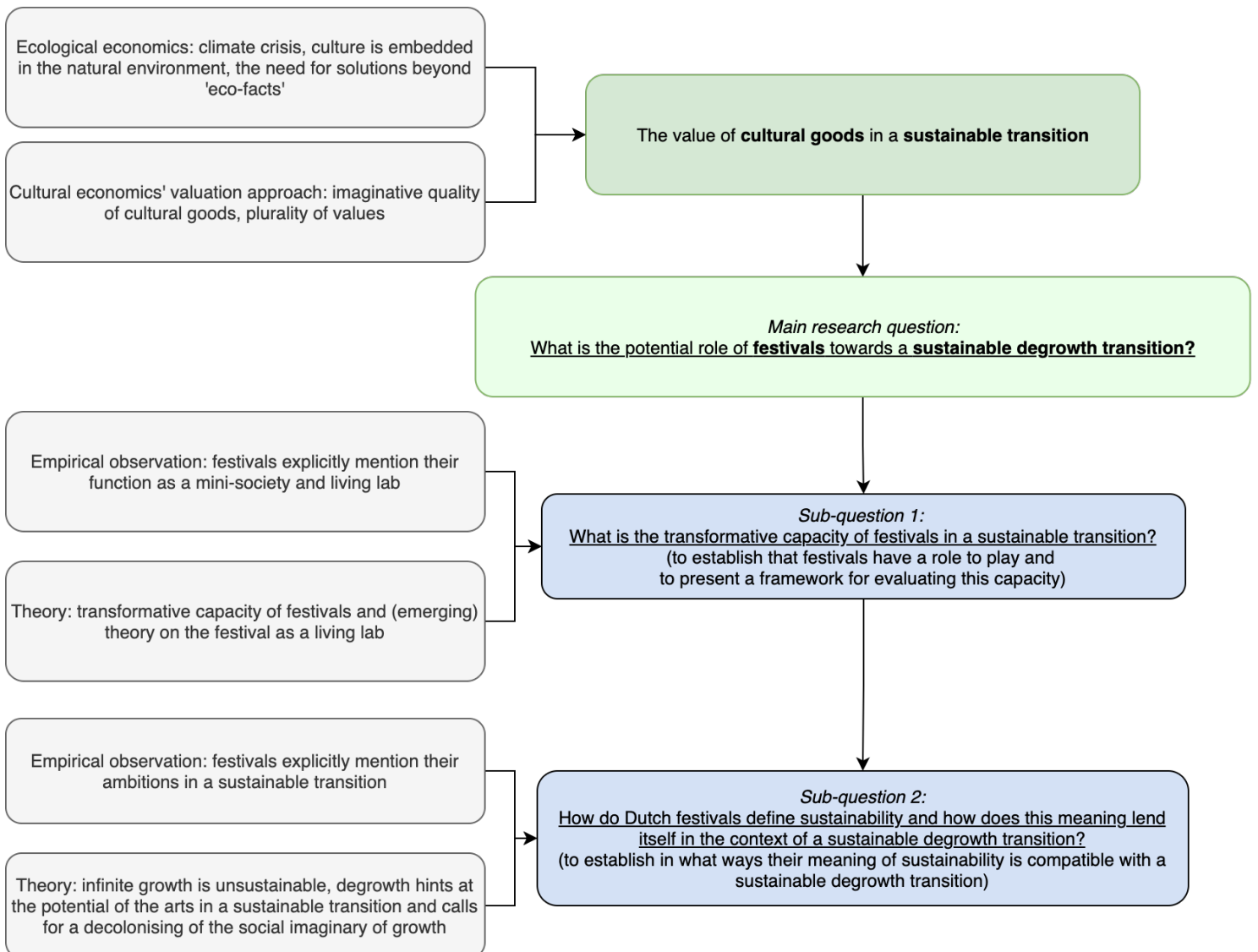


Figure 1. Overview of the research questions.

2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter, a novel combination of theories will be introduced and explored. By analysing two fields of literature previously under-explored in their relation, new connections can be established. This initiation and integration will be based on the field of research of cultural economics on the one hand, and ecological degrowth literature on the other.

2.1 Pluralism, valuation and ecology

This chapter consists of two main parts. First, [Chapter 2.1.1](#) connects the valuation approach within cultural economics (Dekker, 2014) to the call for pluralism in the economic discipline (Tieleman et al., 2017). This connection provides theoretical relevance to this research, but also places it in the context of the development of cultural economics.

The second part, [Chapter 2.1.2](#), illustrates *how* this research contributes to the valuation approach. It starts by addressing the work of Klamer (2017), who builds on Polanyi's notion of embeddedness (1944/2001) to show that the economy is a cultural phenomenon. In addition, this research connects the sphere of the natural environment. This incorporation serves to illustrate that culture, in turn, is embedded in the natural environment.

2.1.1 Rethinking cultural economics: a path towards valuation and meaning

This research takes place in the context of cultural economics and contributes to a noticeable shift in the discipline's development. Therefore, before diving into the topic, the stage in which it is set requires some reflection. As Dekker (2014) observes, the roots of cultural economics can be found in pasting the toolbox of applying economics onto the cultural sector, as is reflected in the discipline's initial name: economics of the arts. Influential authors within cultural economics such as Towse and Blaug have worked to establish cultural economics as a subdiscipline of economics (Dekker, 2014). In this view, cultural economics can be regarded as a successful colonisation of the cultural sector by the so-called 'Imperial Science' of economics (Lazear, 2000).

Here it is vital to address that by economics, the neoclassical version is implied. This is exemplary of a broader issue that points at a lack of 'alternative' views on the economic discipline, which is addressed by the international movement of Rethinking Economics. Focusing mainly on economics education, Tieleman et al. (2017) found that in Dutch economics bachelors programmes, 86% of theory course time is reserved for the neoclassical approach, with 97% of the course time occupied by quantitative methodology. The authors stress their worry as this monopoly prohibits from understanding the economy in terms that are not quantifiable, thereby blind-sighted towards "institutional, social, political and cultural dimensions" (2017, p.5). As Varoufakis points out,

“economics, as taught in our universities, treats all goods as if their character is impermeable to commodification, and assumes commodification simply improves the efficiency with which goods are produced and distributed” (2009, p.48). In other words, economics is seen to be crowding out other perspectives on value, even though “being judged as a commodity is only one sort of “life” that a thing can have” (Beckert & Aspers, 2011, p.6).

In response, Rethinking Economics is built around the call for pluralism in economics and economic education. Although proponents such as Rethinking Economics are generally critical of the neoclassical paradigm, the core of this call for pluralism is not founded upon a rejection of dominant theory, but rather establishes a sustained space in which it can be challenged: “pluralism’s value is its consistent opening up of horizons; not on dogmatic acceptance or rejection of ideas.” (Varoufakis, 2009, p.54). By rethinking economics, pluralism hopes to increase the accessibility of the discipline and improve its practical applicability, an ambition shared broadly (e.g. Arnsperger & Varoufakis, 2006; Chang, 2014; Klamer, 2017; Pouw, 2020; Raworth, 2017; Varoufakis, 2009).

Taking this into consideration, the question emerges what role cultural economics could play in this call for pluralism, and vice versa. A connection could be made with the development in the discipline of cultural economics which Dekker (2014) calls the valuation approach. The core characteristics of the valuation approach can be described as considering, or justifying a good's worth beyond price, seeking “to study the conflict over competing justifications of value” (Dekker, 2014, p.319). Here, Dekker refers to the economic sociology of Boltanski and Thevenot (2006). Boltanski and Thevenot attempt to open up theoretical space different from neoclassicist perspectives of value, by based on different processes of meaning-making. They establish six of such justifications, or ‘economies of worth’². In relation to cultural economics, the application of this approach can, for instance, result in the study of the dynamic between cultural value and economic value (Hutter & Frey, 2010). In other words, the plurality of values—or valuations—plays a central role in the valuation approach.

To study these justifications, “investigations of the valuation of goods and changes of these valuations need to focus on the *meanings* that goods obtain for actors and on the social and institutional structure of markets” (Beckert & Aspers, 2011, p.11). Put differently, the valuation approach is less occupied with *what* the value is and shifts the focus to *how* value is determined (Beckert & Aspers, 2011; Dekker, 2014). During this process of valuation, different justifications can affect each other in a way that they might create conflict and be incommensurable³. It could be argued that it is the space for a variety of regimes of worth that the neoclassical approach is lacking,

² Such plurality of spheres in which valuation can take place can furthermore be found in Appadurai’s discussion of ‘regimes of value’ (1988) and Stark’s ‘accounts of worth’ (2011).

³ For instance, moral values can prevent the economic value from being taken into account (see Zelizer, 1979).

and the emerging valuation approach within cultural economics appears to provide at least a partial answer to this call.

Substantial contributions to the valuation approach within cultural economics can be found in the works of Throsby (2001), Hutter and Throsby (2008), Beckert and Aspers (2011) and Klamer (2017; 2018). For Throsby, a complete understanding of the worth—which can be understood as the outcome of the valuation process—of cultural goods suffers from the colonialist tendency of the dominant economic paradigm, as “the tendency for an economic interpretation of the world to dominate, deriving from the ubiquity and power of the modern economic paradigm, must be resisted, if important elements of cultural value are not to be overlooked” (2001, p.41). By doing so, the prescriptive attitude of standard economics theory (Tieleman et al., 2017) has enabled an ‘instrumental turn’ in the cultural industries (Belfiore, 2004), resulting in a concern that “arts are only valued as an instrument for social cohesion and economic growth, and not intrinsically” (Dekker, 2014, p.314). This research builds on the valuation approach in the sense that it counters this instrumental turn of the cultural industries as in which they are valued predominantly as a means for economic growth.

Klamer’s (2017) value-based approach (VBA) could be read as the result of an impasse of trying to fit the cultural industries into a neoclassical frame. Accordingly, his studies on the cultural sector do not merely lead to new approaches to studying the cultural sector, but rather result in a new conception of economics as a discipline. He defines economics as “the discipline that studies the realization of values by people, organizations and nations.” (2017, p.xiv). In this sense, Klamer offers not just a response, but rather a countermove towards the imperialist hegemony of the dominant neoclassical economic paradigm. This development of a new economic framework based on the study of the cultural industries hints at the cultural industries’ possible role to envision new narratives both around value and worth, as well as the economic discipline.

In other words, despite a neoclassical tradition within cultural economics, the field can benefit greatly from a pluralistic approach, in which various processes of justification, or valorisation (Klamer, 2017) share the stage. At the same time, the emergence of the valuation approach itself signals at least the openness of the discipline towards pluralism, as a new methodology of meaning-making is explored. Although it might be a fertile path for further exploration, this research does not focus on pluralism itself. Rather, it should be considered as an example of what pluralism within cultural economics could look like, as an extension of the valuation approach.

2.1.2 No music on a dead planet: incorporating the natural environment

Now that the importance of pluralism in economics has been addressed and has been connected to the emergence of the valuation approach in cultural economics, it is time to explain how exactly this research contributes to the ‘pluralising’ of cultural economics. The aim is to explore the addition of the dimension of the natural environment into cultural economics. By doing so, this research extends on the valuation approach, as it adds another ‘economy of worth’ to the conversation. In order to do so, it is imperative to first briefly discuss the relationship between different types of justifications that concerns culture and economics.

To provide a framework of how valorisation of cultural goods can happen, Klamer (2017) distinguishes six ‘conversations’, each with their own type of justification, on the relationships between culture, the economy, economics and the arts. Besides the conversations “culture does not matter for economics and the economy” and “the economy does not matter to culture, the “economics matters to culture” point of view corresponds with the original approach of cultural economics (Klamer, 2017, p.15). The conversation revolving around “arts matters to the economy” signifies the instrumentalisation of the arts in service of economics growth (2017, p.16). The “culture matters to the economy” does not abandon the instrumentalisation per se, but rather zooms out and addresses how different cultures differently affect economic processes, such as business strategies. The paradigm that Klamer wishes to propel is the one that states that the “economy is embedded in culture”⁴ (2017, p.18). This research places itself in this conversation too. Simply put, it implies that there is no such thing as the economy without culture. It stresses “the meaningfulness and value-laden character of human actions, and will tend to put them in the (cultural) context” (2017, p.18). This notion of embeddedness finds its roots in the work of Karl Polanyi, who uses the term to express “the idea that the economy is not autonomous, as it must be in economic theory, but subordinated to politics, religion and social relations” (Polanyi, 1944/2001, p.xxiii-xxiv). This ‘substantive’ concept of economics requires action, as economic actions have been ‘disembedded’, “or not governed by social or noneconomic authorities” (Swedberg, 2003, p.28). To view the economy as embedded within culture would result in the depiction in Figure 2.

This research follows this notion of embeddedness, implying that the economy is a cultural phenomenon. However, the role of culture for Klamer is that it serves as the ultimate goal: “all the rest is subordinate, or instrumental for the realisation of culture” (2017, p.10). Perhaps this is not a surprising statement from a cultural economist, but this research does not see culture as the final stop. Rather, it builds on Pouw (2017), who broadens this spectrum by adding the natural and

⁴ Klamer (2017) defines culture along the lines of three interrelated meanings: anthropological in the sense of ‘having a culture’ (C1), ‘Kultur’, as an accomplished distinctive characteristic (C2) and culture as in the cultural sector or simply the arts (C3).

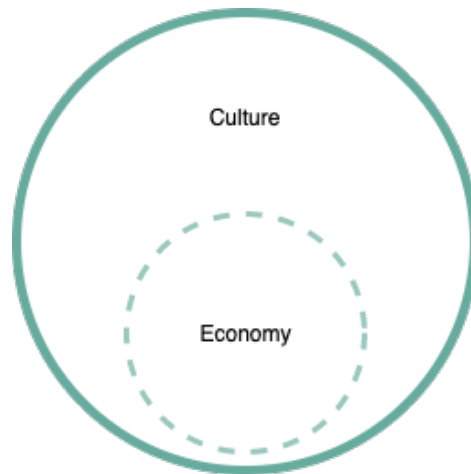


Figure 2. The economy is embedded in culture, based on Polanyi (1944/2001).

political spheres to the picture. This illustrates that it is not just culture in which the economy is embedded, but, in turn, culture is also embedded within the natural environment⁵. For instance, an economic allocation problem “is never a politically or socio-culturally neutral process. Moreover, there are implications for our natural surroundings.” (Pouw, 2020, p.58). In other words, if the idea is to view the economy as a sphere within a different one, the ultimate boundaries of the natural sphere should not be disregarded. Hence, the effort at hand is to draw an interdisciplinary connection between the fields of cultural economics and ecological economics, as a field where the connection between the economic agent and its surroundings seems rather advanced in comparison to other areas. This results in an updated view of embeddedness, adding the sphere of the natural environment as one that hosts the cultural sphere. This has been illustrated in Figure 3.

