

“We’re just Steiner and we do our own thing”

Steiner Fest as a case study of event-based community building and identity negotiation in a context shaped by outsider perceptions

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<p>Abstract:</p> <p>This thesis examines how Steiner Fest, an event organized for students at Finnish Steiner high schools, contributes to community building and identity in a context shaped by existing perceptions of Steiner education. While event studies have widely explored how events foster belonging, community, and social cohesion, and increasingly acknowledged that event settings are not socially neutral, less attention has been given to how identity is negotiated in event contexts shaped by external stereotypes and socially imposed meanings. This study addresses that gap through a qualitative case study of Steiner Fest.</p> <p>The empirical material consists of six semi-structured interviews with event founders, school representatives, students, and an alumnus connected to one Finnish Steiner school. The study takes an interpretive approach and combines perspectives from event studies with sociological theories of identity, stigma, and labeling.</p> <p>The findings indicate that Steiner Fest contributes to community building and sense of community as part of the school’s broader investment in social connection and shared experience. Participants described the event as strengthening relationships, lowering social thresholds, and creating a recurring collective focus that extended beyond the event itself through anticipation, memory, and continuity. At the same time, the event also mattered in relation to identity and external perception by giving students a concrete and socially credible reference point through which to explain the school to outsiders, while also making it easier to identify with the school in more positive ways.</p> <p>The thesis contributes to event research by showing the value of examining the social impacts of events in relation not only to community and belonging, but also to identity, external perception, and broader social context.</p>	
<p>Keywords: Event studies, social impacts of events, identity negotiation, community building, belonging, stigma, stereotypes, Steiner schools</p>	

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and research context

In the last few decades, research on events has grown tremendously, and the focus within the field has shifted from mostly focusing on the economic outcomes towards trying to also understand their social and cultural significance. Earlier studies primarily emphasized tourism revenue and regional development, while more recent research has highlighted how events can function as social spaces shaping community, belonging, and identity (Chiang et al., 2017; Robertson et al., 2009). This shift reflects a growing recognition of events not merely as economic contributors, but as contexts in which relationships form and develop, meanings are negotiated, and collective experiences are produced.

Within the expanding field of event studies, great focus has been dedicated to understanding how events contribute to social cohesion, sense of community, and pride within the community. Events are described as settings where individuals can come together, participate in creating shared experiences, and strengthen and build social connections (Arcodia & Whitford, 2006; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Identity, though touched upon in some works, is still less studied within this discipline. When it is approached, it is mostly done so as something that may be reinforced, expressed, and made visible through participation in an event (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013; De Bres & Davis, 2001).

Though the event studies field has expanded considerably and integrated social impacts into its analyses, much of this work has continued to focus on relatively positive and cohesive outcomes, such as community, participation, belonging, and shared experience. At the same time, more recent critical event studies have begun to examine how event settings are shaped by broader structures of inequality, exclusion, and marginalization, rather than treating them only as cohesive social spaces (Walters & Jepson, 2019). This means that event studies now include both a dominant strand focused on positive social impacts and a smaller critical strand that complicates this picture. Within that broader shift, there is still less attention to how experiences of

identity and belonging may vary across participants and be shaped by broader social contexts or external perceptions.

1.2 Research gap and positioning of the study

While event studies have increasingly examined the social impacts of events in relation to community, belonging, and identity, much of this literature has focused on cohesion, participation, belonging, and other relatively positive social outcomes. At the same time, a smaller but important strand of critical work has examined marginalization, exclusion, and the non-neutral nature of event spaces. For example, Walters and Jepson (2019) argue in *Marginalisation and Events* that events are embedded in broader social inequalities and power relations, and that they may reproduce, resist, or reshape forms of marginalization rather than simply generate shared positive effects.

While these critical event studies have shown that events are embedded in non-neutral social contexts, less attention has been given to how identity is experienced and negotiated by participants within such contexts, particularly in relation to external perceptions, stereotypes, and labels.

This study addresses this gap by combining event studies with sociological perspectives on identity, stigma, and labeling. While event studies help explain how events may foster community and belonging, sociological perspectives on stigma, labeling, and identity negotiation make it possible to examine how identity is experienced and negotiated in relation to external perceptions and stereotypes. Through the case of Steiner Fest, the study explores how participants engage with the event as already socially marked actors, and how community, identity, and external perception intersect in a school-based event context.

1.3 Steiner education and Steiner Fest as the case context

Steiner education, based on the pedagogical ideas of Rudolf Steiner, represents an alternative approach to schooling that emphasizes holistic development, creativity, and experiential learning. Rather than focusing solely on standardized academic outcomes, Steiner pedagogy places importance on the development of the individual as a whole, including creative, social, and emotional dimensions (Mansikka, 2024).

The first Rudolf Steiner school was established in Stuttgart for the children of the workers at the Waldorf Astoria factory, which led to the name Waldorf School. Rudolf Steiner was responsible for planning and initiating the school. The approach differed from more conventional education systems at the time, and over time gained popularity, developing into a broader international movement (Stehlik, 2019).

In Finland, Waldorf schools operate primarily under the name Rudolf Steiner schools. The first school was established in Helsinki in 1955 (Mansikka, 2024; Stehlik, 2019). Today, there are several Steiner schools and kindergartens across the country, and Steiner schools are integrated into the national education system (Mansikka, 2024; Stehlik, 2019). Despite this institutional integration, Steiner schools continue to occupy a somewhat distinct position within the Finnish education landscape due to their alternative pedagogical approach (Mansikka, 2024).

Within this context, Steiner schools are often associated with particular values and practices, but also with a range of external perceptions and stereotypes. As reflected in the empirical material of this study, the term “Steiner” is not neutral, but carries meanings that shape how the school and its students are understood by others. This broader Finnish context is also marked by a degree of public suspicion toward Waldorf education, even alongside its relatively established position as a pedagogical alternative (Mansikka, 2024).

The following description of Steiner Fest is based on interview material with the event founders and school representatives. Steiner Fest takes place within this context. The event is collectively funded by Steiner high schools in Finland, with the Helsinki Rudolf Steiner high school as a central organizer. It was initiated by two young founders, one of whom had attended the school, with the first edition taking place relatively shortly after their graduation. Although the event is supported by the school, it is organized independently through the founders’ production company, positioning it somewhere between a school initiative and a professionally produced cultural event.

The event is primarily aimed at students from Steiner high schools across Finland, who are able to attend free of charge, but it is also open to external audiences. It features professional artists and is held in a well-known concert venue in Helsinki. This combination of institutional support, youth-led organization, and professional

production makes Steiner Fest distinct from more conventional school events, both within the Steiner schools and within schools generally.

These characteristics make it a unique setting in which institutional identity, student participation, and external representation intersect. The event therefore provides a relevant case for examining how experiences of community and belonging are connected to processes of identity formation and negotiation within a context shaped by broader social perceptions.

1.4 Aim of the study and research questions

The aim of this study is to examine how events contribute to community building and identity negotiation in contexts where the target group is socially marked by outsider perceptions and stereotypes. The aim is explored through the case of Steiner Fest.