Although Figure 3 might evoke a sense of hierarchy, the point of this illustration is not to diminish the importance of any of these spheres. If anything, it hopes to evoke a sense of connection, relatedness or just a more holistic view of spheres. The reason why the natural environment is placed around the other spheres is that the natural environment has boundaries that can be more clearly defined than possible answers to what is included and what is not in the concepts of culture and society. The natural environment is the earth’s ecosystem, which is a (relatively) closed system, with as its main exception the energy it requires from the sun⁶. The line

⁵ Pouw (2020) places the political sphere between the cultural and economic sphere. Within the aim of this research, the political sphere does not have to space to be explored, as it does not play a crucial role in the point of adding the sphere of the natural environment. For further reading on the dynamics of politics in this context, the works of sociologist Willem Schinkel provide a critical analysis (2013; 2021).

⁶ And the occasional billionaire leaving earth to find new planets to colonise (Fernholtz, 2018).

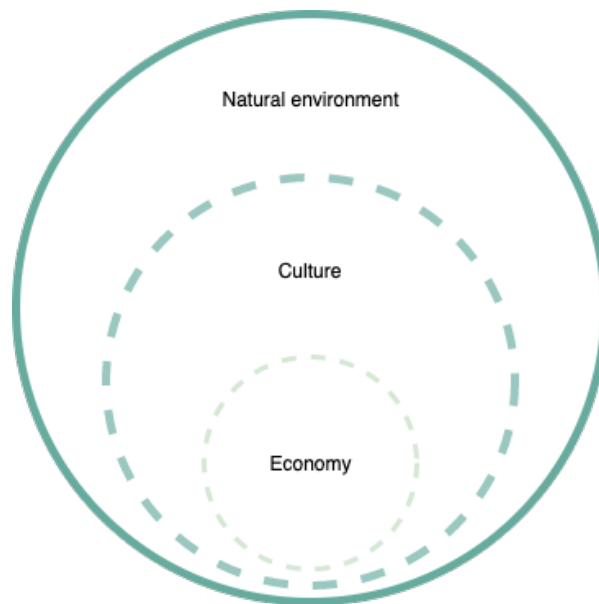


Figure 3. The economy is embedded in culture, which is embedded in the natural environment.

that surrounds the natural environment signals the space in which we have to make it work: in the same sense that there is no economy without culture, there is no culture without a planet to practice it on. This view of the natural environment is the foundation of another sub-discipline of economics, known as ecological economics (Costanza et al., 1997). Whereas within environmental economics the natural environment is studied from the perspective of neoliberal economics (Munda, 1997), ecological economics can be understood as a

trans-disciplinary field of study that addresses the relationships between ecosystems and economic systems in the broadest sense [...]. Ecological economics (EE) differs from both conventional economics and conventional ecology in terms of breadth of its perception of the problem, and the importance it attaches to environment-economy interactions. (Costanza et al., 1991, p.2-3)

Another potential implication that can be drawn from this depiction is that the cultural sphere is positioned as a sphere that connects the economy with the natural environment. This shows that when we want to study the impact of the economy on the climate, we cannot ignore the impact of culture on the climate. In fact, that is then the subject of our study. The dotted middle circle, representing the theoretical border that connects culture to the natural environment, is where this research places itself.

In a discipline that holds culture as the ultimate goal (Klamer, 2017), this outward perspective can be expected to be lacking. However, it goes without saying that the way the natural environment of the earth is being treated is unsustainable (e.g. Meadows et al., 1972). The reason that cultural economics should provide space to include this ecological view is because, again, there is no culture without a (healthy) planet. Put more bluntly, there would be “no music on a dead planet” (Music Declares Emergency, n.d.). This connection between culture and ecological crisis, and the implied concept of (ecological) sustainability, has as of writing not been addressed both in the more classical approach of cultural economics by the likes of Towse, Throsby and Blaug nor in the valuation approach⁷.

Concluding, this research extends on the valuation approach within cultural economics to incorporate the ecological sphere, which is not currently fundamentally discussed in cultural economics. However, if environment-economy interactions are to be discussed, the cultural sphere cannot be ignored, as illustrated by its inclusion in Figure 2. In order to arrive at a feasible scope within the limited capacity of this research, both cultural economics and ecological economics are concretised through more specified concepts; cultural festivals and the concept of a sustainable degrowth transition respectively. Through this extended view, this research aims to combine the ecological theory of degrowth with the emergence of the valuation approach within the discipline of cultural economics.

2.2 Towards a sustainable degrowth transition

This chapter provides the theoretical background for what is meant by a sustainable degrowth transition. First, [Chapter 2.2.1](#) introduces the core aspects of degrowth and what that implies for the notion of sustainability. The theoretical context of degrowth serves to provide a more specific understanding of sustainability, which is imperative for the term to remain of value (Frankel, 2018). Second, [Chapter 2.2.2](#) offers insight on what is meant by a sustainable transition. Finally, [Chapter 2.2.3](#) brings the concept of degrowth together with that of a sustainable transition, resulting in a list of six characteristics that will serve as the main structure within which to analyse the results in [Chapter 4.2](#).

2.2.1 Degrowth and sustainability

Reacting to the birth of the growth paradigm and the increasing importance of GDP as a measurement tool since the 1950s (Kallis et al., 2018), the degrowth movement “calls for the decolonisation of public debate from the idiom of economism and for the abolishment of economic

⁷ Throsby (1995) does write about sustainability, but only in the context of ‘culturally sustainable development’.

growth as a social objective.” (D’Alisa et al., 2015, p.3). It critiques not merely the prominent focus on growth, but also connected concepts such as capitalism⁸ and commodification. Hence, degrowth can be understood as a “political slogan with theoretical implications” (Latouche, 2009, p.7). Furthermore, its foundations appear to bear a resemblance with the proponents of economic pluralism in the economic discipline as well as the valuation approach, refusing the single denominator of value as a predominantly quantifiable monetary concept.

The urgency that propels degrowth is the acknowledgement that you can’t have infinite growth on a finite planet (Hickel, 2020; Latouche, 2009). Growth is inherently unsustainable, as nothing can grow forever (Raworth, 2017). In nature, any organism that wants to grow indefinitely will end up destroying its host, which can be extended to humankind and the earth (Raworth, 2017). Furthermore, economic theory is not excused from thermodynamics’ Entropy Law, which notes the “non-reversibility of transformations of energy and matter.” (Latouche, 2009, p.15). This call to replace traditional economics with bioeconomics⁹ is vital in order to transform economic models to take into account the inevitable, irreversible and damaging processes of economic activity (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971).

As GDP growth does not guarantee an increase in national wellbeing (Hickel, 2020), a replacement of the growth paradigm that envisions how the ‘economic airplane’ will land into a more durable ‘economics of arrival’ is imperative (Trebeck & Williams, 2018). But will new innovations not eventually make growth sustainable? Why not focus on ‘sustainable growth’? Regardless of innovations and increased efficiency that growth might bring along, this will eventually not lead to an overall reduction but might even cause an increase in consumption and resource use, also known as Jevon’s Paradox (D’Alisa et al., 2015). Although theoretically possible, the decoupling of growth and use of resources is highly unlikely within a capitalist system, “given that owners of capital are propelled to accumulate wealth (rather than spending all money on consumption) and firms must reinvest to stay competitive” (Kallis et al., 2018, p.300). As long as technological innovations remain within a growth-based system, a net reduction of resources and therefore waste is unlikely (Hickel, 2020). Nevertheless, innovation itself remains to hold a vital role in a degrowth society: “in a post-growth economy, efficiency improvements would actually reduce our impact on the planet”, opening the possibility for “different *kinds* of innovations— innovations designed to improve human and ecological welfare, rather than innovations designed to

⁸ For several perspectives on whether capitalism could be sustainable in this context, see Frankel (2018), Euler (2019) and Jackson (2009).

⁹ Which laid the foundation for ecological economics (Mayumi, 2001).

speed up the rate of extraction and production”¹⁰ (Hickel, 2020, p.155). The challenge is to understand that the absence of growth does not diminish the ability to thrive (Jackson, 2009).

Degrowth should not be understood as an alteration of existing systems, but rather the replacement thereof: “Ecologizing society [...] is not about implementing an alternative, better or greener development. It is about imagining and enacting alternative visions *to* modern development” (D’Alisa et al., 2015, p.9). Hence, degrowth should not be mistaken for ‘less of the same’, but rather as a “call for an altogether new, qualitatively different world that will evolve through confrontation with the existing one” (Kallis & March, 2018, p.362). In other words, degrowth frames the question of sustainability as a matter of systems, rather than choosing to treat the effects. It could be concluded that, as long as we uphold an (economic) system that thrives on exponential growth, sustainability will not be achieved.

Instead of growth, the ultimate aim for any society and its innovation is proposed as flourishing, “like in the flourishing of the arts.” (D’Alisa et al., 2015, p.5). How can this desired future be achieved, given that the current economy is not a ‘degrown’ one? To put this into practice, the second step is to relate it to “a process of change, that is, a transition” (Wittmayer et al., 2014, p.465).

2.2.2 Sustainable transitions: a meaning-making perspective

The concept of sustainable transitions emerges from the combination of the scholarly bodies of sustainability and transition research (Wittmayer et al., 2014). The scholarly body of transition studies is built on the notion that experimentation and demonstration can contribute “to change in norms, values, goals, operational procedures and actors that govern decision-making processes and actions needed to translate sustainability ideas into practice” (Bos & Brown, 2012, p.1341). A starting point for sustainability can be found in the definition by the Brundtland report (1987), understanding sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (1987). This interpretation often leads to focusing on immediate threats to future generations, such as inequality, carbon emissions and food supplies. Without diminishing the importance of these challenges, any approach to solving these issues requires an understanding of the dynamics and complexity of different perspectives, scales and contexts (Leach et al., 2010). Efforts to universalise this inherent ambiguity such as the constitution of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the UN should therefore be treated carefully, as “our quest for pathways to sustainability” is of “essentially plural and political nature” (Leach et al., 2010).

¹⁰ The Easterlin paradox questions the impact of money on wellbeing, as it shows the limited effect of income on happiness (Coscieme et al., 2019).

Hence, Leach et al (2010) distinguish four main obstacles, preventing us from acknowledging the importance of dynamics and complexity of sustainability. First, the authors stress the importance of ‘dynamics’ as a constant, avoiding the more conventional approach of equilibrium thinking. Second, the notion of risk is always only partially knowable. Uncertainty, ambiguity and ignorance are factors that should be accounted for in any sustainable policy to “avoid the dangers of creating illusory, control-based approaches to complex and dynamic realities” (2010). Third, frames, referring to “to the particular contextual assumptions, methods, forms of interpretation and values that different groups might bring to a problem, shaping how it is bounded and understood”, constitute a vital part of sustainability (Leach et al., 2010). In other words, to understand sustainability is to understand the variety of meaning-making processes that constitute it. The multiplicity of narratives and storylines generated within different frames by different people can therefore reveal not only the complexity of a problem, but also what to do about it (2010). Finally, Leach et al. (2010) see the fuzziness and co-opting of the concept of sustainability as a reason not to abandon it, but rather to “re-cast the notion of sustainability as a more explicitly normative (and so overtly political) concept”:

Thus sustainability refers to explicit qualities of human well-being, social equity and environmental integrity, and the particular system qualities that can sustain these. All these goals of sustainability are context-specific and inevitably contested. This makes it essential to recognize the roles of public deliberation and negotiation—both of the definition of what is to be sustained and of how to get there—in what must be seen as a highly political (rather than technical) process. (Leach et al., 2010)

The authors call this a pathways approach, referring to “alternative possible trajectories for knowledge, intervention and change which prioritise different goals, values and functions” (Leach et al., 2010). In their four case studies, the authors seek to distinguish dominant narratives from alternative narratives on sustainability. This research shares a similar aim, treating degrowth as such an alternative narrative. To add the concept of degrowth to this line of thought then makes sense, as degrowth is able to provide a political answer by providing a narrative on sustainability that is explicitly political.

2.2.3 Characteristics of a sustainable degrowth transition

To those who prefer a concrete list of practical implementations of degrowth, [Chapter 2.2.1](#) risks the classification of unsatisfactory. A title like degrowth might indeed chance focusing on that what

it is advocating *against*¹¹, leaving the ship without a captain, sailing towards an undefined destination. Hence, this chapter serves to devise a more concrete set of characteristics that are distilled from various sources within the degrowth discourse, which together would lead to a flourishing and sustainable society. By doing so, sustainability is equipped with a working definition within the context of this research. Finally, this allows us to arrive at what can be called a sustainable degrowth transition.

As mentioned, degrowth is political, since it is based on normative, qualitative values. Degrowth has no fixed standard definition, but should be viewed rather as a discourse, or dictionary perhaps. It is with this in mind D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis (2015) have aimed to distinguish a 'vocabulary' of degrowth, which can be read as a theoretical toolkit for further developing the body of literature around the concept. To replace the growth imperative, degrowth literature proposes a set of interlinked aspects, of which several fundamental characteristics have been distilled for the purpose of this research.

First, the notion of abundance seems to lie at the foundation of achieving sustainable degrowth. Commodification leads to infinite scarcity, not because of a lack of essential things, but as a socially produced need for consumption (Harvey, 1979). Scarcity then can be understood "not as an intrinsic property of technical means [...] but as a relation between means and ends" (Sahlins, 1972, p.5). Hence, abundance is not achieved by gathering more, but rather by wanting less (Kallis & March, 2015). According to Latouche (2009), an abundant mindset changes our relationship to our environment, stressing that "the most important thing is to get away from the belief that we must dominate nature and to try to live in harmony with it" (p.35). A note should be made to avoid criticism implying that this view discards material shortage, such as hunger. Embracing abundance does not excuse anyone from experienced periods of shortage, "the difference is that this did not translate to a generalised sense of scarcity or a push for growth; it was a temporary disaster of shortage, which the society suffered through in common. Temporary lack is not generalised scarcity." (Kallis & March, 2015, p.364).

Second, innovation must be able to move beyond its focus on technological efficiency. As touched upon before, 'sustainable' innovation alone is unlikely to fundamentally contribute to staying within ecological boundaries as long as it is unable to detach itself from the growth imperative (Hickel, 2020). In sustainable degrowth, innovation is not only directed at technological advancement, but must primarily be focused on enriching the wellbeing and equality of humans

¹¹ According to Roth (2017), indeed, "the key to a new society is not in an ever-sharper focus on the old problem of more-versus-less economic growth, but rather in a *marginalization of the economy*." (p.1034).

(Hickel, 2020). Willem Schinkel (2013) even goes on to argue that a certain level of inefficiency is crucial for the sustainability of the *oikos* of both ecology and the economy¹².

Third, resources that are available need to be redistributed. For instance, the problem of world hunger is not so much caused by a lack of food, but rather by a system that is not built for fair and equal distribution (Latouche, 2009). The direct positive effect of redistribution is the diminishing of the power of the ‘big predators’, while indirectly “removing the incentives for conspicuous consumption” (Latouche, 2009, p.37). The question remains whether current systems, namely capitalist economies, would voluntarily enable this redistribution of political power remains to be seen, but nevertheless, it is clear that “we cannot grow our way out of poverty, and must therefore accept redistribution”, as exemplified by policies such as a Universal Basic Income (UBI) and the Maximum Income (D’Alisa et al., 2015).

Fourth, relocalisation refers to the focus on local production. Wherever possible, “all economic, political and cultural decisions that can be made at the local level must be made at that level” (Latouche, 2009, p.39). Practical examples of this can be found in the Transition Towns movement and the Slow Food Movement. Although such movements are explicitly focusing on constructing alternative structures, Hess (2009) proclaims that the philosophy of localism does not exist strictly on the radical end of the political spectrum. Whereas communalism and non-monetary exchange are often associated with localism, the localist narrative could also be critically viewed as a way of framing the ‘buy local’ message as a neoliberal tactic aimed at off-loading state responsibilities (Hess, 2009). Furthermore, relocalisation in the context of ecological economics is extended beyond commodities to include equality, social wellbeing and community. Studying localist movements in the USA, Hess (2009) investigates how relocalisation can benefit communities from both a social justice and environmental perspective.

Fifth, the individualistic nature of capitalism is typically required to incorporate a more altruistic, community-based counterbalance, which can be found in the context of the commons (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014; Lockyer, 2017). As Elinor Ostrom and others have shown, “communities of people have developed and utilised their own systems of cultural norms and rules to sustainably manage resources over the long term in the absence of private property or top-down government intervention” (Lockyer, 2017), resulting in a concrete list of eight principles for governing the commons (Ostrom, 1990). Commons are often associated with degrowth, as an organisational structure *against and beyond* capitalism and beyond the market versus state dichotomy (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014), enabling “humanity to deal with the question of

¹² *Oikos* is the greek term from which both ecology and economy are derived, meaning ‘household’ (Schinkel, 2013).

sustainability on the basis of social structures that include the possibility of a solution” (Euler, 2019, p.158).

Furthermore, the commons can propose a ‘how’ to the ‘what’ of degrowth: “degrowth helps us to understand the urgency of getting out the ‘iron prison of consumerism’, while commoning shows what a ‘beyond-consumerist-culture’ looks and feels like” (D’Alisa et al., 2015, p.77). Concretely, Euler (2019) provides two main reasons on the role of the commons in a degrowth transition. First, “transformational movements need a sense of where to go so that they do not merely defend against neoliberalism and capitalism in general” (Euler, 2019, p.166). The second point refers to the need for space. These spaces can offer room to come together and make a direct impact. Commons are never completely detached from capitalist systems, but “they bear a potential that can be unfolded further” (Euler, 2019, p.167). Both reasons are essential,

for no struggle will succeed in changing the world if we do not organise our reproduction in a communal way and not only share the space and time of meetings and demonstrations but put our lives in common, organising on the basis of our different needs and possibilities, and the rejection of all principles of exclusion or hierarchisation. (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014, p.103)

Since commons are based on community, co-creation and trust¹³, “a society decisively determined by direct reciprocity is faced with the problem of scalability. Groups cannot become too large because the human capacity of having direct and relationships of trust is limited” (Euler, 2019, p.167). An answer to this limitation can be found in the idea of a “complex and dynamic netting of commons-projects”, allowing individuals to be part of several communities simultaneously (Euler, 2019, p.168). This way, commons could provide an answer to make a society limit itself, favouring sharing in common over personal gain: “the end of enclosures therefore and the sharing of the commons brings the end of scarcities and of accumulation, making living within limits possible” (Kallis & March, 2015, p.364).

Sixth, as mentioned, some of the degrowth literature hints at the potential of the arts in a sustainable degrowth transition. However this connection is lacking a solid foundation in the academic literature. Within degrowth literature, the arts are rarely explicitly mentioned, yet some references reveal the hidden potential of the cultural sector in a transition to a degrowth society. Its strength would lie in ‘decolonising the imaginary from growth’, as well as offering a countermove to commodification and instrumentalisation through its inherently animistic qualities (Hickel, 2020). Furthermore, Latouche finishes his book *Farewell to Growth* (2009) with a sentence that this

¹³ Hence, according to Hess (2012), all commons are cultural phenomena, regardless of the resources they deal with.

research interprets as an invitation for further exploration, stating that “in a degrowth society, as Oscar Wilde puts it, ‘All art is quite useless’...and therefore essential.” (Latouche, 2009, p.105). Although this statement provides food for thought, what is missing here is an explanation of why art is essential within the degrowth narrative.

It goes without saying that a sustainable degrowth transition is unlikely to happen at once and by itself. Hence, this research combines the hunch of Latouche in which the artist might be a vital part of this transition and the need for a space in which to implement it. Accordingly, a connection will be made with the cultural industries. As any ‘alternative’ economic theory struggles to find its way into the economic discipline, it is perhaps unsurprising that a connection between the approach of degrowth and cultural economics is not yet established within academic literature, both from the perspective of cultural economics and from degrowth. However, a key characteristic of cultural goods might be vital in enabling a successful sustainable degrowth transition.

2.3 Valuing culture in times of an ecological crisis

Now that the valuation approach and the sustainable degrowth transition have been introduced, the final theoretical step can be made. This chapter provides theoretical arguments for the importance of the cultural sector in a sustainable degrowth transition. Although it was briefly touched upon in the previous chapter, in order to add it to the list of characteristics of a sustainable degrowth transition, it requires further theoretical explanation.

[Chapter 2.3.1](#) connects the imaginative quality of cultural goods (Beckert, 2011) to a gap in ecological economics that concerns the lack of a shared vision of a sustainable society (Costanza et al., 1997). The potential of cultural goods in this context is enhanced by critically reviewing the rhetoric of the creative economy’s growth imperative (Banks, 2020). [Chapter 2.3.2](#) moves on to connect this with the transformational quality of festivals (Quinn & Wilks, 2017; Rowen, 2020). Here, three main aspects of this quality are distilled, which will structure the results in [Chapter 4.1](#). Finally, [Chapter 2.3.3](#) briefly addresses the emerging literature on the connection between festivals and sustainability. This offers insights into how festivals can be valued in the context of a sustainable transition, while also providing more practical suggestions on how festivals can provide a solid structure for such a transition. Hence, it enhances the understanding of the role of festivals in a sustainable transition.

2.3.1 Imagination beyond the growth imperative

With sources from around half a decade ago (Brundtland, 1987; Meadows et al., 1972), the idea that reaching the planetary boundaries has a significant impact on the lives of most people on this planet should not come as a surprise. Neither can there be said to be a lack of ideas on how to tackle this

issue and implement a sustainable transition (e.g. Raworth, 2017). Yet, apparently, something is lacking that goes beyond (scientific) knowledge.

A broad, overlapping consensus is forming around the goal of sustainability, including its ecological, social, and economic aspects [...]. But movement toward this goal is being impeded not so much by lack of knowledge, or even lack of “political will,” but rather by a lack of a *coherent, relatively detailed, shared vision of what a sustainable society would actually look like.* (Costanza et al., 1997)

If science’s job is to understand how the world currently works, an urgent vacancy is open for the envisioning of future scenarios which trigger both imagination and action through a process of meaning-making: “scientific facts arise out of detached observation whereas meaning emerges from embedded experience” (Jasanoff, 2010, p.235)¹⁴. To achieve scientific robustness within the ecological context, a continual conversation between fact-finding and meaning-making is imperative (Jasanoff, 2010).

At this point, a crucial role for the cultural sector appears. As sustainability is an amorphous and multidimensional concept (Frankel, 2018), cultural goods can be valued because of their ability “to support future imaginings that might better reveal a world of multiple, differentiated and uncertain futures.” (Tyszczyk & Smith, 2018, p.60). As Dekker (2014) points out, one of the distinguishing features of cultural goods as discussed within the valuation approach is their position as symbolic goods that possess an imaginative value. This notion has been addressed from a sociological perspective by Beckert (2011), who argues that “imaginative qualities make a difference—and are valued—because they arouse images that alter the state of consciousness of the owner” (p.110). A distinguishing mechanism in this imaginative value lies in the idea that the realisation of this value is always in front of us, since “once an object has been purchased, this promise remains in other objects not yet possessed” (Beckert, 2011, p.123). Here, the inherently ‘utopian energy’ of art is revealed (Davies & Sarpong, 2012; Levitas, 2007; Morton, 2010), and by doing so, a fundamental argument for its role in a sustainable degrowth transition is presented: the imaginative value of cultural goods presents an opportunity to decolonise the ‘imaginary of growth’ through its capacity to connect the urgency of the climate crisis to a shared vision of a sustainable society. The ‘non-instrumental nature of art’ enables the possibility of shaping future ambitions of societies and individuals (Sarpong & Davies, 2012). After all, “art is a kind of shadow from the

¹⁴ Especially within the economic discipline a lack of future-oriented research should not come as a surprise, since “time injects uncertainty and upsets calculation to such a degree that the future must be discounted” (Jasanoff, 2010, p.242).

future that looms into our present world” (Percy Shelley, quoted in Morton, 2010). Nevertheless, a critical note should be added that this *potential* does not mean that all art is automatically occupied with a shared future vision of society, let alone a sustainable one (Sarpong & Davies, 2012).

This quality of cultural goods and the arts has been under-appreciated in the discourse of the climate crisis, but “opening up the imaginative practices of climate research to more collaborative working with these fields of inquiry, might support a more vibrant and imaginative sense of how humanity can be prepared for societal transformations and uncertain futures.” (Tyszczyk & Smith, 2018)¹⁵.

Although some recognition of this new valuation of the cultural sector within the ecological context of the climate crisis appears to gain traction, cultural economics has yet to contribute. Instead, the broader creative economy is increasingly being valued because of its contribution to economic growth (see Belfiore, 2004) and ground for innovation (Dekker, 2020). Hence, it might be worthwhile to critically assess some main assumptions underlying this valuation. Besides previously mentioned shortcomings of such an instrumentalist view of the cultural economy, Banks (2020) distinguishes four main dimensions along which to critically challenge the creative economy’s growth imperative.

First, in economic terms, the basic assumption that the broadly defined ‘creative economy’ stimulates economic growth (e.g. Florida, 2002) can be questioned. For instance, growth in the sector tends to be geographically uneven. What’s more, the broad definition of the creative economy allows the economic growth to be strongly skewed by the ‘heavy lifting’ done by the computing, software and IT industries (Banks, 2020). In other words, the varying and broad definitions of who is in the creative industries (Potts et al., 2008) might cause to question even the basic claim of the arts as an instrument for economic growth.

Second, a fundamental question to ask is who benefits from this economic growth? As mentioned in [Chapter 2.2.1](#), an increase in GDP cannot be equated to an increase in wellbeing, especially in developed economies (Hickel, 2020; Jackson, 2009). Even more so, it has been proven that a point can be reached where an increase in GDP starts to cause a decline in wellbeing (Hickel, 2020). Hence, other forms of valuation are imperative in order to “tackle the persistent and deep-rooted structural inequalities that have so perniciously excluded and disadvantaged women, ethnic minorities, working-class people and other socially disadvantaged groups in the creative economy workplace.” (Banks, 2020, p.14).

Third, the cultural sector is far from excused when it comes to negative environmental impact. Not only is the creative economy failing to live up to “its own promises for clean, inclusive

¹⁵ See also: Twaalfhoven (2020).

and sustainable growth, [...] it may be undermining the prospects of societies making the necessary shift towards more sustainable economies, in general.” (Banks, 2020, p.15). Although Banks’ argument lacks the empirical data to back this claim up, a critical stance in regard to environmental impact should not be reserved for merely the fossil fuel giants and the usual suspects alike.

Fourth, objections can be made within the cultural domain. The focus on economic return from the creative industries singles out the economic regime of worth, crowding out “alternative visions of arts, media and culture as shared public goods, or as articulations of collective cultural interests and political identifications” (Banks, 2020, p.15). In other words, the growth imperative in the creative economy obstructs a plurality of valuations of cultural goods.

In short, it appears worthwhile to regard the cultural sector as fertile ground for a pathway beyond its problematic connection to the growth imperative. Even more so, this sector could play a vital role in a transition towards a post-growth economy. One cultural sector that has been explicitly acknowledging its role in a sustainable transition can be found in festivals (Van Wetten, 2020).

2.3.2 The transformational capacity of festivals: a temporary space for experimentation

Defined as “themed, public celebrations” (Getz, 2007, p.31) and “time out of time” (Falassi, 1987), cultural festivals will steer this research into more empirical waters. Through the case of festivals, the role of the cultural sector in a sustainable degrowth transition will be addressed. This chapter serves to first provide proof of academic relevance for the role of festivals in any societal transition.

The primary assumption in this chapter is that festivals are able to provide a space for cultural transformation. ‘Transformation’ refers both to the potential for individual members of the festival audience to change themselves and their place in the world, as well as to the possibility of festivals to cultivate a wider cultural shift (Leu 2013; Perry 2013). How are festivals capable of facilitating this transformation? Based on a brief literary review, several main themes are distinguished to explain the festival’s transformational potential for experimenting with new social movements.

First, festivals simultaneously encompass economics, politics, social structures and social identity (Wasylycia-Leis, 2016), fitting the embedded and interrelated nature of several spheres as mentioned in [Chapter 2.1.2](#). In addition, this multiplicity inherently holds the potential to have a transformational impact. As mentioned, companies in these different spheres are likely accompanied by their own processes of valuation and justifications. In his description of a festival as a Novelty Bundling Market (NBM), Potts (2011) argues that their complex design is not intended to facilitate efficiency, but rather helps to “promote deliberate contexts of dissonance to provide

effective contexts for creative discovery and evaluation of worth” (p.169)¹⁶. Hence, beyond market places, festivals are social places, in which novel goods are presented across multiple 'economies of worth' (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). It is thus a place “where value criteria are themselves part of what must be chosen”, causing the social space of an NBM to become “a critical part of the value that is created.” (Potts, 2011, p.169).

Second, a key characteristic that contributes to festivals' transformational capacity is the fact that they bring these spheres together for a short amount of time (Getz, 2010). Liminality is introduced as “the temporary state of being apart from the mundane” (Getz, 2010, p.8). Hence,

Festivals are liminal spaces where subsets of society can experiment with non-mainstream cultural identities, values and practices and these may align with movements of political resistance and social change, especially when they cater to art forms that espouse such messages. (Wasylycia-Leis, 2016, p.53)

According to Quinn and Wilks (2017), a connection could be made between festivals and what Foucault would call a heterotopia: “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p.24). To what extent festivals can truly act as a heterotopia should be viewed critically, since they are also embedded in existing structures.