The main research question of the study is:

How does Steiner Fest contribute to community building and identity in the context of existing perceptions of the Steiner school?

This question is approached through two connected perspectives. The first concerns how Steiner Fest functions in relation to the school's already existing stereotype context and to the ways students speak about and negotiate Steiner identity. The second concerns how the event functions internally as a setting for belonging, connection, and sense of community.

These two perspectives are analytically distinct but closely connected in practice: the event is not only experienced internally by participants but also understood in relation to the broader social context in which the school already exists.

The first perspective is explored through the following sub-questions:

- *How is the Steiner school socially perceived prior to Steiner Fest?*
- *How do students relate to and negotiate Steiner identity?*
- *How does Steiner Fest influence how the school and its students are represented and understood?*

The second perspective is explored through the following sub-question:

- *How is Steiner Fest experienced by students as a setting of belonging, connection, and sense of community?*

The study does not seek to measure the social impacts of Steiner Fest in a broad or generalizable sense, but rather to interpret how these impacts are experienced and understood by those connected to the event in this particular context.

1.5 Contribution and relevance

This study contributes to existing research on the social impacts of events by building on previous studies within event studies that have examined community, belonging, and identity, while extending attention more specifically to how identity is experienced and negotiated in relation to external perceptions, stereotypes, and social context. By examining how identity is negotiated in relation to external perceptions within an event setting, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of how events function in socially marked environments.

This study has practical relevance for arts management because it highlights how events may interact with existing institutional identities and reputations, rather than simply producing shared or uniformly positive outcomes. In this sense, the study suggests that the social effects of events are shaped not only by what happens within the event itself, but also by the broader context into which the event enters.

The study is relevant to arts management because it highlights how events do not simply generate social outcomes internally but can also shape how institutions and communities are publicly represented. In this sense, Steiner Fest can be understood not only as a site of belonging and identity negotiation but also as a cultural event that influences how the school is seen, understood, and represented outwardly.

1.6 Scope and limitations

This study is based on a qualitative case study of Steiner Fest within one Finnish Steiner school and draws on interview data from students, organizers, and school representatives. The study takes an interpretive approach, focusing on how participants experience and make sense of the event in relation to identity and community.

The findings are therefore context-specific and do not aim at generalization, but rather at developing a deeper understanding of the processes through which identity and belonging are experienced and interpreted in this setting. As such, the study does not seek to provide a comprehensive account of Steiner schools or school events more broadly, but to examine one particular case in depth.

Additionally, the study is limited by its reliance on a relatively small number of interview participants, and the perspectives presented reflect those who were willing and available to participate.

1.7 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on the social impacts of events, community, identity, marginalization, and external perception, and develops the theoretical framework for the study. Chapter 3 presents the research design and methodology. Chapter 4 outlines the empirical findings, which are then discussed in relation to the theoretical framework in Chapter 5. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the study by summarizing the main findings, outlining their implications, and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Introduction to the literature review

This chapter reviews the prior literature most relevant to understanding the social impacts of events in relation to community, identity, and perception. The main body of the literature comes from event and festival studies, which have traditionally focused on community, cohesion, and positive social impacts, but have more recently been complemented by critical perspectives examining exclusion, marginalization, and uneven social experiences. These sources are complemented by sociological perspectives on identity, stigma, and labeling, which help explain how identities are shaped not only through participation and interaction but also by broader social expectations and external perceptions.

Studies on the Steiner schools or their pedagogy will not be included in the literature, since the purpose of the study does not lie within Steiner pedagogy specifically, but in

the event's impacts and the social context within which the school exists. To my knowledge, there are no studies in either the Steiner or other high school contexts of stereotypes, identity, and events, so bringing general studies on Steiner into my thesis is redundant.

The goal of this chapter is to identify which concepts and discussions are useful for analyzing events, not only as activities that generate measurable impacts, but beyond that. The literature examined here makes it possible to dig deeper into how events may impact belonging, identity, and social perception. The chapter moves from the shift from event research focused on economic impact to socio-cultural impact, then moves to literature on community and belonging, identity and representation, critical perspectives on events and marginalization, negotiated identity, and stigma and labeling.

2.2 From event impacts to social meaning

Events and festival research has a long history of studying events primarily from the perspective of their economic impact. Earlier work from within the field was mainly concerned with tourism revenue, visitor spending, and regional development. Chiang et al. (2017) note that for about two decades, from the 1970s to the 1990s, research was dominated by economic perspectives, focusing on how events could benefit the region in that capacity, for the most part completely leaving out the social and psychological effects of events. Even when social questions gained more popularity within research, the percentage of event studies that focused on them remained comparatively small, and in theoretical terms, the area remained underdeveloped.

In the 2000s, more and more studies on the social impacts of events began to emerge as researchers started to recognize the importance of understanding what impacts events and festivals had not only economically, but also on the people and the community where events took place. Robertson et al. (2009) highlight this phenomenon in their review and argue that festival research had long been too narrowly focused on economic benefits, despite many researchers recognizing that festivals also have significant social and cultural effects. Themes such as community, identity, social cohesion, civic pride, and stakeholder conflict began to be discussed more seriously within the socio-cultural impact research, indicating a broader shift in how events were understood. This

literature review also suggests that the field remained relatively limited and methodologically unsettled, without one clearly agreed-upon way of approaching social impacts.

This shift led to several attempts to measure the social dimensions of event effects more systematically. Social impacts are difficult to measure objectively since they are not as easily quantifiable as economic impacts, and they have been mostly researched through investigating the residents' and participants' perceptions of these impacts. Studies such as those by Delamere et al. (2001), who proposed one of the earlier scales, the Festival Social Impact Attitude Scale (FSIAS), which consists of 47 items in two categories of social costs and social benefits; Fredline et al. (2003), who used over 40 indicators as a scale to measure both positive and negative effects of events; Gursoy et al. (2004), who developed models of measuring the festival and special event organizers' perceptions of the impacts of festivals and special events on local communities; and Small et al. (2005), who created the Social Impact Perception (SIP) scale to help project and then evaluate the socio-cultural impacts of a festival, all contributed heavily to this development. Later research such as the work by Xie and Sinwald (2016), which applied and extended prior scales in survey form, continued this development. Though important to the development of the field, these focus on more quantitative methods, which I will not do in this thesis.

This prior, more quantitative work often treats social life in relatively stable and measurable terms. By organizing event impacts into predefined categories, there is always a risk of simplifying processes that in reality are more fluid, relational, and dependent on context. Robertson et al. (2009) note this in their review, arguing that much literature has been focused on evaluation frameworks instead of how social impacts are lived, interpreted, and given meaning by the event participants and communities themselves. Because of these limitations, the next sections move away from impact measurement alone and instead examine event research that approaches events as socially meaningful settings connected to community, identity, and social perception.

2.3 Events, community and belonging

A central thread of event and festival literature sees events as social spaces that can contribute to community life. In research of this kind, events are not only treated as organized occasions or cultural products, but as settings where people come together, participate, interact, and experience togetherness. Two main concepts arise from this literature: social capital and sense of community. Although these concepts are related, they use slightly different lenses to interpret how events matter socially. Social capital highlights the creation of networks and connections, while sense of community emphasizes belonging and shared emotional connection.