Furthermore, Lavanga and Drosner (2020) note how a temporality paradox may emerge when a temporary project enables sustained change exactly due to its temporary nature. This means that the temporal nature of festivals might make them more sustainable, because they have to be flexible and adaptable enough to exist for a limited time. In short, the liminal quality of festivals enables them to offer “a temporal release from the structures and regulations of daily time” (Quinn & Wilks, 2017, p.36).

Finally, recognising these qualities in festivals, they have been recently connected to the concept of living labs (Dijkstra et al., 2019; Van Wetten, 2020). Although festivals are relatively small compared to cities, the large amounts of festival visitors can serve as valuable guinea-pigs (Dijkstra et al., 2019). From this point of view, festivals are valued because of their size, measurability and potential for facilitating spinoffs¹⁷. A noteworthy characteristic of this approach lies in the fact that the living lab methodology tends to focus on technological innovation (Leminen,

¹⁶ See also: Stark (2011).

¹⁷ In other words, how an experiment on a festival can be scaled up and make an impact outside the festival. Costanza et al. (1997) see this as one of the main challenges to achieve a sustainable society.

Westerlund, & Nyström, 2012). For instance, Dijkstra et al. (2019) do not include the event's cultural dimension when proposing to define a Festival Living Lab (FLL) as:

a celebratory event that builds one or more temporary, independent logistical infrastructures for the purpose of facilitating the gathering of people, combined with the purpose of providing a user-centred, open innovation ecosystem based on a systematic user co-creation approach, integrating research and innovation processes in a temporary real life community and setting.

Yet, the emergence of the FLL does provide a vital step in introducing the festival in academic literature as a mini-society with transformational potential. From the experiment-focus background of living labs, festivals are appreciated because of their measurability and high level of control:

The clearly defined borders of the festival site, together with its clear demarcation thereby adds to the level of control when conducting experiments making it relatively easy to monitor and quantify in- and outgoing flows (e.g. material or energy flows). (Dijkstra et al., 2019)

Based on the aspects of multiplicity, liminality and testability, Figure 4 illustrates the three pillars of the transformational capacity of festivals in a sustainable transition. This will serve as the framework for analysing the results in the first sub-question of this research.

Besides these promising characteristics, some of the limitations should not remain unaddressed. According to Wasylycia-Leis, festivals “may, however, also be spectacles controlled by economic and cultural elites focused on the benefits of commercialism and consumption and reinforcing mainstream culture”. (2016, p.53). While festivals can offer a space outside of and resistant towards daily life and its social norms (Bakhtin, 1968), they are never fully separate from it, since it is usually allowed to take place by and in those same social norms, rendering them “a licensed affair” functioning as “a permissible rupture of hegemony” (Eagleton, 1981, p.149). In addition, except the FLL concept, these theories appear to have a limited connection with the empirical practice of festivals themselves. In other words, it leaves one to wonder to what extent festival organisers are aware of these characteristics, let alone actively implement them. Hence, one of the goals of this research is to provide an accessible structure that festival organisers could benefit from. This research could be of use for festival organisers based on the empirical observation that a substantial amount of festivals not only are adopting the living lab rationale by viewing themselves as mini-societies, but also explicitly sharing their ambitions in their role in a *sustainable* transition (e.g. DGTL, n.d.; ESNS, n.d.; Into the Great Wide Open, n.d.; Motel Mozaique, n.d.; Welcome to the Village, n.d.).

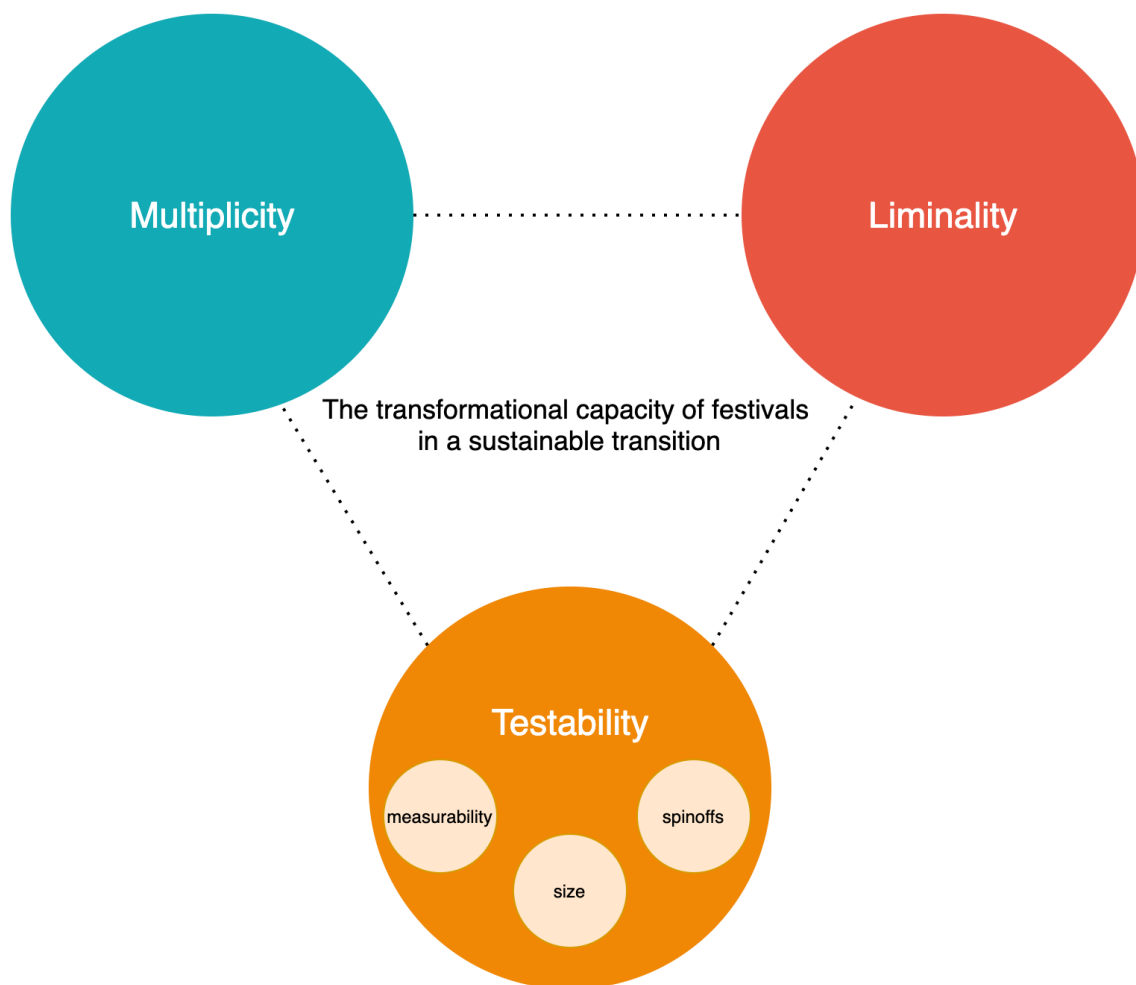


Figure 4. The transformational capacity of festivals in a sustainable transition.

2.3.3 Festivals in a sustainable transition

This chapter provides a theoretical background to the empirical observation that festivals appear to be increasingly aware of their transformational role as they explicitly regard themselves as active players in a sustainable transition.

Within academic research, Getz (2010) distinguishes three main discourses within festival studies, consisting of 1) the discourse of the roles, meanings and impacts of festivals in society and culture, 2) the discourse on festival tourism¹⁸ and 3) the discourse on festival management.

¹⁸ Concerning the second discourse, Getz states that “dominating this discourse has been the assessment of economic impacts of festivals and festival tourism, planning and marketing festival tourism at the destination level and studies of festival-tourism motivation and various segmentation approaches.” (2010, p.5). This resonates with the essentially instrumentalist ‘economics of the arts’ approach as previously discussed in [Chapter 2.1.1](#)

Wasylycia-Leis (2016) expands on Getz's three discourses by adding three more, of which 'Festivals, the cultural public sphere and "green" social change' appears to be of the most relevance for this research. It concerns the view of festivals as a catalyst of a sustainable transition, which implies both the organisation of an 'environmentally friendly' event as well as the promotion of a sustainable lifestyle (Cummings, 2010, p.144). While both elements can enhance each other, Brooks et al. (2007) are critical of the long-term positive societal impact as it tends to be outweighed by the environmental impact by the festival itself. To curb this, Brooks et al. propose five ways for music festivals through which they can provide a solid basis for sustainable practice (2007).

First, festival organisers proclaiming sustainable ambitions should focus on educating themselves, so they can share their vision clearly within their organisation, with artists and with their audience. Second, festival organisers are a central node in their network, connecting a broad variety of suppliers, an audience, artists and other stakeholders. To achieve sustainability hence strongly depends on the co-operation with all of those parties. Furthermore, because of the various spheres that are present at a festival, research on festivals might allow understanding their value beyond economic growth (Wasylycia-Leis, 2016). Third, festivals should form alliances throughout the industry in order to facilitate a sectoral sustainable transition. Fourth, sustainability should be financially viable in order to increase the chance of adaption throughout the supply chain. Fifth, festival organisers must realise the transformational potential of cultural expression. This means that their values should be embedded in the entire festival community (Brooks et al., 2007). This final point could be connected to the smaller, community-based organisation including volunteer-based structures (Laing & Mair, 2008) which are often found in festivals, could provide fertile ground for a bottom-up, community-based and co-created transformation (Wasylycia-Leis, 2016). For the festival, this means a more active role for its audience, which is "encouraged to contribute to the 'co-creation' of the experience, moving beyond passive consumers of the event." (Wasylycia-Leis, 2016, p.52). Although locality thus plays an important role, the scale that is most suited to foster this co-creation remains unspecified.

Finally, Cummings adds that "the green festival space may serve as a site in which a global consciousness of environmental issues and global awareness are manifested and further developed among a translocal young adult audience." (2010, p.149). Associating festivals with a more susceptible younger audience here is connected with a bigger potential impact in a sustainable transition. However, solid research on the connection between environmental sustainability and festivals remains scarce (Van Wetten, 2020) and work needs to be done in order to fully understand the role of festivals in a sustainable transition.

To summarise the theoretical framework, [Chapter 2.1](#) discussed the context of cultural economics in which this research takes place. Building on the valuation approach, a connection was

made between cultural economics and ecological economics. Here, not only the embeddedness of the economy in the cultural sphere was addressed, but also how that visualisation could be extended to include the natural environment. This provided the disciplinary context in which this research is situated.

[Chapter 2.3](#) has provided the theoretical background on the value of culture in times of an ecological crisis and connected this to the transformational potential of festivals, resulting in three main aspects. Connecting this chapter to the previously discussed theory on a sustainable degrowth transition in [Chapter 2.2](#), the background to address the potential role of festivals in a sustainable degrowth transition is complete. Henceforth, in order to provide a structured overview of the methodology for this research, a complete review of the research design follows.

3. Research design

This chapter covers the description and justification of the methodology used to operationalise the discussed theory. This operationalisation leads to the implementation of an interview guide, which functions as the connecting element between the discussed theory, the research questions and the practice of festivals. This chapter's main goal is to provide clarity and transparency on this process. Its subsections consist of research method, sample and sampling description, operationalisation, data collection, data analysis and an acknowledgment of the methodological limitations.

3.1 Research method

To recap, the main research question of this research is:

What is the potential role of festivals towards a sustainable degrowth transition?

Which is divided into two sub-questions:

1. What is the transformational capacity of festivals in a sustainable transition?
2. How do Dutch festivals define sustainability and how does this meaning lend itself in the context of a sustainable degrowth transition?

In order to answer the main research question, the first subquestion serves to explore the idea that festivals have the capacity to play a role in the first place. The first sub-question functions to test the transformational capacities that cultural festivals would have as addressed in [Chapter 2.3.2](#). The second question is attended to by applying the theory from degrowth within the discipline of cultural economics, which is relatively under-explored as of writing¹⁹. The six characteristics of a sustainable degrowth transition as defined in [Chapter 2.2.3](#) provide the guiding structure for this endeavor.

This research is of an inductive nature, as it aspires to enrich theory with empirical knowledge (Bryman, 2012). From the perspective of the economic discipline as a whole, a qualitative approach aligns with Pouw's and the wider Rethinking Economics' call for pluralism within the economic discipline in order to support a broader variety of dimensions: "If society values sustainability and the creation of equal opportunities [...], and not the pursuit of economic growth alone, then we must learn to think more multi-dimensionally in economic science" (Pouw, 2020, p.20). As the majority of economic research and practically all economic education is

¹⁹ For a first attempt, see Banks (2020).

reserved for quantitative methodologies (Tieleman et al., 2017), this research follows Pouw's (2020) call for methodological diversity in the economic discipline by contributing to the discipline of cultural economics with a qualitative, inductive method. Within the sub-discipline of cultural economics specifically, the neoclassical dominance is also being challenged, building on the growing realisation that the value of cultural goods is not sufficiently expressed by price only (Dekker, 2014). Hence, this research takes the opportunity to pluralise the economic discipline through the evolving sub-discipline of cultural economics.

Semi-structured interviews are suited because their flexibility allows for following the direction of the interviewee into new thoughts, examples or emphases (Bryman, 2012). Hence, a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted with festival managers and other experts explicitly related to festivals and/or sustainability. This approach allowed for addressing the topics that were deemed of interest based on the literature, yet left enough space for the interviewees to share their personal perspectives and expertise (Bryman, 2012; Krauss, 2005). For instance, for some of the interviewees sustainability is at the core of their organisation, while for others it is a more recently emerged topic that coexists alongside other occupations.

In addition to the interviews, a brief qualitative content analysis serves to add an extra layer to the research data in order to both provide a richer set of data as well as to increase their reliability. Through direct content analysis, the websites of the organisations with which the interviewees are affiliated will be researched (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

3.2 Sampling method and sample description

The first step consisted of purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012), selecting individuals that are explicitly occupied with festivals and sustainability. It is becoming increasingly clear that festivals recognise their (potential) role in a sustainable transition. Motel Mozaique (MOMO) and Eurosonic Noorderslag (ESNS) both have explicit mentions of sustainability on their websites, articulating the first glimpse into their interpretation of the concept in their context. MOMO publicly shares its ambition to become "the first climate positive festival in the Netherlands, and by doing so inspire cities and the cultural sector" (Motel Mozaique, n.d.). ESNS shares insights to its sustainable practice divided in the six categories of energy, food, transport, waste, water and fair trade (ESNS, n.d.).

Furthermore, festivals like Into the Great Wide Open (ITGWO) and Welcome to the Village (WTTV) both not only offer dedicated webpages on sustainability and circularity, but even erected the specific sub-organisations Lab Vlieland and DORP respectively that are specifically occupied with sustainability (Into the Great Wide Open, n.d.; Welcome to the Village, n.d.). These refer to sustainability both in relation to their 'own' festival, as well as to a broader societal frame by

positioning themselves as living labs in which sustainable innovations can be tested before they are further rolled out.