Social capital is one central way of approaching the social impacts of events. Arcodia and Whitford (2006) show that events may contribute to social capital by creating opportunities for participation, interaction, and shared experiences. Beyond events just gathering people in one place, they argue, they can facilitate the kinds of contact through which relationships can be reinforced or even formed. Arcodia and Whitford (2006) suggest that festivals can matter beyond the duration of the event itself, with the social impacts coming into effect before the event and living on past it. This happens through shared anticipation, experience, and memories. In this sense, events are seen as more than isolated moments, but as part of broader social processes.

A closely related, though slightly different, perspective is sense of community, which is present in the research of McMillan and Chavis (1986) who define it through four elements: membership, influence, integration, fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Although their theory was not originally developed within event studies, it has become an important one within it and can be widely useful for understanding why events can become socially meaningful. Events may provide situations where people experience being part of something shared, where they encounter others in ways that reinforce belonging, and where they partake in moments that can become emotionally significant. McMillan and Chavis (1986) are useful, then, not only because they explain events directly, but because they provide conceptual frameworks for understanding how the elements of events connect to a sense of community.

Wilks (2011) shows that the connections made can be divided into two kinds: bonding and bridging. Events can strengthen existing ties by bringing people together in new

settings and providing an opportunity to bond. They can also dissolve prior social boundaries and bridge new connections. Brownett and Evans (2020) make a similar point, arguing that festivals are spaces where community can be expressed and strengthened, but also actively constructed through shared participation. Quinn and Wilks (2013) further argue that for these effects to take place, it is not enough to just gather people anywhere. The setting of the event matters and can create meaning, which strengthens the way in which the shared experience matters. Together, these perspectives suggest that events support community not only through bringing people together but by shaping the conditions under which connection becomes possible and socially meaningful.

Hixson (2014) provides a more participant-centered perspective on the social impacts of events, focusing on community as something experienced by participants. Hixson's research focuses particularly on young people and shows that by creating opportunities for active participation, events can support belonging, engagement, and identity development among participants. This research moves from just showing that events can have social effects to how they are achieved, emphasizing that active participation and engagement are important factors in individuals' perception of these potential social effects.

Collectively, this literature shows that events can contribute to a sense of community in several ways. These studies argue that events can be seen as spaces where belonging can be strengthened, and social connections can be formed or reinforced. Concepts like social capital and sense of community can help put words to how events impact togetherness and collective experience.

Although these studies help define the social effects events can have on community and belonging, the literature has a tendency to treat community as something relatively evenly and cohesively experienced among participants. Less attention is given to how there might be differences between how individuals experience these effects and how there may be variations dependent on existing differences, uneven participation, or the broader social contexts and meanings. This raises the question of how prior conditions may impact these processes of community. Addressing this requires moving beyond community as a general concept and looking at how belonging connects to processes of

identity. The next section, therefore, focuses on literature that examines events as spaces where identity is expressed, experienced, and made visible.

2.4 Events, identity, and representation

In addition to bringing people together, the event literature also sees events as spaces where identity is expressed, made visible and given meaning. This applies to individual identity, but particularly group identity. While community-oriented events research is more focused on how events contribute to community and belonging, identity focused research is more concentrated on how events allow individuals and groups to experience a strengthened sense of identity, show who they are, and how they are understood by others.

Within these studies, three closely related, yet analytically distinct ways of understanding identity in relation to events can be identified. First, identity is seen as something expressed through participation. Second, identity is understood as something that becomes visible and recognizable through representation, and third, identity is approached as something that is shaped through shared cultural meanings and practices. These will be explained further below.

The first way this literature sees identity and belonging is as something that is enacted through participation. Jaeger and Mykletun (2013) argue that festivals function as sites where people not only show up with an identity or a feeling of belonging they already possess, but where identity is expressed and shaped through involvement in the event and where belonging happens in relation to others. Hixson (2014) agrees, showing that participation in events may contribute to identity development, particularly for young people, through them being settings for engagement, interaction, and self-expression. Both Hixson (2014) and Jaeger and Mykletun (2013) emphasize that identity is not formed in isolation, but through active involvement in social settings. By engaging in event activities, participants can explore how they relate to others, how they are perceived, and how they want to position themselves within the group. Events, therefore, do not only provide the opportunity to express identity, but may actually shape it through social interactions. In this strand of research, identity is not treated as something one has, but as something that is actively shaped within the event setting.

The second distinct way of understanding identity is that identity becomes visible and recognizable through an event. De Bres and Davis (2001) explain how festivals can make communities visible to both themselves and to others by creating shared symbolic moments of outward-facing representations. The focus here is less on how participation shapes identity, but more on how an event makes the community visible. Events can work as moments of self-representation. When the identity of a group is made visible outward, it may also become real inward. In a sense, the visibility of the perceived identity can create or strengthen identity.

Thirdly, there is a focus on identity as something that is shaped through shared cultural meanings and practices. Elias-Varotsis (2006) argues that festivals are settings where cultural identity is interpreted and reinterpreted, suggesting that events not only shape identity or make identity visible, but in a sense do both. They claim that existing shared understandings of identity can be reinforced, but also that the collective experiences that events provide can shape identity or give it new meaning.

Together, these three strands show that within event research identity is generally understood as something that can be expressed, made visible, and given meaning through events. Participation, representation, or shared cultural practices are all cited as reasons why events are considered to function as settings in which identity can become more recognizable, particularly at the collective level.

While these studies highlight that identity is not ignored within the discipline, event spaces are, in many cases, treated as if all participants enter them on relatively equal social terms. Less attention is given to how identity may not enter these event settings neutrally, but be contested, uncertain, externally shaped, and experienced differently across participants. The next section turns to critical event studies and how broader structures of exclusion, marginalization, and power may influence how events are experienced.

2.5 Events, marginalization, and non-neutral contexts

Though previous event studies have increasingly emphasized community, belonging, identity expression, and other social impacts, more recent critical work has challenged the assumption that events are socially neutral or evenly beneficial. Rather than treating

events as simply spaces of cohesion or participation, this strand of research examines how events are embedded in the broader social context, including negative broader structures of inequality, marginalization, and exclusion (Walters & Jepson, 2019).

One important contribution to this newer perspective is the book *Marginalisation and Events* by Walters and Jepson (2019), which is one of the first works to do an in-depth examination of marginalization and events and bring together studies of events in relation to themes of disability, age, religion, race, socio-economic status, refugee and migrant status, homelessness and other forms of marginalization. Walters and Jepson argue that events may not merely respond to marginalization by bringing people together, but may instead reproduce, perpetuate, resist, or even overcome it, depending on the context and how the event organizers approach it. This is an important addition to the previous event studies, because it shows that events are not inherently inclusive spaces, and may function very differently depending on the power relations in which they are embedded.

One chapter that is particularly important to the context of my study is the one on the South Dunedin Street Festival, which shows that an event set in a marginalized community may foster pride, visibility, belonging and sense of place, while also continuously operating in relation to the stigma already attached to the community. The study also emphasizes that the inward focus of the event was an important factor in creating the positive effects. An outward focus on tourists or people from different socio-economic groups could potentially lead to drawing attention to the marginalized status of the attendees, negating the positive effects (Walters, 2019).

Walters and Jepson (2019) demonstrate that event settings are shaped by broader social inequalities and that participation in events does not occur on neutral ground. Events have the potential to create opportunities for inclusion, recognition, and community building, but they can also reinforce existing hierarchies, stereotypes, and exclusion. Understanding the target group and the physical and social setting in which an event is held is important in achieving positive effects. This literature marks an important shift from earlier tendencies within event research to treat social impacts more cohesively and positively, to emphasizing how events can have both positive and negative effects, and that social context matters.

While this literature shows that events are not neutral and places them into broader social contexts, it focuses primarily on how groups are positioned within those contexts and less on how identity is experienced and negotiated by participants themselves within these settings. This is where sociological perspectives on identity become especially useful. The next section shifts focus to how identity is a negotiated and relational process.

2.6 Identity as negotiated and relational

If critical event studies show that events are embedded in broader structures of marginalization and power, a further question remains: how are identities actually negotiated within such non-neutral contexts? To address this, it is necessary to move beyond event studies alone and draw on sociological perspectives that understand identity as a negotiated and relational process. Event literature often presents identity as something that can be expressed, made visible, and given meaning through different kinds of events. Sociological perspectives similarly view identity as something that is not fixed but shaped by different contexts. This chapter brings in selected sociological perspectives to extend the view of identity as something that is expressed through events, as how it is most commonly described within event studies, to identity as something continuously formed in interaction, interpretation, and relation to others. Rather than assuming that participants arrive at events with stable identities that are then reinforced or represented, this perspective suggests that identity is a continuous process and is negotiated relationally.

One important way of seeing identity, which is highlighted within sociological literature, is the idea that identity is constructed through interaction and interpretation. Prins et al. (2013) argue that collective identity is formed through processes of storytelling, where individuals position themselves in relation to shared narratives and social contexts. Identity is not seen as something that simply exists but as something that is created through how people interpret their experiences and communicate them to others. This perspective importantly highlights that even identities that may be viewed as collective and stable are continuously produced and reinforced in a context.

A very closely related perspective emphasizes not only the continuous nature of identity formation, but how identity is relational. Naples (1996) shows that identity is formed

not only between members of a group, but also in relation to those outside of it. They argue that how someone's identity is as an individual cannot be understood independently of how they are positioned in relation to others. What is not considered part of the identity shapes the identity. O'Connor (2015) has a similar argument, emphasizing that belonging and identity within a group are defined through who is left outside of it. Inclusion, in terms of identity and belonging, always implies exclusion of some sort. These approaches show that identity formation is not limited to self-understanding, but is also shaped by broader processes of categorization, inclusion, exclusion, and boundary-making.

The relational understanding of identity also points to the fact that identity is not stable, but may shift depending on the context, the relationships involved, and the perspective taken. Kerstetter (2012) highlights that insider/outsider positions are not fixed, but can change depending on the situation, the people involved, and the perspective taken. Identity may then be completely different depending on context, and may even shift within the same context, and the rules for what the boundaries of belonging are may change situationally.

Collectively, these perspectives show that identity is an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a stable possession. Identity is constructed through interaction, shaped through relationships with others, and continuously adjusted dependent on context. This adds an important dimension to the event literature reviewed earlier. This somewhat contrasts with event literature, where events are seen as something that affects identity, but where identity is nonetheless viewed more as something people already have. Here, identity negotiation is viewed as continuous and active. These perspectives provide an important step in understanding how identity may be negotiated within the kinds of non-neutral event contexts described in the previous section. They highlight that participation in events does not automatically lead to shared identity or belonging, rather that events are spaces where identity may be worked on in interaction and where these effects may be quite uneven.

These perspectives importantly highlight identity as a negotiated process, but do not say much about how that process unfolds within the kinds of non-neutral social contexts discussed earlier. The next section, therefore, turns to the concepts of stigma, labeling, and external perceptions to understand how identity is negotiated in these settings.

2.7 Stigma, labeling, and external identity construction

If identity is negotiated relationally and within non-neutral social contexts, it also becomes important to consider how identities are shaped by meanings that come from outside the individual or group. While the previous section emphasized identity as continuously constructed and relationally negotiated, another thread in the literature highlights how identity is also shaped by how individuals and groups are perceived and classified by others. Expanding on the previous section, identity is not only something shaped and negotiated by people themselves, but may also be imposed, interpreted, and responded to within a wider social context.

A key starting point to understanding this perspective is Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma. Stigma is described as a process through which certain attributes become socially discredited, leading to a gap between what is called "virtual identity", meaning how people are perceived by others, and "actual identity", meaning how people understand themselves (Goffman, 1963). This classification shows that identity is not constructed only internally but is shaped by external expectations and interpretations. This means that individuals may not always enter social situations as neutral actors, but as people whose identities are already defined in a certain way by others.

Labeling theory relies on Goffman's (1963) theory but develops it further by focusing on how social categories are assigned and maintained (Bernburg, 2019). Bernburg (2019) argues that labels assigned to individuals or groups not only shape how they are viewed by outsiders but may, over time, shape how they come to understand themselves. Once a label becomes cemented, it can shape expectations, interactions, and behavior of the targets, reinforcing certain identities and limiting others. Identity, then, is not only shaped or negotiated relationally but formed through broader social frameworks that define what categories of identification are available and how they are interpreted.

This process may lead to internalization, a phenomenon where externally imposed meanings become part of how individuals see themselves (Felix, 2014). Felix (2014) argues that stigma can become part of identity development, meaning that external perceptions do not remain as such, but may become part of self-understanding. Through

this perspective, identity is shaped through ongoing interaction with how individuals see themselves and how they are viewed by others.

Together, these approaches show that identity is not only shaped through participation or interaction, but that in certain situations, external perceptions, labels, and classifications may influence this heavily. Identity is therefore both negotiated and imposed: it is shaped through what people do and in what context, but also through how they are seen, described, and categorized in a wider social context. Stigma and labels, then, may apply a further layer of factors that negotiation must happen in relation to.

In the context of events, these sociological lenses add an important dimension to the event literature discussed earlier. While the previous sections have already shown that event settings are not neutral and may be shaped by broader structures of inequality, marginalization, exclusion, and power, the sociological concepts of stigma and labeling make it possible to understand more specifically how such conditions may shape identity from the participant's point of view. Thus, the issue is not only that events are non-neutral, but that participants may enter them already carrying socially imposed meanings that affect how they understand themselves and their place within the event. Events, as discussed earlier, may be able to provide opportunities for expression of identity, participation, and belonging, but do not automatically override external perceptions or classifications. Instead, these meanings may continue to shape how individuals experience the event and how they position themselves in relation to it.

Together with the previous sections, this shows that identity in event contexts should be understood as shaped both by what happens within the event and by the wider social meanings participants already carry into it. The final section brings these strands of literature together to form the thematic framework for the study.