From this empirical observation, it became clear that there is an emerging sustainability sector behind these festivals consisting of experts and consultants. They focus on increasing the sustainability of festivals themselves (e.g. Green Events) as well as on festivals as living labs (e.g. AMS). Notably, the Revolution Foundation and Milan Meyberg's individual practice are both offspring from the DGTL, which aims to be the world's first circular festival (DGTL, n.d.). Finally, RAUM and the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) were added to the sample by means of control. RAUM is not a festival in the sense that it is not a liminal space, yet it positions itself as an urban living lab with co-creating and creative placemaking as central concepts (RAUM, n.d.). Therefore, it offers insights into the role of temporality with regard to sustainability. IFFR does not explicitly mention sustainability on any of their media, but they are currently structuring a Green Team within their organisation and are consulted by Green Events. Finally, by interviewing IFFR insight will be gained into how festivals that are not centred around music interpret and practice their role in a sustainable transition. The entire sample consists of Dutch organisations and individuals.

	Organisation name	Organisation type	Interviewee name	Function title	Interview date	Additional sources of analysis
1	Lab Vlieland (ITGWO)	Music festival	Govert Reeskamp	Connector/ technical producer	12 May 2021	labvlieland.nl/ & intothegreatwideopen.nl/duurzaam
2	DORP (Welcome to the Village)	Music festival	Janneke Stuive-Stelpstra	Innovation Broker	6 May 2021	welcometothevillage.nl/en/dorp/about-dorp/ & 'Welcome to the Circular Village' report
3	Motel Mozaique	Music festival	Kelly Leeuwis	Business director	26 May 2021	motelmozaique.nl/about/sustainability/
4	International Film Festival Rotterdam	Film festival	Kamiel Arents	Communication coordinator & Green Team	4 May 2021	-
5	RAUM	City lab	Rinke Vreeke	Co-founder	18 May 2021	raumutrecht.nl/info/
6	Green Events	Consultancy	Lyke Poortvliet	Co-owner	4 May 2021	greenevents.nl/en/ & Toolkit Waste-free Festivals
7	Freelance sustainability consultant	Consultant	Milan Meyberg	Owner	20 May 2021	-
8	Revolution Foundation (DGTL)	Consultancy	Mitchell van Dooijeweerd	Sustainability coordinator	14 May 2021	revolutionfoundation.nl/ & dgtl.nl/sustainability
9	Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Metropolitan Solutions (AMS)	Research institute	Aranka Dijkstra	Program Developer Living Labs	4 May 2021	Festival Experimentation Guide

Organisation name	Organisation type	Interviewee name	Function title	Interview date	Additional sources of analysis
10 ESNS / Innofest	Music festival/ innovation facilitator	Rob van Wegen	Sustainability manager	24 May 2021	esns.nl/info/sustainability/ & https://innofest.co/en/about-us/

Table 1. Interviewees

3.3 Operationalisation

An interview guide (see [Appendix 1](#)) has been derived from the discussed theory. However, it should be mentioned that the process of developing the interview guide was iterative and subject to continuous adaptation as certain tendencies became more resonant than others. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the research three main parts have been created to structure the interview guide. Table 2 provides an overview of the operationalisation from theory into interview questions.

First, questions were asked about the transformational capacity of festivals, designed to focus on the first research question. Based on the theory as presented in [Chapter 2.3.2](#), several arguments on why festivals are suited for this role are presented. These questions are not yet focused on the aspect of sustainability, as first the premise that festivals can play a role at all in a cultural transition ought to be tested. Without steering too much in the direction of the aforementioned theoretical argumentation, the interview guide offers room for interviewees to come up with their own arguments as well as their limitations. By doing so, it will not only test the theoretical arguments on why festivals are fertile testing grounds for alternative models of (economic) organisation, but also contribute to the building of a more comprehensive understanding of the transformational capacity of festivals, which is currently lacking (Dijkstra et al., 2019). In addition, depending on the role and organisation of the interviewee, some questions played a more significant role than others. For instance, since IFFR does not communicate content that connects the festival to transformational capacities, this section was only briefly addressed.

The second part of the interview guide is focused on understanding the meaning-making process of the interviewee with regard to sustainability. In order to What sources of inspiration are drawn from? How is it measured? Again, the questions from the interview guide offer enough space for the interviewee to define their own interpretation.

In the third and final part of the interview guide, several questions were devised to touch on the characteristics of sustainable degrowth. The answers to these questions allow for a comparison between interviewees and the degrowth perspective on sustainability. Here, [Chapter 2.2.3](#) serves as

the guiding principle for determining the extent to which the meaning of a sustainable transition for festivals is congruent with the discussed characteristics of a sustainable *degrowth* transition.

In addition to the interview guide, these three parts also function as the guiding structure with which the websites as well as documents associated with the organisations such as reports are studied. Table 1 provides an overview of the documents and websites that have been used for this additional analysis.

Topic	Question number	Description
0 Introduction	0.1, 0.2, 0.3, 0.4	Introduction of the interviewee
1 Transformational capacity	1.1	Inviting the interviewee to explain how they view the role of festivals in a sustainable transition
	1.2	The limitations of the transformational capacities
2 Meaning of sustainability	2.1	Definition and relevance of sustainability
	2.2	Inspiration, sources that are drawn from
	2.3	Areas of practice that are associated with sustainability
	2.4	Organisational structure of sustainability
	2.5	Measurability of sustainability
	2.6	Practical limitations of sustainability
3 Sustainable degrowth	3.1	Relates to relocalisation, redistribution and commons
	3.2	Relates to abundance
	3.3	Relates to sustainable innovation and redistribution
	3.4	Relates to relocalisation
	3.5	Relates to relocalisation, abundance, commons
	3.6	Relates to the role of the arts
	3.7	Invites interviewees to visualise and concretise the aspects of sustainability that are most important, beyond what is currently achievable.

Table 2. Operationalisation

3.4 Data collection

All interviews have been conducted online, via Zoom, except for interview number 7, which was conducted at the location of the interviewee's office at Basecamp IJmuiden. The conversations were in Dutch and took place between May 4th and May 28th 2021. Their duration varies between 50 and 70 minutes. The audio of these interviews has been recorded with the permission of the respondents. Proof of this permission as well as written permission to use their full names in this research can be provided upon request.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, secondary data from the festivals' websites and other public documents was used to prepare the interview and make them more specific to each respondent's organisation. Furthermore, these additional data sources serve to enrich the themes that emerge from coding the transcripts. As mentioned in Table 1 above, most of the respondents' organisations either provide this data directly on their website, or in dedicated documents such as a report or project plan. The criteria for the selection of this secondary data was that the text should explicitly mention sustainability or related terminologies, such as circularity, living labs or co-creation.

3.5 Data analysis

The transcripts of the interviews and the reviewed websites and documents are analysed in Atlas.ti software in a thorough thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012). Emerging codes and their interrelations are visualised in a code tree (see [Appendix 2](#)). Although based on literature, the initial themes that have formed the interview guide are prone to change during the process, which suits the flexible nature of thematic analysis (Herzog, Handke, & Hitters, 2019). Hence, the process of coding is both inductive in the sense that it extracts meanings of sustainability, as well as deductive as themes have previously been devised to structure the interviews (Saldaña, 2021). For the first research question, the seven themes that emerged were mostly created based on the interviews, whereas the themes of the second research question had been mostly pre-determined based on literature. Yet, again, in both cases it has been an iterative process nonetheless.

In [Chapter 4](#), relevant or exemplary quotes from the interviews as well as from the additional sources are categorised per theme in order to illustrate the variety of perspectives on the themes. The quotations have been translated from Dutch to English by the author.

3.6 Methodological limitations

Every research contains personal interpretations (Bryman, 2012). My perspective is from a white, 29-year-old Dutch cis-gender man. All of these characteristics inevitably colour my interpretations in this research. This text is not the space to explore how (much) I might be biased and privileged, but nevertheless, it is imperative to note my recognition, as other characteristics would have meant different interpretations and therefore impacted the outcomes and conclusions of this research. Furthermore, I encourage you, the reader, to be aware of your perspective.

This leads us to address the limited reliability of this research, which holds true especially for qualitative efforts (Bryman, 2012). In-depth semi-structured interviews with a small selection of festival managers and experts reduce the repeatability (Bryman, 2012), which is further decreased by the fact that the interviews were conducted in times of a global pandemic. The background of a

raging pandemic killing hundreds of thousands across the globe will inevitably influence not only the availability of respondents, but also the mindset in which they respond, considering the festival sector has been almost completely brought to a standstill as a result of the measurements. Whether this benefited the results due to an enhanced period of reflection or not is unclear, but a negative impact on reliability can be expected due to the exceptional circumstances.

Because this research hopes to embody the heterodox approach that a pluralist economics heralds, different disciplines are brought together. The theoretical background is carefully constructed, but many relevant contributions inevitably remain on the shelves. The selection of used sources is limited due to time and capacity constraints.

Although interviews are fully transcribed, only selected parts that contribute substantially to the goals of this thesis will be featured in the results, meaning the full context in which some responses are quoted will inevitably be lost. In the context of convenience and snowball sampling, these results are not suitable for generalisation (Bryman, 2012).

The sample size is not only small and geographically limited, but the interviewees also represent only a certain group within the festival sector. Although it is not a variable that was explored in this research, most of these festivals are predominantly music festivals. Hence, the results from this research are likely to be most congruent with music festivals, while leaving the difference with other types of festivals unaddressed.

In addition, interviewees can be expected to have a positive attitude towards sustainability since they are already involved as stakeholders. Even if an increasing amount of festivals are found to be addressing and promoting sustainability, plenty of festivals do not. However, since the emergence of festivals' occupation with sustainability is relatively recent, the interviewees can be regarded as frontrunners. They signal a possible direction for the sector. Hence, this research explores the *potential* of festivals, rather than that it makes a statement on the practice of all festivals.

Interviews offer the opportunity to dive into certain topics such as sustainability and increase the validity of this research (Bryman, 2012), but the information that is retrieved from them is distinct from practical implementation. Even if these data are supplemented with a document analysis to reduce the risk of bias (Verschuren et al., 2010), a difference between the data in this research and practice is inevitable. Once festivals are permitted again, further research is encouraged to fill this gap. Further limitations will be addressed in [Chapter 5.1](#).

4. Results and Discussions

The first part of this chapter examines how festival organisers and experts view their transformational capacity. The second part, [Chapter 4.2](#), compares the characteristics of a sustainable degrowth transition to the sustainable ambitions by the festivals. This way, assumptions of the transformational capacity of festivals can be tested, theory can be enhanced and practical suggestions for improvement of sustainable ambitions for festivals can be made.

4.1 The transformational capacity of festivals

The role of festivals as a facilitator of a transition was recognised by all interviewees. The festival could be regarded as a ‘live pressure cooker event’ in which orchestrated and controlled tests can be done (Reeskamp, Lab Vlieland).

A festival is a temporary city, with the same needs as a regular city. We need water, sanitation, people need to drink and eat, people need energy, they commute both to the festival as within the festival. There are a lot of systems that are similar to those in a city. [...] And we are acting like the mayor, with the power to organise it as we want. (Van Dooijeweerd, Revolution Foundation)

In addition, Meyberg (sustainability consultant) connects this development to a process of maturation, which does not have to be a process of complete solemnness:

How do you define wealth (*rijkdom*)? What gives you a ‘rich’ festival experience? Partying until you drop? I understand that there might be a period in your life for that, but at a certain moment in your life you cannot escape reality anymore. We have to deal with our shit. So, let’s do that in a fun way. That’s where I see the potential for festivals.

This potential is often used to paint a picture of a society that is sustainable, as defined by the festival organiser. In this sense, the festival can be simultaneously a mirror that reflects current society, a testing site and a glimpse into the future of what society could be like (Meyberg, sustainability consultant). Hence, an effective sustainable transition requires a bigger scope than the festival organisation itself. It is not so much the sustainability of the organisation itself that constitutes the main focus of this research, but rather its role in a sustainable transition. In addressing this role with the interviewees, the following themes were explored.

4.1.1 Multiplicity: festivals as a combination of different sectors and logics

One of the main of festivals' transformational capacity is that they encompass various aspects of life simultaneously. This opens up unique possibilities for cross-fertilisation:

We are bringing a lot of different parties, businesses together with some kind of innovation, in which they collaborate on something that can eventually be scaled up. You have to deal less with the troubles of competition in this temporary little world. You can bring together great businesses that would never cooperate otherwise. (Van Dooijeweerd, Revolution Foundation)

Using the festival explicitly as a place for bringing people together is also voiced by Stuive-Stelpstra (DORP): "The strength of DORP lies not so much within the prototypes that are devised, which are very nice, sure, but within the meeting and connection of the people involved". However, she also mentions the importance of facilitating a successful cross-fertilisation: "But if your interests are not aligned, that causes friction. So if an artist wants to be artistic, but the group wants to realise a working prototype and you are not capable of bringing that together in a stressful week [...], it won't work" (Stuive-Stelpstra, DORP). This remark can be read as a nuance of Potts' recognition of festivals as 'contexts of dissonance', which characterise NBMs (2011). Hence, to enhance the transformational capacity of festivals in this respect, the challenge for festivals is not to minimise friction between stakeholders, but facilitate it effectively. As Dijkstra (AMS) explains, there is a lot of hidden knowledge at a festival, also within its audience: "however, there is no guarantee for success. In order to 'harvest' this type of knowledge you can facilitate interesting talkshows or experiences, or workshops." Again, this resonates clearly with Potts' (2011) conceptualisation of festivals as NBMs, which are not designed for efficiency, but rather to facilitate complexity²⁰.

This implies the necessity for an open organisational structure. Van Wegen (sustainability coordinator) describes this organisational openness as a "positive vibe", which is generally met with excitement and has a sense of 'sexiness' to it. It is furthermore described by Poortvliet (Green Events):

In some industries, those who are more closed off and don't deal with an audience, people can't see what is happening. Whereas on a festival, you walk around and see what's on the menu, every journalist can walk in, anyone can basically enter. I believe that makes festivals more engaged [in a sustainable transition] than other industries.

²⁰ Another connection that could also be further explored is with Potts' concept of innovation commons (2019; also see Dekker, 2020).

Because stakeholders with different interests are invited to join the festival, this open quality could be regarded as a catalyst for different processes of valuation (Dekker, 2014) with their own justification (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). Van Wegen (ESNS) sees the coordination of these different justifications as the core of his job. He argues that recognising a plurality of interests helps in a sustainable transition as it allows to consider alternative perspectives. In this sense, it is understandable that certain corporations struggle to join a sustainable transition if it appears incommensurable with their commercial goals. Nevertheless, Van Wegen continues, it is vital for such companies to be transparent about their values and the struggle they might endure:

that's the cultural aspect: you have to be empathetic and say that you understand it is impossible to change certain things within a year if someone's mindset isn't there yet. You have to understand the other side of the picture and acknowledge there is a revenue model. Nevertheless, you should hold companies accountable if they haven't made an effort to change next year. That is why companies have to be transparent about their struggle.