2.8 Thematic framework

The literature reviewed here suggests that events should not be seen only as occasions that can produce economic outcomes, but as socially meaningful settings in which belonging, identity, and perception are shaped all in relation to each other. It shows that events can create opportunities for social connection and community building, but that these processes should not be assumed to be automatic or universally felt by all

participants. The conceptual framework of this study is built on five themes found within the literature. Firstly, events may create conditions for belonging and social connection. Secondly, they can function as spaces where identity is expressed and made visible. Third, events are not neutral settings, but are embedded in broader structures of power, inequality, exclusion, and marginalization. Fourth, identity is not fixed, but something negotiated in relation to social context. Fifth, identity can be shaped by external perceptions and labels that exist beyond the event itself.

Together, these perspectives show that events are not neutral spaces or isolated occasions. They are embedded in broader social contexts and power relations, and their meanings are shaped not only by what happens within the event itself but also by the wider social environment in which they take place. Earlier event studies help explain how events may foster belonging, participation, and shared meaning. Critical event studies complicate this by showing that these processes occur within uneven social contexts. Sociological perspectives on negotiated identity, stigma, and labeling help explain how participants interpret and experience such settings. Together, this collection of research perspectives makes it possible to examine Steiner Fest not simply as a community building event but as a site where belonging, identity, and external perception intersect.

This outline provides a thematic framework for analyzing Steiner Fest and its social impacts. The analysis will not assume that the event produces shared effects in a straightforward way, but will examine how these effects are experienced, interpreted, negotiated, and perceived in relation to the broader social context of the school.

3. Research design and methods

3.1 Research approach

This study is a qualitative, interpretive case study. This research approach is suitable because the research question asks how Steiner Fest contributes to community building and identity negotiation in the context of existing perceptions of the school. This is explored primarily by looking at how Steiner Fest as an event is experienced, interpreted, and given meaning by those connected to it. These are context-dependent

and meaning-based processes that are better examined through in-depth qualitative material than through standardized measurement.

This question is examined through two connected perspectives. The first concerns how Steiner Fest functions in relation to the school's already existing stereotype context and to the ways students speak about and negotiate Steiner identity. It is explored through the questions of how the Steiner school is socially perceived prior to Steiner Fest, how students relate to and negotiate Steiner identity, and how Steiner Fest influences how the school and its students are represented and understood. The second concerns how the event functions internally as a setting for belonging, connection, and sense of community, and is explored through the question of how Steiner Fest is experienced as a setting of belonging, connection, and sense of community among participants.

The unit of analysis in this study is the participants' accounts of Steiner Fest and the Steiner school context. Rather than examining the event in itself, the analysis focuses on how it is interpreted by the participants, particularly in relation to themes of community, identity, belonging, and external perceptions, with the interview material approached as participants' situated accounts rather than as neutral reports of reality (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

3.2 Research design

This study is designed as a qualitative interview-based case study, focusing on Steiner Fest within the context of one specific Steiner school, the Helsinki Rudolf Steiner School, to which future mentions of the Steiner school, Steiner, or simply the school, will refer. The aim is to examine this one case in depth rather than making generalizations or comparing it to different cases.

When I first made my research plan, I had two research questions in mind. The first one was about how Steiner Fest was developed by its young founders in collaboration with the school. And the second one was what the perceived social impacts of Steiner Fest were, according to the stakeholders. These were also the questions that guided my interview guides. As I started coding the material after my interviews and working on my findings chapter, I noticed there was so much material that I did not have the time or capacity to include both questions in a study of this scope, so the first question was

dropped. I did, however, use material from interview questions based on that research question to form the background for the study.

The second question, which became the central one for my study, also shifted somewhat throughout my research process. My original expectation was that the social impacts of the event would focus mostly on the community building aspects, and this was the intention when I went into the interviews. However, during the interviews I noticed that themes of identity and imposed identity were very evident in the participants' accounts, even without direct prompts to discuss those themes. When I did ask my one planned question on how Steiner identity is felt, which I had done with the hypothesis that the event might strengthen the existing identity, the replies to that question were more apprehensive than I had expected.

Although I was aware from personal experience that stereotypes about Steiner schools existed, I had not anticipated how clearly they would appear in the material or how strongly they would shape participants' accounts of the event. Through the ways Steiner Fest was described in relation to identity and external perceptions, it became clear that these themes were analytically important and needed to be incorporated into the study.

As a result, the final study came to examine Steiner Fest in two connected ways: first, as an event functioning within a school already shaped by outsider stereotypes and identity-related tensions, and second, as an event functioning internally as a setting for belonging, connection, and sense of community.

Due to the shift in my research question, I had to expand the scope of my theoretical perspective, since the event studies literature on social impacts only touched relatively lightly on identity within the broader social context. The sociological literature gave the analysis depth and made it possible to better address these unexpected themes. All of this goes to say that my research design was not fully fixed but developed considerably during the research process.

3.3 Data collection / producing empirical material

3.3.1 Interviews

The main empirical material of this thesis consists of six semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in person, except one, which was conducted through an online meeting. All interviews were individual and conducted in Finnish. Most interviews lasted from about 45 minutes to an hour, with one founder interview being approximately two and a half hours, although it did cover many background facts about the event.

The interviews were based on loose interview guides, which were different depending on the role of the participant, but were all based on event studies as a theoretical perspective. The guides were followed loosely, with some questions also being improvised during the interview, and others being skipped. This made it possible to keep the interviews focused on some of the key themes of the study while still allowing room for participants to bring up issues that had not been fully anticipated in advance (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

The interviews were recorded as audio only using my phone and laptop with permission from the participants. They were transcribed using the transcription software in Word and manually checked and edited afterwards.

3.3.2 Participants and sampling

The participants were:

- Two founders/organizers of the event, of whom one had attended Steiner school throughout their whole school history, and the other had not gone to Steiner
- One rector of the school, who has been within the school for over a decade
- Two current students, one of whom started high school the same year Steiner Fest was organized for the first time, while for the other, the event had already happened once when they started. Both started Steiner in high school
- One alumnus, who graduated about a year ago and had attended Steiner for their entire school career

There was one more student interview scheduled, but it was canceled by the participant at the last minute.

The founders and rector were obvious choices for the organizational perspective, since the event is organized and founded by the two founders, but funded by the school, and since one of my research questions was originally going to be focused more on the production of the event. These interviews were valuable for the study, nonetheless. The students were found partly through one of the founders, and then through one of the students I interviewed.

This means that the sampling combines purposive selection with elements of snowball sampling (Qu & Dumay, 2011). I could have interviewed more people to get a clearer picture, but it was difficult to find students when I did not personally know them. I was also running out of time, and six interviews already produced plenty of material to process within a study of this scope. A more comprehensive study with more interviews or with custom surveys included could potentially show the more universal effects of the event.

The students were chosen to purposefully represent different roles, with them being in the school at slightly different times in relation to when Steiner Fest was first introduced, and also having different school backgrounds. The different school backgrounds of the two founders, as well as the rector's long career within the Steiner school, also provided interesting perspectives and contrasts to the study.

3.3.3 Access and recruitment

Although I have a personal background within Steiner education, access to participants was not based on existing relationships. I did not personally know any of the participants beforehand and first contacted one of the founders through social media rather than through any previous Steiner connections. Further participants were then reached partly through referrals from this founder.