In addition, this transparency itself should not only consist of one type of value, but should make an effort to include a broader picture of the benefits of changing policy. However, this can be a challenging task, as Dijkstra (AMS) points out:

it is often a matter of revenue: if something is going to cost more money, you have to be able to show to the added value somewhere else. But that can be very hard to quantify, because money is the same to everyone, whereas with happiness; how do you define the value of that?

This hints at the aforementioned tendency of monetary value to crowd out other types of value, such as ecological and cultural, valuing only one 'sort of life' that something can have (Beckert & Aspers, 2011). Another sentiment amongst interviewees was that the festival's core values should not be compromised, for instance in implementing sustainable practices in an international festival: "I cannot just bring everyone from the West Kruiskade [*local street in Rotterdam*] together, because then you will not have an international festival" (Verschuren, IFFR)²¹.

In short, the multiplicity of festivals in terms of the variety of sectors and logics they host can be seen as a vital part of their transformational capacity. As a result of this multiplicity, different forms of justifications are also brought together. These might not be in line with the (sustainable)

²¹ On the other hand, Rotterdam is known for its multicultural population.

aims of the festival, which is something that has been noted by some of the interviewees. Yet, the fact that these stakeholders are joined together in a celebratory event with an open and transparent organisational structure, might enhance the chance of a successful collaboration in terms of balancing different economies of worth.

4.1.2 Liminality: festivals as temporary and alternative sites

As mentioned in [Chapter 2.3.2](#), the temporal qualities allow for festivals to have transformational capacity. This quality is acknowledged by all interviewees, and aptly summarised in the Festival Experimentation Guide:

Contrary to a city or town where you will have to work with existing systems in place, a music festival generally arises from an empty plot of land or an empty city square. This ‘empty canvas’ can be very inspiring and invite you to rethink and redesign the festival’s (social) systems, technical and economic infrastructure from scratch. The empty canvas can make it easier to implement and connect sustainable innovations in a festival setup. (Dijkstra & Boonstra, 2021, p.33)

This description of the ephemeral quality of festivals has also been discussed in the temporality paradox by Lavanga and Drosner (2020), who found that temporality itself can be an important factor of a sustainable transition. Reeskamp (Lab Vlieland) explains that especially smaller festivals hold a strong focus on a yearly cycle of re-invention, as opposed to, for instance, a construction company “which is primarily focused on increasing efficiency”. In addition, Leeuwis (MOMO) explains that the temporal quality has been of great value in being able to ‘use’ the pandemic as a way to reinvent what a concert can look like. In this sense, temporality and resilience can go hand in hand.

However, this temporality also comes with significant challenges. As Van Dooijeweerd (Revolution Foundation) explains: "temporality has both positive and negative effects, because it does make it more of a challenge to install something for a limited time and deconstruct it two days later. For instance, some things like production facilities cannot be moved to a festival area for a small amount of time". Furthermore, “some innovations take weeks to iterate. In that case, one weekend is not sufficient” (Reeskamp, Lab Vlieland). Finally, emphasising the role of the IFFR as a hub for professionals in the (film) industry, Verschuren (IFFR) points at the networking function of a festival and how that benefits from consistency rather than temporality:

this remains the same every year. It is one of the most important parts of the festival, in order to maintain an international allure. That is why that isn't re-invented every year. We do evaluate to see what should be altered, but at the core of the festival is bringing people together.

From the perspective of RAUM, having a more permanent structure and fixed location, Vreeke (RAUM) points out the benefit of a continuing construction: "Our place is very important. We can welcome people here; both visitors that choose to come here for a specific reason as well as people who are passing by".

A noteworthy development to curb this limitation is the creation of sub-organisations next to festivals, which allow for a sustained impact. These sub-organisations emerged from festivals, but they are active for a longer period of time and can act beyond the direct interest of a festival. Both DORP and Lab Vlieland are examples of such sub-organisations. As Reeskamp (Lab Vlieland) says:

one of the reasons for the creation of Lab Vlieland can be found in the example of a compost machine. Through Lab Vlieland, we are able to keep the machine on the island and have it working there. That has nothing to do with the festival anymore.

DORP extends the duration of the WTTV festival for several days, allowing a more complete process of design thinking to take place. However, Stuive-Stelptra (DORP) voiced the ambition to extend DORP to cover more than just the days prior to the festival, "I see a lot of potential in doing this at more places, with more festivals". Such connections between DORP and other European festivals are already established through the InnoQuarter network (Stuive-Stelpstra).

A frequently mentioned result of the liminal quality of festivals is the openness of the attitude of their visitors²². Understanding festivals as a 'time out of time' (Falassi, 1987), which offers a release from everyday life, also allows a reduction of expectations, norms and preconceptions, leaving the visitor more open towards new experiences:

It is a place where people are a bit more open for things that otherwise might not be as accepted, or where people are looking for a new identity, want to try new things. Festival visitors are open to change. That allows us to test things. What do people think about this kind of future? How do they react to certain things? What happens if you take away all the trashcans? (Van Dooijeweerd, Revolution Foundation)

²² Which is a secondary view that would require visitor research to be confirmed.

This capacity has also been noted by Dijkstra and Boonstra, describing the audience: “Their desire to experience new things and their open mindset make festival visitors more approachable for user feedback, co-creation and contribution to experiments. Moreover, among festival visitors are a lot of early adopters that might embrace your innovation.” (2021, p.34). However, the disconnection from real life could also influence visitors in an undesired way, for instance through the use of drugs²³ (Dijkstra & Boonstra, 2021) .

To conclude, the liminal quality of festivals was recognised by the interviewees. The temporal aspect can allow festivals the space to re-invent themselves every year, yet several practical limitations must be acknowledged. In terms of ‘being apart from the mundane’ (Getz, 2010, p.8), festival organisers seem to also recognise this as an important contribution to the transformational capacity, describing an enhanced openness among people during festivals. However, this last point would require a study of festival audience experience for a better empirical foundation.

4.1.3 Testability: festivals as living labs

As discussed in [Chapter 2.3.2](#), within the emergent field of living labs, the first steps are taken to connect this theory to festivals (Dijkstra et al., 2019; Van Wetten, 2020). In this chapter, three main qualities that qualify festivals as living labs are considered.

Size

A key differentiation between festivals and cities is their size. Festivals are not just real-life societies, but real-life *mini*-societies (Dijkstra & Boonstra, 2021). As festivals tend to be smaller, several possibilities for testing open up:

The privilege of ITGW0 is that it is a very small festival with national attention. That makes it easy to present an inspiring programme, because you know there will be a lot of attention for a relatively small project and that is a unique position. (Reeskamp, Lab Vlieland)

In other words, despite being significantly smaller than most cities, festivals have a relatively large impact, or at least such potential.

In the end, you need the very big players, like Coca Cola, to make a big impact. If you manage to make a difference with them, in a positive sense, you are still better off than with a small

²³ Another reading could also interpret this as rather an enhanced level of openness.

company. That has less impact. So we review: can we make a change? Isn't it greenwashing? Is it truly a significant contribution and not a kind of replacement? That is how we weigh our choices. (Poortvliet, Green Events)

In other words, a bigger festival might attract bigger stakeholders, hence increasing the potential impact in a sustainable transition. This increased impact is also connected to reaching a bigger audience, which can both be transformed and contribute to the transformation (Van Wetten, 2020). Indeed, festivals are popular in the Netherlands, having substantially increased in number and visitors to have 1070 music festivals reach over 23 million visitors (Galle & Haes, 2017).

"Festivals are part of our culture. With the exception of this year's pandemic, they occur often, resulting in many opportunities for your experimentation." (Dijkstra & Boonstra, 2021, p.34). More specifically, festivals are popular amongst a certain demographic: "Festivals in the Netherlands I believe reach about between 90 and 96% of the population between 18 and 35 years old. So if there is one way to bring new ideas into society, I think it is through festivals" (Meyberg, sustainability consultant). This capacity is connected to having an open attitude, as a line could be drawn between young age and openness towards experimentation. The same relationship was also hinted at by Cummings (2010) and seems to be a fertile path for further exploration. However, there is a minimum size if you want to have an impact, as Van Dooijeweerd (Revolution Foundation) explains:

It could be that some flows are too small for some businesses to invest in. Perhaps once you are three times as big, it becomes interesting for certain brands to push for a certain innovation, because sometimes you need more volume to create a business case for sustainable things. I think growth can be helpful there.

In short, a dynamic can be identified between size and transformational capacity. On one hand, the fact that festivals are relatively small is viewed as a key characteristic that allows for testability, while on the other, a certain minimal threshold in size is regarded to be necessary in order to make an impact. This applies to both audience size as well as leverage power towards big stakeholders.

Measurability

A festival is appropriate as a living lab partly due to the fact that they offer a space that is separate from daily life, both spatially and conceptually. Most festivals have defined borders, making a festival very controllable and measurable (Van Dooijeweerd, Revolution Foundation). This can

result in a Material Flows Analysis (MFA), which can be used “by companies, cities or countries to reveal in- and outgoing material flows” (Galle & Haes, 2017, p.8). In other words, it quantifies the resources used in order to reveal what percentage is wasted, which consequently reveals the steps that are necessary in order to achieve circularity. MFAs have been executed by Metabolic for WTTV (Galle & Haes, 2017) and DGTL (Metabolic, 2017).

However, this measurability has clear limits, as Poortvliet (Green Events) points out: “If you manage to change something, that is always the sum of many parts and parties, which makes it very hard to measure what your own contribution has been.” Even if you manage to separate the impact from your actions from its surroundings, the presumed objectivity of numbers should always be treated carefully:

To give an example, at Mysteryland we measured the weight of the waste in kilos. On one edition, the weather was great and there was only a small amount of waste. The following year, with the same amount of people, there suddenly was 30, 40 percent more waste. However, that extra weight turned out to be water from the heavy rain that year. This shows that even clear measurable numbers can be tricky. (Poortvliet, Green Events)

Nevertheless, measurability remains important in the sustainable ambitions, to prevent false claims and greenwashing:

You only know if you are regenerative once you have established a zero measurement to start with. If you do that, you know how much carbon you emit, how much water you use, how much landmass you use. Then you can restore, compensate, replace and also communicate that externally. (Meyberg, sustainability consultant)

What is noticeable in the discussion of measurability with interviewees is the predominant focus on technological and material aspects. More qualitative aspects such as wellbeing are often overlooked in this measuring. Dijkstra (AMS) is aware of this and explains this as follows:

To measure the impact of certain living lab processes can be very tricky, especially with new connections between people. It is so hard to measure that, because it is very intangible. To make it tangible is possible, but to monitor that takes a lot of work, which often is not worth it. In the sense that it is not cost-effective. In the end, it is about a culture shift in what we value as a society.

This signals room for improvement. If a sustainable transition is at least to some extent a cultural transition ([see Chapter 2.1](#)), the FLL should incorporate measurement tools to include more qualitative aspects of the sustainable transition. This can be found in Metabolic's definition of a circular economy, which

goes beyond only materials and waste: it is a 'new economic model for addressing human needs and fairly distributing resources without undermining the functioning of the biosphere or crossing any planetary boundaries.' What this means is that the festival should also aim to use renewable energy, be resilient, and structurally support key parameters of planetary health such as biodiversity, health and wellbeing, and culture and society. (Metabolic, 2017, p.2)

However, current festival MFAs have not incorporated any of the parameters beyond energy, water, dinks, infrastructure, food and consumption materials (Galle & Haes, 2017; Metabolic, 2017; Van de Voort & Schurink, 2018). Although measuring qualitative aspects might indeed prove to be a more demanding task than for instance measuring waste (which, as discussed, is also thornier than it might seem), it is vital nevertheless. In the end, as Dijkstra (AMS) mentioned, a focus on quantitative measurements is part of a culture and the lack of measuring qualitative aspects cannot be explained solely in terms of effort and cost-efficiency. Building on [Chapter 2.1](#), a more pluralist interpretation of value is of great importance. A direction for the implementation of measuring wellbeing could be found in the development of the Wellbeing Economics Matrix (WEM) by Pouw (2020), although it needs technical development before it can be applied in practice.

Spinoffs

As brought up earlier in this chapter, the role of a festival in a sustainable transition goes beyond the parameters of the festival itself. This is another key aspect of the FLL too; to facilitate experiments that can then be transported or scaled up outside of the temporary mini-society into the 'permanent' society (Dijkstra et al., 2019). This requires a more long-term approach and therefore is connected to the temporal aspect of the liminal quality. One possible effect of the realisation of long-term impact is that it opens up more possibilities for experimentation:

with the example of the compost machine, you could debate whether in the end that has an ecological benefit of using it for that one weekend as opposed to just disposing the waste with a truck. But through the potential spinoff, it can be justified. [...] You know there is going to be a big spinoff and you are helping a substantial change take place by providing an inspiring surrounding in which you can prove that things can work in practice. (Reeskamp, Lab Vlieland)

This example highlights a balance as critically discussed by Brooks et al. (2007). It is impossible to fully separate the sustainability of a festival itself and its role in a sustainable transition. From the perspective of IFFR as represented by Verschuren, it becomes clear that the film festival sector is mostly occupied with sustainability in the context of reducing waste and emissions within its festivals. Even though it is a large sector where there is much to be gained, the scope transformational capacity for film festivals risks to remain limited to the sector itself.

In addition, the organisational evolution of DORP and Lab Vlieland plays an important role in facilitating spinoffs. The opportunity to focus specifically on the more peripheral matters resulting from the festival living lab is opened up by these sub-organisations. It allows for spinoffs to find their ways into society, as well as a more sustained presence throughout the year. An organisation that focuses primarily on facilitating tests on festivals and ensuring that “for an increasing number of start-ups, the step to the market is a successful one” by offering guidance, tools and frameworks for entrepreneurs (Innofest, n.d.). In addition, as Leeuwis (MOMO) points out, other existing organisations could also facilitate that role:

we are working together with Blue City, which hosts impact cafes in which students or entrepreneurs, often young entrepreneurs take on specific challenges. [...] Blue City can facilitate the entrepreneurial side of the sustainable transition, so how can you connect it to a healthy business model. We can offer space, but we are not corporate economists.

Other interviewees mention the collaboration with banks, (local) government and each other. Concerning the latter, Dijkstra (AMS) spots room for improvement in bringing festivals closer together:

Currently, there are festivals every weekend in the Netherlands. I would like it if an entrepreneur could test somewhere every weekend, meaning that festivals would cooperate more. (...) Because every festival has its own setting and if you test on several festivals, I would like that from my perspective of living labs, there would be more of a red thread and that festivals would support each other in that.

Hence, several paths towards facilitating spinoffs become clear. From creating sub-organisations to working with existing local organisations to collaboration within the sector. Another stakeholder that plays a key role in this regard is that of (local) government, which would need further research in order to determine its specific role in this dynamic.

4.2 The role of festivals in a sustainable degrowth transition

Now that the transformational capacities have been addressed, it is time to move on to the question of how those capacities can be used in a sustainable degrowth transition. To do this, the core characteristics of a sustainable degrowth transition as mentioned in [Chapter 2.2.3](#) are compared to the meaning of sustainability and a sustainable transition by the interviewees. What's more, several connections will be drawn between these characteristics and the three main categories that define the transformational capacity.

4.2.1 Abundance

In the interviews, the concept of abundance was not explicitly mentioned by the interviewees, yet their responses can be tied to several of its implications. For instance, Van Dooijeweerd (Revolution Foundation) mentions a modular and minimalist stage design, "which brings the focus back to the basics, having filtered out all the extra things". Furthermore, Reeskamp's (Lab Vlieland) enthusiasm for ITGWO implies how a limitation of wants (Kallis & March, 2015) can improve quality:

One of the reasons why I am at Vlieland is because it can't grow in audience, because the island is full. That is why the only room for growth is in the content. Once you start growing in volume, this diminishes the quality of the content.

This relates to issues of the size as discussed in [Chapter 4.1.3](#), in which increased growth in size would negatively impact growth in other aspects, as well as reduce the dynamic between different economies of worth and their justification (Beckert & Aspers, 2011; Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006; Dekker, 2014). However, consequences in terms of content have yet to be further conceptualised and investigated.

Another dynamic between a reduction of wants and the transformational capacity of festivals can be found in the aspect of the 'empty canvas' (Dijkstra & Boonstra, 2021) from which especially smaller festivals can gain a lot. Based on her previous experience from working at the Le Guess Who (LGW) festival in Utrecht, Vreeke (RAUM) sees a lot of potential for increased sustainable practices by using existing and local resources²⁴ instead of having to erect everything from scratch:

That is why I think LGW is quite sustainable. They use what is already available, in terms of locations and infrastructure. They make use of existing networks and organisations that can

²⁴ Vreeke referred to the notion of a confetti festival by Wynn (2015).

facilitate them, as opposed to a festival like Lowlands, which puts a fence around its terrain and has bar staff coming from all across the country.

Furthermore, in two of the interviews, it was noted how the growth imperative in Western societies should be reduced. As Poortvliet (Green Events) mentions, “I am very aware that we in the West, or in Western culture have a major contribution, that our needs are way too high. How can we make sure we bring those down?” Sharing this sentiment, Meyberg (sustainability consultant) connects this to the potential of festivals to break with the trend of commodification:

I think our society has been off too well for a while. If a festival reflects society, with the rise of the consumer society and the rise of mass media and fast food culture, you see that reflected in festivals. With consumer culture comes consumer artists, consumer music and consumer festivals.

Finally, abundance can find inspiration in nature (Kallis & March, 2015). Poortvliet points at the ecologist and philosopher Matthijs Schouten as a source of inspiration. Schouten stresses that the real challenge is to do ‘inner work’ in order to change our relationship to the natural environment, according to Poortvliet. Leeuwis (MOMO) mentions drawing inspiration from the German forester Peter Wohlleben (2016) leading to the development of plans to plant a forest together with MOMO’s artists and visitors. Moreover, a renewed appreciation of nature is not only of great value in the fight against climate change directly, it also can serve as inspiration for a re-evaluation of the abundance that the earth provides, reducing the need for materialities:

The unique value of ITGWO is that it offers a stage for big artists to a small audience and in fact all of them are happy to return, because of the beautiful surroundings. That has to do with the fact that it is set in a natural environment and you hear from artists that they appreciate this and also the fact that it is taken good care of. (Reeskamp, Lab Vlieland)

In terms of implementing an abundance mindset into practice at festivals, Poortvliet (Green Events) explains that it remains up to the wishes of the festival to what extent she chooses to share her inspiration and translate it into a policy recommendation: “these kinds of things have to arise in a strategic session with a team, for instance. If I sense that it might be interesting for them, I’ll share it, but perhaps I should do that more often”.

4.2.2 Sustainable innovation

As mentioned in the context of measurability in [Chapter 4.1.3](#), sustainability in the context of festivals is often related, or even equated with increased efficiency in the use of resources. Festivals participating in the sector's Green Deal “want to tackle the waste problem in an efficient and effective way” (Van de Voort & Schurink, 2018). In line with Van Wetten's (2020) findings, sustainable practices by festivals tend to be skewed towards technological innovation. Within the context of a sustainable degrowth transition, this role of innovation is not sufficient, as it remains unclear how this efficiency is directed towards the increased wellbeing as Hickel (2020) proposes. Mentioning efficiency does not necessarily equate to decoupling from a growth imperative.

Although ‘sustainability’ is often connected to the notion of increased efficiency and a reduction of waste, several comments indicate a realisation that it is not enough. For instance, Van Wegen (ESNS) does emphasise the importance of efficiency, but only after the options of reduction and alternatives have been explored.

If we really want change, we will need to start telling a different story. Ultimately, our story is not right and everyone is stuck in it. I am not talking about technical aspects and reduction and innovative solutions, but more about a culture shift in people. In the end, we need to change our relationship with nature and with the resources and the people around us. That needs to change before we can really address the problem in full. (Poortvliet, Green Events)

If you take sustainability as a guiding principle, a reduction of negative impact on the environment will always be the goal. This is great, but not enough. [...] If we live and work in a linear economy, you will get linear festivals. When I worked at DGTL, I proposed to take it a step further, to match society's shift from a linear to a circular model. (Meyberg, sustainability consultant)

Even the call for inefficiency (Schinkel, 2013) found resonance, as it is argued to contribute to the value of ITGWO:

In a sense, it is a very large, inefficient and broad club that wants to produce a beautiful festival every year. Not because they make money, but because they love to do it. That has remained until now, that energy is still there. (Reeskamp, Lab Vlieland)

Concluding, there seems to be plenty of fertile ground for a more holistic understanding of sustainable innovation, beyond technological efficiency. However, there is a tendency to present it

in a manner that is limited to categories such as waste, energy and food. It could be argued that this dominant focus on efficiency in resource use diminishes the complex and inefficient qualities of the multiplicity aspect of festivals.

4.2.3 Redistribution

Perhaps the most political goal within this research concerns redistribution. This aspect of a sustainable degrowth transition remained mostly untouched, yet several examples point towards its direction. For instance in the recognition of the importance to keep festivals accessible:

The festival attracts a rather wealthy audience and really tries to maintain a broad audience and manages to do so and also attract families without a big budget. At the same time, it remains an expensive trip to come to the island, so that remains a complicated tension. Maintaining a broad audience is very important. (Reeswijk, Lab Vlieland)

Now people have to buy a ticket to go to a festival, which creates a hurdle for people to enter which is money. This excludes some people, so how can you make sure that a festival is accessible for everyone? If you can create that, you make sure that everyone can feel connected to each other, because no one is excluded. (Leeuwis, MOMO)

Leeuwis provides an example in which buying a group ticket for MOMO enabled a free ticket to be donated to a vulnerable *Rotterdammer* in collaboration with the Nieuw Thuis Rotterdam foundation.

Another type of redistribution appears in an example by Van Dooijeweerd (Revolution Foundation), who uses the example of a food court to combine redistribution of food with the notion of abundance:

We created a menu based on what is available instead of what the visitor wants. What food has been overproduced, what is in season and what would otherwise be thrown away? And can we make a menu out of that?

Together with InStock and local producers such as bakeries, DGTL created such a menu. It could be argued that part of the success of this approach is the open attitude of the festival audience discussed in [Chapter 4.1.2](#). Perhaps that openness can thus not only benefit the acceptance of new products and systems, but also enhance the willingness of the festival audience to reduce their consumption in service of the wellbeing of the community.

In short, there appears to be a lot to be gained in terms of redistribution. Festivals are valued because they reach a big part of the Dutch population, but, if the festival is indeed a mini-society, who is excluded? How can festivals be a testing ground for finding ways in which disadvantaged minorities can thrive? As Leeuwis (MOMO) points out, receiving subsidies means you have to engage with societal matters. It might be that some of the organisations that participate in this research engage more actively in redistribution, but that those efforts are not presented under the banner of sustainability and hence not found during the data collection process. Nevertheless, in a sustainable degrowth transition, redistribution is one of the most vital parts of ensuring a sustainable future for all (Hickel, 2020; Latouche, 2009).

Multiple interviewees (Poortvliet, Van Dooijeweerd, Van Wegen, Dijkstra) refer to the model of Raworth's Donut Economics, which aims to provide a structure to meet the needs of all within the boundaries of our planet (2017), yet focus more on limiting the impact on those boundaries than meeting the needs of all. The problem of measuring a festival's qualitative impact adequately might provide a reason for this, but also communication appears to play a role: "it is just very broad, goes very far. It's about embodied impact and that goes too far for us now. We looked at what is achievable and easy to explain to our producers and everyone working on site" (Van Dooijeweerd, Revolution Foundation). Nevertheless, the awareness of social responsibility as recognised by Reeswijk and Leeuwis opens up opportunities for an enhanced application of redistribution. For instance, tests with (a variation of) a UBI, or offering access to those who do not have the means themselves, such as implemented by Leeuwis.

4.2.4 Relocalisation

Festivals that aim to be sustainable recognise this goal both as a vital part of the sustainable transition, as well as a vital part of some festivals' identities. Relocalisation is mostly valued by the interviewees because it implies a reduction of CO2 emissions, as fewer flights will be necessary. Although this only partly covers the motivation behind relocalisation as addressed in [Chapter 2.2.3](#), it is nevertheless a dilemma that shows clear friction between types of justifications.

If you take an international festival with special acts from across Europe, or the world, we could say: try to book your acts locally. But then that's not you, that is not the festival. The identity is often connected to certain acts or international speakers. So how do you solve that? (Poortvliet, Green Events)

As it is unlikely for inherently international festivals like IFFR to source their line-ups and audience locally and remove all flights, the ‘solution’ might be in the transparency of the justification of the choice, as Meyberg (sustainability consultant) points out:

Travel and flights. I say: it’s possible. As long as you are clear about why. I think that if an artist has a good message and is a progressive thinker either in his speaking or in his music, you should be able to offer them a stage at your festival. Even if they are from Mexico or Australia. But incorporate their emissions, be transparent about them and explain your decision to book the artist because of their essential contribution.

The problem, in other words, should not be merely defined as flights, but rather in how easily flights are booked without considering the consequences. If the task is to provide a more balanced pluralistic system of valuation, social and aesthetic justifications should be able to outweigh potential negative environmental impact. This observation resonates clearly with the core of degrowth which promotes an awareness of the unsustainable mechanisms rather than renounces specific unsustainable resources (Hickel, 2020).

Another observation about relocalisation in the practice of festivals can be addressed in the context of the call to use local resources where possible (Latouche, 2009). As Poortvliet (Green Events) mentioned before, big (international) companies like Coca Cola should not be discarded as possible partners, since an increase in their sustainable practice potentially has more impact than a smaller, local company. A clear example of this strategy is the achievement of the Plastic Promise, initiated by Green Events, whose participants include not only a broad variety of events organisers, but also Coca Cola and AB Inbev (Plastic Promise, n.d.). This is an effort that recognised as a great achievement. On the other hand, a critical view would question to what extent this achievement tackles the inherent unsustainability of international capitalist companies that are fuelled by the need for exponential growth (Euler, 2019; Hickel, 2020). This criticality gains even more weight when taking into consideration Coca Cola’s uncomfortable, yet consistent and unchallenged number one ranking in the list of the world’s biggest plastic polluters²⁵ (Chalabi, 2019).

It might be considered awkward to critique the applaudable effort that the Plastic Promise represents. Yet, these views are presented with the shared ambition of a sustainable transition in mind. Or, as Van Wegen (ESNS) puts it: “it’s not a competition, it’s a competition together”.

²⁵ Amongst a wide variety of other possible critiques on Coca Cola in the context of sustainability (see: Blanding, 2011).

4.2.5 Commons

As Euler (2019) explains, a commons is confined to a limited size, as it is based on trust and community. Addressing the importance of limited scale if a sense of community is desired, Reeskamp (Lab Vlieland) explains:

The origin of the organisation is a party for your friends, with your friends. That is how it started. [...] It shouldn't become an in-crowd thing, where once you've been to the festival you are secured of a ticket for the following edition. One of the reasons we are so close is because of the limited scale.

This observation introduces the question if a festival could be a commons. An interesting tendency was revealed when addressing the knowledge sharing between festivals and festival consultancies. Hence, it might also be worth exploring the festival sector as a commons. It soon became clear that the sharing and co-creation of knowledge in the context of sustainability within the festival sector was collectively regarded as very important if a sustainable transition was to be successful:

Revolution Foundation is the foundation that was founded by DGTL to help other festivals become more sustainable and share our knowledge and experience, because it would be a waste not to. To speed up the transition towards a circular economy it is necessary to share information so that others can learn from our mistakes but also our successes. (Van Dooijeweerd, Revolution Foundation)

If you are the only one within your organisation that wants to work on sustainability, it can be quite tough. It could be very helpful to come together with like-minded people. Those networks have only been online in the past year, but they are extremely important. Also for new people who want to join, for them to know that there is an entire group of people with lots of information and experience and that they are approachable. Once you have physically met someone, for instance at a festival, the bar is even lower for you to give someone a call afterward. (Poortvliet, Green Events)

Lab Vlieland's goal and purpose is to share the knowledge and experience developed on and near the island with its surroundings; with the island itself, the shore, and in particular with related festivals. (Lab Vlieland, n.d.)

This resonates with the call of Brooks et al. (2007) to not only educate yourself on sustainability, but that sharing this knowledge is imperative too in a sustainable transition.

In addition to the previously mentioned benefits of controlling and implementing spinoffs and maintaining visibility throughout the year, organisations such as Lab Vlieland, Green Events and Revolution Foundation serve to produce, store and openly share knowledge. In other words, a knowledge commons is created (Hess & Ostrom, 2007). This can be connected to the suggestion by Brooks et al. (2007), who propose that festivals should form alliances throughout the industry in order to facilitate a sustainable transition.

Reeskamp (Lab Vlieland) explains another added benefit of involving your audience in the festival's sustainable practices:

Through QR codes we provide a story with drawings, infographics to show where we are at. There are tours behind the scenes for the audience to show where the challenges are and what steps we have made to tackle them.

Hence, the audience can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the sustainable innovations, and even be encouraged to participate or co-create sustainable practices, strengthening the framework around the knowledge commons.