At the same time, the fact that the students and alumnus I interviewed were referred to me by the founder and then through one student referred by them, may mean that those selected were all quite active members of the community and participants in Steiner Fest. This leaves out the perspectives of those who might not have participated in the

event at all or have different opinions about the success of the event or their sense of belonging within the school.

3.3.4 Interview design

The interviews were based on loose interview guides, which I also improvised on quite a lot during the interviews. The themes included participants' relationship to Steiner Fest and the school, how the event fits into the school environment, participation and engagement, sense of community and belonging, Steiner identity, external perceptions and stereotypes, and how the event affects how the school is understood.

While I had an initial structure, I followed the conversation and asked follow-up questions depending on what participants brought up. This allowed themes that I had not initially focused on to emerge more clearly. As noted above, the interviews were based on a research design which initially included two research questions, however one of them was later dropped.

The interview guides also differed somewhat depending on the participant's role. The founder and rector interviews focused more on the origins of the event, its role in the school context, school support, participation, feedback, continuity, and possible effects on school identity and reputation. The student and alumni interviews focused more on lived experience, participation, belonging, Steiner identity, pride or embarrassment, and outsider stereotypes.

3.4 Data analysis

The data was analyzed using an interpretive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012). As I already explained in 3.2. Research design, the analysis process was not very linear, with the research question shifting as I worked through the material, gathered more literature to support the new research focus, and did some more analysis.

Although the research is based on the accounts of the participants, it should be noted that these accounts are subject to substantial interpretation, using what the participants say in different contexts together, together with theory, to form a fuller image of the phenomenon. The findings do not, then, simply report what the participants said, but how these accounts connect to each other and to the broader social context in which

they are produced, reflecting a more interpretive use of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

In practical terms, after transcription, the analysis consisted of reading the interview transcripts multiple times, recognizing patterns and coding them under themes, and then repeating this process multiple times, refining the themes further through the writing process (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

The interviews were conducted in Finnish, and all quotations presented in the thesis have been translated into English. Before translation, the quotes were edited for clarity and length, keeping the original meanings intact. The translations were initially produced using the online AI translator DeepL (free version) and then manually edited to ensure accuracy and to better reflect the tone and meaning of the original Finnish statements.

3.5 Reflexivity and researcher position

Reflexivity is important in this study because my own background and relationship to Steiner affect both the research process and the interpretation of the material (Berger, 2015). I have a partial insider perspective in relation to the research context. I went to a Steiner elementary and middle school from grade 2 to 9, after which I went to a different school for high school. However, I attended a different Steiner school than the Helsingin Rudolf Steiner koulu, which this study focuses on, and I did not attend a Steiner high school, which is the main context of this study.

I therefore have personal experience of stereotypes and identity within the Steiner sphere and still feel it is an important aspect of how I relate to this research topic. I do not, however, have any personal experience of attending Steiner high school or of Steiner Fest and its effects.

I had not originally given much thought to the fact that the interviews could be affected by whether the interviewees knew of my background in relation to Steiner. In my interview with the rector, I did not mention this to begin with, as I had somehow assumed that the founder had mentioned it when referring me to them. But when I corrected their assumption that I did not have much prior knowledge of Steiner, I noticed that I got much deeper with my questions and felt that the conversation opened

up more when the rector saw I was an “insider” and had personal experience of the school. In the rest of the interviews, I made sure to start the interviews by telling the interviewees about my background.

As illustrated above, this may have influenced responses. Participants might have felt more comfortable telling me their views if they felt I was an insider and understood the broader context. Then again, they also knew I was reporting the results in a thesis, so they might still have framed their answers not for my benefit, but for the readers of the thesis. The extent of this is very difficult to assess, as I have nothing to compare it to, but it should be noted, nonetheless, as part of the reflexive awareness required in qualitative research (Berger, 2015).

Access to the interviewees was not necessarily shaped by this insider position, since I did not personally know any of the participants and contacted the founder through Instagram rather than through previous Steiner connections.

My own background has most likely also influenced the way I interpreted the material, particularly in relation to identity and stereotypes. Although I initially tried to approach the research process with as much objectivity as possible, I came to recognize, through the interviews and the analysis, that my personal experience also gave me certain interpretive advantages in understanding the school and the participants. I have relied on theory and tried to argue my findings in relation to that, but I do also feel my unique position in relation to the material has something to contribute to the study.

My position was therefore somewhat insider due to my connection to Steiner as a whole, but not entirely, since I did not have a strong personal connection to the Finnish-speaking Rudolf Steiner school in Helsinki, nor to Steiner high school more generally, and since I also inhabited the role of a researcher from the “outside”. I would therefore say that I am neither fully an insider nor fully an outsider, but somewhere in between (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kerstetter, 2012).

3.6 Ethical considerations

Participants signed a consent form informing them how the material was going to be collected and used. They could choose whether or not they wanted to be anonymized, to the extent that this was possible, and whether they wanted to read the transcripts and

quotations I planned to use. The consent form also made it clear that participants could make comments off the record, request the removal or reformulation of quotations afterwards, and withdraw their consent without needing to justify it. It also stated that the material would be stored on the researcher's own computer and used only for this thesis.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and how the material would be used. They were also informed that participation was voluntary, that they could choose not to answer questions, and that they could request parts of the interview to be excluded. They were also given the option to review transcripts and quotations used in the thesis.

I had not fully decided on anonymization when conducting the interviews, but I have since chosen to anonymize all participants in the final thesis. In the findings and analysis, participants are referred to using codes that indicate their role: students (S1–S3), founders/producers (F1–F2), and the rector (R1). However, complete anonymity cannot be fully guaranteed due to the specificity of some roles.

No highly sensitive topics were really discussed, but themes of identity, stereotypes, and school reputation still involved some degree of social sensitivity. I did not interview any minors.

3.7 Limitations

This study has several limitations.

First, the sample is relatively small and focuses on one specific case, which makes the study context-specific and limits generalizability.

Second, as mentioned before, the student and alumni participants were recruited through referrals, and all were participants in Steiner Fest. This may mean that those selected were quite active members of the community, which leaves out the perspective of those who might have different opinions on the success of the event or on belonging within the school.

Third, the analysis is interpretive in nature and shaped by the researcher's perspective, meaning that the findings represent one possible interpretation of the material rather than a complete or objective picture.

To make the conclusions of the study stronger, I could have interviewed more people to get a clearer picture, but it was difficult to find students when I did not personally know them, and the time limits and scope of the thesis somewhat prevented this. If this study were to be continued and extended, conducting surveys that feature more opinions from within the school, as well as alumni, could be very useful.

The study is based on only one set of interviews and does not follow participants over time. As such, references to changes before and after Steiner Fest are based on participants' own accounts and interpretations, rather than on observations through interviews spanning a period of time. The findings, therefore, reflect how participants understand and describe the role of the event, rather than demonstrating causal effects.

The findings from this study should be understood as quite context-specific and interpretative, rather than as a generalizing image of the experiences of all Steiner students.

4. Empirical findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings through the two perspectives introduced in the introduction. The first perspective focuses on Steiner Fest in relation to the school's existing stereotype context, and looks at identity, external perception, and the ways "Steiner" is negotiated as a socially marked category. This perspective is explored in Sections 4.1 and 4.2. The second perspective looks at Steiner Fest as an internal social setting, focusing on belonging, connection, and sense of community among participants. This perspective is explored in Section 4.3.

While the chapter focuses on the empirical material, the analysis is guided by the five themes identified in the literature review. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 are most closely connected to the themes of non-neutral social contexts, negotiated identity, and external perceptions and labeling, since these sections focus on stereotype context and identity. The theme of identity as something that can be expressed and made visible is also

relevant in these sections, especially in Section 4.2. Section 4.3 is most closely connected to the theme of events as settings for belonging and social connection, while also showing how identity can be experienced internally through participation and shared community.

4.1 The pre-existing social context

To understand the social functions of Steiner Fest, it is first necessary to understand the social context within which the Helsinki Rudolf Steiner School, and therefore the event, exists. In this chapter, I first lay the groundwork by examining the social conditions described in the empirical material, before then, in 4.2, showing how Steiner Fest as an event acts in relation to this context.

4.1.1. Outsider stereotypes and the loadedness of “Steiner”

Something that emerges from all of the interviews is that the label of “Steiner” can be very loaded, especially when it comes into conversations with people outside the school. Both current students and alumni regularly recount having encountered stereotypes of the school, such as it being “culty” or “hippie”. These reactions can create a certain boundary between an “us” and a “them”. S2 describes that these types of stereotyped reactions to the school they go to tend to be quite immediate. Instead of initially treating the potential differences with curiosity, there seem to be strong preconceived notions, often based on little knowledge.

...there are a lot of prejudices, and then people assume I'm a certain kind of person just because I went to a Steiner school...So, people outside Steiner schools might have this kind of... assumption about what kind of identity we have here and stuff. I feel like there are actually a lot of different kinds of people at our school, though.

A situation described by S2 about the brother of a friend initially seeming interested in the possibility of attending the Steiner High School, but later calling it a “freaky place” (in Finnish: “friikkimesta”) because his friends had labelled the school so, shows that these stereotypes are not necessarily only held by individuals, but circulate as a kind of peer-produced social scripts. This example suggests that the stigma associated with the school can persist even when personal experience does not fully support it.

Then I just said something like, I mean, you actually had a pretty good time here—you really liked these teachers and these people, and you noticed that there are totally

normal people here, just like you. So why do you think this is a place for freaks? He was like, well, I don't know, my friends said it is.

In addition to the students and their experiences, both founders and the rector of the school also acknowledge this wider discourse context. F1 tells of the concrete measures taken to minimize the visible existence of these stereotypes in association with the school or event, having to block words like “hippie” in the event’s TikTok page’s comment field, hinting that these kinds of stereotypes are still visible even online.

Steiner schools have been associated with—and maybe still are to some extent—things that some people think are kind of weird. For example, on the TikTok of the Rudolf Steiner school in Helsinki, we have had to block the word ‘hippie’, so when you comment it there, the comment doesn’t go through. It’s somehow seen as a hippie school, and you’re doing some kind of earthy stuff there. So, in a way, there’s still a bit of that associated with it, at least in some people’s eyes.

R1 also mentions the existence of these stereotypes and notes that the word Steiner in itself is quite a loaded one: “The word Steiner carries a certain connotation, which, especially in the eyes of outsiders, is probably quite strong...”

These accounts suggest the word Steiner is not encountered as a neutral school label, but as one that already carries a range of outsider assumptions and connotations. These assumptions do not concern only the institution itself but are often extended to the kinds of people imagined attending it.

4.1.2 Living with stereotypes: correction, clarification, and response

Beyond the existence of stereotypes being simply described, they seem to shape how people within the school relate to it.

One way that this manifests is through the stereotypes being brought up unprompted within the interviews, in relation to descriptions of the school and Steiner Fest. I did not originally ask any direct questions about stereotypes, but even without doing so, they emerged clearly within the interviews and appeared as something that those within the school have to relate to.

Another thing I find notable here is that interviewees, while bringing up the existence of these stereotypes, in the same breath also described how they were not true and why. One example of this is S2 explaining that outsiders may have a certain perception of the identity people have within the school, but noting in the same sentence that there are, in fact, many different kinds of people in the school: “People outside our Steiner schools might have this kind of preconception about what kind of identity we have here and stuff. I feel like there are actually a lot of different kinds of people at our school.”

Even when speaking to me, someone they knew was already familiar with the school, and in a situation where they should not have felt judged based on external perceptions, the interviewees still found it important to explicitly discredit these stereotypes. This suggests how present and durable the effects of these imposed stereotypes are.

Another example comes from R1 speaking about the loadedness of the word Steiner and the external perceptions of the school (as shown in the previous chapter). He goes on to note both that the students of the school are in fact all very different, but also notes that the students feel they can be themselves there, immediately discrediting the preconceived notion:

...however, we have students all across the board, and trying to lump them all under a single identity or value system is a bit tricky. The students themselves often say that there are so many different kinds of young people here and that they feel it's okay to just be themselves here.

This particular example also illustrated that the students are not the only ones who actively feel the presence of the labels inflicted onto the school and feel the need to respond to them.

These examples show how the stereotypes are voiced by the interviewees without being brought up by me, suggesting that they are part of how those within the school relate to the school and describe it. They also show how the need for responding to them is immediate. This immediacy, together with the fact that participants still found it important to clarify and discredit these stereotypes even in a relatively familiar interview setting and without direct prompting, suggests that these assumptions are not merely background noise when the school is described. Rather, they seem to be anticipated in advance and responded to even before they are explicitly raised.

4.1.3 “Normal schools” and the language of difference

In addition to directly correcting stereotypes when they are voiced, the effect of living with stereotypes can also be read through the way the school is contrasted or compared to others. There are many examples where Steiner is explained through comparison to other schools. In these cases, the goal is often to stress that Steiner is in many ways just like any other school, as a way to discredit stereotypes by downplaying differences.

A couple of examples of this kind of rhetoric, which appears in relation to the stereotypes, come from S2, who points out: “(Steiner)high school is actually pretty much the same as regular high schools” and F1 who declares: “A Steiner high school isn't really any different from a normal high school.”

These accounts show, again, that there are active attempts to rid Steiner of stigmatizing labels, here through arguing that it is just like a normal school.

What else stands out from these quotes, however, is that, even while Steiner is being described as not that different, other schools are still called ‘peruslukiot’ or ‘normaalit lukiot’ (regular high schools / normal high schools), with Steiner implicitly being positioned as something slightly outside that category. In these accounts, it is not argued that Steiner is “a” regular school, but “like” one. This suggests that, although the participants argue that the school is not that different, even within their own vocabulary, they do not describe it as completely “normal”. In this sense, the normalizing move becomes double-sided: Steiner is defended as being completely ordinary, but at the same time, the comparison to other schools shows how strongly the label of being “weird” continues to shape the terms through which it is described.