Finally, the commons have also been addressed as a space for anti—or *beyond*—capitalist degrowth exploration (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014; Euler, 2019). This sentiment was voiced clearly by Meyberg (sustainability consultant): “I believe that that culture of hedonism and consumption is on its final legs and an increasingly bigger social, societal, ethical and moral awareness is evolving that such a culture is no longer possible”. However, Meyberg adds that this sentiment is not likely to be shared throughout the entire festival sector, as other festival organisers will continue to “regard the festival as a money making machine within a hedonistic and consumption society of capitalism, looking to extract the biggest amount of money possible”. Hence, a moment arises to realise the difference between the *potential* of the festival as a commons and the complex, varied and multidimensional alternative that is known as reality.

4.2.6 Role of the arts in a sustainable degrowth transition

At last, the role of the arts was addressed with the interviewees. Expanding on the concept of multiplicity as introduced in [Chapter 4.1.1](#), special attention is given to the input of the arts, based on the premise of their imaginative qualities (Beckert & Aspers, 2011), of which the inherent future-oriented quality could play a vital role in not only imagining, but also realising a sustainable transition (Tyszczyk & Smith, 2018).

As Brooks et al. (2007) mention, the role of festivals in a sustainable transition requires the awareness of the transformational capacity of cultural expression. From the perspective of Vreeke (RAUM), the value of this artistic mindset in tackling urban issues is recognised, stating that “makers are always situated outside the domain of the problem”. This can result in a re-valuation of what in another sphere or regime would have been regarded as waste:

We did a project with Ace & Tate, who had about 20.000 lenses they couldn't use anymore. So we talked with them and asked how cool would it be to make an artwork out of it? So together with some local artists, we made an installation out of 15.000 lenses that were initially destined to be trash. (Van Dooijeweerd, Revolution Foundation)

In other words, the arts could pose as powerful catalysts in promoting values of a sustainable degrowth transition such as abundance, but also altruism, cooperation, craftsmanship and autonomy (Latouche, 2009).

Beyond technological innovation to improve sustainability in the sense of efficiency and waste reduction, several interviewees recognised the importance of storytelling in order to galvanise innovation into impact:

What you do as DORP needs a certain experience value, because in the end, a festival is about the experience. So you also need to think about that when designing your prototype. [...] The idea of connecting artists to this process is to strengthen the connection to the festival and also gain new perspective from the artistic interpretation. (Stuive-Stelpstra, DORP)

Art tells stories, and therefore has the potential of 'decolonising the imaginary' of growth (Latouche, 2009) by providing alternative views. Hence, it has the forward looking capability that is lacking in scientific knowledge (Jasanoff, 2010). This quality was valued broadly amongst interviewees, due to its ability to “not touch you intellectually, but emotionally” (Vreeke, RAUM), “help to show action perspective [*handelingsperspectief*] in matters that are hard to envision” (Leeuwis, MOMO) and “provide us with a mirror” (Dijkstra, AMS).

However, as Meyberg (sustainability consultant) notices, this future-oriented quality does not automatically imply a solution-based attitude, as it can often also present a dystopian view. Nevertheless, one of his main sources of inspiration breaks with that dystopian trend:

There is this new genre called solar punk. It is an artistic genre that envisions a future in which the sustainable transition has been fulfilled, energy is created with sustainable methods,

inclusivity is embraced and the movement from a linear to a circular to a regenerative economy has been achieved. It is a very optimistic vision in which technology does not only serve mankind, but also nature. In fact, technology and nature have come together in a way it is hard to separate them. I think that is the kind of worldview we need.

Furthermore, artists are often individuals with an impact. Potentially, if artists share their conceptions of sustainability (on a festival), this could influence a broad demographic:

I see the role of the artist as setting an example. A good artist or performer is one that people look up to and who has a story, a message. I am not talking about one-day wonders and consumer pop culture, but artists with a message, a mission, a vision. They have followers and they need to start making decisions. (Meyberg, sustainability consultant)

In other words, Meyberg's comment can be read as a call for popular artists to use their superstar effects (Rosen, 1981) for the purpose of speeding up a sustainable transition.

Finally, the content of art should be briefly addressed. A dominant tendency when addressing the explicit references to sustainability in the art that is programmed on the festival with the interviewees was that it should not stray too much from the core artistic values of the festival. Although inquired festivals for this study are explicitly occupied with sustainability, they were not founded primarily on the values of a sustainable transition. As a result, “there are also bands that do not care about it. It is not a precondition, it is also just a music programme selected based on music and not on politics or a musician's worldview” (Reeskamp, Lab Vlieland). Nevertheless, as sustainability increases to be a topic that shapes the world, art is likely to become more involved with the ecological²⁶ (Morton, 2010). The importance of this explicit occupation with sustainability by artists as a vital part of a sustainable degrowth transition remains to be seen, as, in the end, “*all art is ecological*” (Morton, 2018, p.12).

²⁶ For instance, see Club Gewalt's most recent work, *Anthropocene*, the musical (2021).

5. Conclusions

This research has expanded on the valuation approach by building a bridge between cultural economics and ecological economics. In times of an ecological crisis, it is imperative to broaden the scope of valuation of cultural goods. This connection responds to the call from the side of ecological economists (Costanza et al., 1997) for the need for a shared vision, which cultural goods are able to provide through their imaginative quality (Beckert, 2011).

Festivals appear to answer this call as they explicitly position themselves as mini-societies in which sustainable practices, products and systems can be experimented with. From combining theory on the transformational capacity of festivals with the results from ten semi-structured interviews, three main aspects of this capacity have been distilled. Together, they provide an answer to the first sub-question: what is the transformational capacity of festivals in a sustainable transition? First, multiplicity refers to the combination of different sectors with different logics, which is a main characteristic of festivals. In the interviews, festival managers and experts stressed the importance of an open structure for festivals in order to best facilitate the complex dynamic of cross-fertilisation. Liminality, or the “temporary state of being apart from the mundane” (Getz, 2010, p.8) adds a layer of ephemerality to the aspect of multiplicity. The interviewees describe an enhanced level of openness with festival audiences which goes hand in hand with the liminal quality of festivals. Collaboration both within and outside the sector, but also the emergence of sub-organisations such as DORP and Lab Vlieland can to a certain extent curb the constraints that are inherent to an organisation that organises a yearly event. Although the temporal nature of festivals still brings a lot of practical limitations in the context of sustainability, there appears to be fertile ground for further exploring the possibilities of openness that it brings. Finally, the aspect of testability refers specifically to a festival’s quality to control and measure what happens within its boundaries, following the narrative of festivals as a living lab. Furthermore, this level of control opens up the ability to facilitate spinoffs outside of the festival boundaries. A critical notion to the aspect of testability can be made with regard to the dominant focus on the quantitative analysis of material flows. Although this focus is understandable from a practical point of view, incorporating more qualitative aspects into the testability would enrich the potential role of festivals in a sustainable transition.

The second part of this research is concerned with the meaning of sustainability in the context of a sustainable transition. Based on the theory of degrowth, six characteristics of a sustainable degrowth transition were defined. These six characteristics were compared to the meaning of sustainability by the festival managers and experts, to formulate an answer to the second sub-question: how do Dutch festivals define sustainability and how does this meaning lend

itself in the context of a sustainable degrowth transition? Although degrowth is not a direct source of inspiration for the interviewees, this research found that their meaning of sustainability can be connected to some extent to all of the characteristics of a sustainable degrowth transition. At the same time, the discussion of each of the characteristics revealed spaces in which festivals could grow to enhance their role in a sustainable degrowth transition.

In the context of abundance, several quotes signal an awareness among the interviewees that Western societies should reduce their consumption for the sake of environmental conservation. Inspiration is drawn from nature, and connecting the festival to the creation of a forest by Leeuwis provides an example of how this inspiration could lead to practice. The aspect of sustainable innovation was found to be dominated by a focus on resource management and waste reduction. In addition to this tendency, a sustainable degrowth transition would require the inclusion of more social and qualitative innovation. Redistribution appeared to be an aspect in which there is a lot to gain. Yet, examples from Leeuwis and Reeskamp hinted at the potential of festivals to experiment with programmes that focus on reducing inequality. Relocalisation was of great concern for all the interviewees, mainly addressing the dilemma of travel and flights. An incongruence between the meaning of this concept as defined by the interviewees and its meaning in the context of degrowth appeared in the matter of collaboration with big, multinational brands. Interviewees argued that such collaborations contain a bigger potential impact, whereas degrowth literature suggests sourcing all resources as locally as possible. Reviewing the festival as a commons revealed the emergence of a knowledge commons, in which knowledge on sustainable practices was actively distributed through the sector in order to propel a sustainable transition. This signals an awareness of the importance of collaboration. Finally, the role of the arts in a sustainable degrowth transition was addressed and their imaginative quality was widely recognised and valued. Storytelling, re-valuing and impact are qualities that together could provide a sustainable transition with the “coherent, relatively detailed, shared vision of what a sustainable society would actually look like” (Costanza et al., 1997).

These findings together provide an example of the (potential) role and value of the cultural sector in a sustainable transition. Combining the ecological theory of degrowth with cultural economics' valuation approach, a new framework for valorising cultural goods emerges, within which this research serves as an example of how that path can be explored. As such, this research is an example of what pluralism in cultural economics can look like: connecting theoretical bodies to foster a broader understanding of the value of cultural goods.

5.1 Limitations

It goes without saying that this research comes with its limitations. In addition to the methodological limitations discussed in [Chapter 3.6](#), it should be acknowledged that the size of this research provides a narrow fit for the variety of concepts that are covered in this research. To prevent it from becoming a ‘ratatouille’ of concepts, several figures help to provide clarity. Combining input from different disciplines lies at the core of this research, but also inevitably limits the depth of understanding these disciplines. For instance, the six characteristics of a degrowth transition do not cover the full body of literature on degrowth, which, in turn, provides just one of many ways of interpreting sustainability and has limitations of its own. For each of the six characteristics, a plethora of practical and theoretical implications could be researched. The idea of a festival commons, for example, would require more space than is available within this research to be fully explored. However, as the goal of this research has been to explore a *potential* based on empirical observations, this limitation is hard to avoid.

The open structure of the interview guide allowed interviewees to expand on their interpretation of sustainability, but that same openness carries a risk. It might be that the interviewees would have been able to provide answers that are closer (or less close) aligned with the characteristics of a degrowth transition if the questions would have been more direct, or if the concept of degrowth would have been introduced beforehand.

As mentioned, the current pandemic has influenced this research in a broad variety of ways. These include the absence of (physical) festivals, online interviews, online education and personal effects on mental wellbeing. It might have allowed the interviewees some space to reflect on their (sustainable) practices, but that same distance might simultaneously enhance the gap between their responses and their practice.

Furthermore, [Chapter 2.3.1](#) addressed that the impact of scientific knowledge in a sustainable transition is limited, since it requires to be combined with a vision and practical implementation (Jasanoff, 2010). In this sense, the value of this research depends on its ability to connect to the practice of festivals and the vision of a sustainable future that they hold.

Finally, although they can be regarded as mini-societies of their own, festivals are also embedded in systems. Theoretically, a potential might have been unveiled in this research, but practice never fails to surprise with unexpected hurdles. Even if festivals would manage to embrace all aspects of a sustainable degrowth transition, the growth imperative will not disappear. The mini-society of festivals are situated in much larger societies with their own history, culture and economy.

5.2 Further research

In a sense, all of the addressed limitations can also be read as suggestions for further research. Nevertheless, some concrete examples will be addressed. First, this research is mostly focused on one type of stakeholder. As festivals encompass multiple sectors and logics, research that includes the perspectives of other stakeholders such as (local) business, sponsors and (local) government²⁷ would greatly enhance understanding. Similarly, to understand the transformational capacity on a personal level, research that incorporates festival audiences (for instance to test their ‘open attitude’) would be required.

Due to the limited scope of the sample, further research could focus on different countries, but also different types of festivals, both in their set-up, size and their content. With such a broader understanding, the various aspects of a festival that best enable festivals to facilitate a sustainable transition could be better understood.

Other research could focus specifically on the upscaling of spinoffs once they have been (successfully) experimented with on a festival. What type of organisation serves to upscale what kind of (sustainable) practice, product or system? With the options of collaborating with other festivals, further developing sub-organisation, establishing a network with local businesses and government, plenty of avenues can be taken.

With regard to the six characteristics of a sustainable degrowth transition, it goes without saying that further research should be accompanied by experimentation on festivals. For instance, the idea of the festival as a commons would be interesting to explore theoretically while testing practical implementations, possibly guided by Ostrom’s principles for governing the commons (1990). This exploration could further benefit from the context of Esteva and Prakash’s concept of the ‘post-modern commons’ (2014), as well Potts’ notion of innovation commons (2019; see Dekker, 2020).

Finally, on a broader scale, a robust connection between cultural economics and ecological economics requires more research. Again, the emergence of the valuation approach could be read as a signal of a certain degree of openness towards such a development. To stimulate the impact of such research, transdisciplinary endeavours ought to be encouraged. After all, the imaginative quality of cultural goods might be used for the academic’s benefit as well. At last, to encourage such research, educational development in the direction of a course on sustainability within the discipline of cultural economics might be of great value.

²⁷ For instance, Frankel stresses “the impossibility of radical reforms without state institutions” (2018).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Introduction

- 0.1 Name/age/gender/pronouns
- 0.2 What is your function title & what does it entail
- 0.3 How long have you worked for this organisation
- 0.4 Could you explain concept & values of the festival/organisation, history, why is it there

The transformational capacity of festivals

- 1.1 How would you describe the role of festivals in realising a sustainable transition? (both for the industry and beyond). What makes festivals suited for enabling/facilitating this transition?
- 1.2 What are the limits to implementing sustainability on festivals? How can these be overcome?

The meaning of sustainability

- 2.1 What is sustainability to you and why is it important?
- 2.2 What inspired you to focus on sustainability? What sources do you draw from in developing your sustainable practice?
- 2.3 How are you trying to make festivals more sustainable? What are your main areas of focus?
- 2.4 How has your organisation structured itself to facilitate this? Are there specific functions/ departments dedicated to this?
- 2.5 How has your organisation defined its sustainability goals? And how does it monitor/evaluate them? What variables and measurements do you use?
- 2.6 What are the main challenges of pursuing your sustainable goals?

Sustainable degrowth

- 3.1 In the development of your sustainability goals, who is invited to collaborate? (e.g. other festivals, visitors, volunteers)
- 3.2 In what ways do your sustainable ambitions affect your visitors' views on sustainability/ consumption practices?
- 3.3 How can sustainable practices be profitable? Who benefits from sustainability?

3.4 How do you balance the local with the global in your sustainability goals? (e.g. resources, programming).

3.5 Do you think it is possible to become more sustainable while growing? How so?

3.6 (How) do you connect the artistic inputs of the festival to sustainability?

3.7 Could you describe to me the sustainable utopia that your festival could be?

Appendix 2: Code tree