To add a personal note, I remember my peers and me referring to other schools as ‘vanliga skolor’ (normal schools) when I went to Steiner. This was likely not done with any intention of implying that Steiner was weird, but the wording still carries a slight connotation of that. It is clear that in the context the students live in, other schools are universally accepted as “normal”, and Steiner is not.

This subsection shows that the way Steiner is defended, through comparison to “normal” schools, reveals something further about how stereotypes shape relations to the school from within. Even when Steiner is defended as ordinary, the wording of that

defense suggests that normality is still imagined as located outside Steiner rather than within it.

4.1.4 Identity under stereotype pressure

External assumptions of what Steiner is also seem to affect how those within the school talk about their relation to it. We can see this not only in how the school is described and positioned against others, but also in how school identity itself is talked about.

When asked whether they feel they have a Steiner identity, the reactions were often hesitant, especially among the current students. Identity as a term seemed to immediately carry some discomfort. S2, for example, explains that outsiders tend to assume she has a certain kind of identity because she goes to the school: “People outside our Steiner schools might have a certain kind of preconception about what kind of identity we have here.” Later, when asked more directly about school identity, she replied: “I don't really feel like I have a specific identity or anything.”

Looked at together, these statements suggest that identity within Steiner is already a loaded category, with meanings already attached to it before S2 gets to define it on their own terms.

Another example of the apprehensive attitude towards identity as a concept is shown here, where S1 writes off having a Steiner identity, but in the same sentence calls herself “steinerlainen” (a Steiner student / a part of Steiner) with pride, showing a tension between the attitude towards identity as a term and how they do view themselves as part of the school:

...it's not really part of my identity... this is the high school I'm attending now, but of course I'm proud to say that I'm a Steiner student ('steinerlainen'). I definitely carry it with pride that I'm a Steiner student (steinerlainen) and that I go to a Steiner high school.

Here, the tension becomes especially clear: they distance themselves from Steiner identity as a label but still speak of belonging to the school with obvious pride.

One possible reason for this hesitation is that the interviewees are already used to others projecting a rather fixed image of Steiner identity onto them. What seems most visible

in this material, then, is not a simple absence of identification with the school, but a difficulty with identity as a category when that category already carries outsider assumptions. The hesitation around the term does not mean an absence of belonging, attachment, or pride. Rather, it suggests that “Steiner identity” may be difficult to claim straightforwardly precisely because it is already loaded from the outside.

4.1.5 Conclusion: a school identity shaped by outsider assumptions

When describing the school to outsiders, this is often done from a position shaped by an awareness that stereotypes about the school already exist. As this chapter has shown, when people hear which school the students go to, the page is not blank, and descriptions of the school are therefore often formed in relation to and in anticipation of already existing notions.

Across the material, these outsider assumptions remain present both in how the school is described and in how students themselves relate to it. These responses take different forms, but they all suggest that the school is not described from a neutral starting point, and that outsider assumptions remain present in the background both when the school is described outwardly, and when students themselves relate to it and to ‘Steiner’ as a label.

This is also visible when interviewees describe their own identity or position within the school. What this suggests is not that the school means little to them, but that their relation to it, and the kinds of identity labels that feel available or claimable, is shaped in a context where Steiner already carries strong outsider associations.

The background established in this chapter becomes important in the next one, because Steiner Fest takes place within that context, not outside of it. Its meaning and effects can therefore only be understood in relation to the already existing stereotype context, the forms of defense it gives rise to, and the tensions around identity that shape how the school is described.

4.2 Steiner Fest as an intervention in the stereotype context

As the previous chapter has shown, the social meaning of Steiner is shaped by more than the school itself. The empirical material suggests that the word Steiner is already loaded with outsider assumptions, and that these influence both how the school is perceived from the outside and how those within it speak about it, compare it to others, and negotiate their relation to it. Steiner Fest takes place within this context, not outside of it.

This chapter, then, examines Steiner Fest as an intervention in that situation: first as something that can be used outwardly to counter stereotypes and present the school differently, and then as something that may also affect visibility, pride, and school-related identification within the school itself. In that sense, Steiner Fest does not only respond to the situation described above but may also begin to reshape it.

4.2.1 Steiner Fest as a counterexample

As the previous chapter has shown, those within the school often have to speak about Steiner against a background of preconceived notions and stereotypes. Steiner Fest then functions as a concrete tool against these outsider stereotypes, both in outward explanations of the school and in more direct responses to existing assumptions about it.

Several interviewees describe using Steiner Fest as an example when talking about the school to show a more positive side of it. S1 describes that they always mention Steiner Fest when speaking to people outside the school: “When I tell my friends from outside the school about Steiner, I’ve mentioned that, yeah, we have Steiner Fest.” S2 similarly mentions that they always bring up Steiner Fest when telling people about the school: “I always mention the Steiner Festival because it’s kind of the main event at our school.” These examples suggest that Steiner Fest functions as a concrete example that students can draw on in outward explanations of the school.

The students also describe using Steiner Fest more directly to defend the school. This is exemplified in this quote by S1, which shows that Steiner Fest is used as corrective evidence against the stereotypes themselves:

If someone suddenly asks, so is that the cult school? I’m like, we have a Steiner Fest, and we’ve had Turisti and SaraBee there, and I’m sure everyone always lists all the

artists... Then they kind of regret saying it's a cult school and that it's a bit of a weirder school compared to other high schools. So, it's kind of like a correcting thing, where then those rumors kind of fade away, and they don't really dare to say anything anymore.

One reason it seems to work so well in this role is that it does not fit neatly with the stereotyped image of the school. In this previous quote, S1 describes how explaining that the event has “real” artists and is organized at a “cool” venue made their friends pull back their previous stereotyped statements about the school.

The presence of well-known Finnish artists and the venue being considered cool among young people seem to have a strong effect on how effectively Steiner Fest can be used in this way. The young people already have a certain respect for the artists and the venue, and the connection made to the Steiner school forces them to reconsider their notion of what Steiner is. S1 points out what a big deal it is and that telling people about it gets a reaction and can make them question their expectations of the Steiner school:

But it's also a really big deal that they're these big and influential artists... When I tell my friends outside the school about Steiner, I've mentioned that, yeah, we have Steiner Fest where these artists performed, and then they're just like, wow, why doesn't our school have an event like that?

S2 also explains that it being at a place where “real” events are organized makes it more of a legitimate event, which also makes it more credible to use as something to showcase the school outwardly:

It makes it feel more like a real festival, since it's actually held at a venue where big-name artists perform. It creates a different atmosphere than if it were held in, say, a school gym, so that kind of makes it feel more legitimate.

This highlights the perception that the event becomes easier to use outwardly when it is linked to a venue and format that already carries legitimacy, strengthening the corrective power of Steiner Fest.

Together, these examples suggest that Steiner Fest gives students something concrete, credible, and socially legible to point to when speaking about the school outwardly. Because students know that outsiders are likely to respond positively to the event, it can be brought up both pre-emptively, when explaining the school, and defensively, when

stereotypes are voiced more directly. In this sense, Steiner Fest functions as a counter-image to the stereotypes attached to the school.

4.2.2 Normalizing Steiner through Steiner Fest

Beyond functioning as a tool for defense in single interactions, Steiner Fest may also have a broader normalizing effect on the school's reputation. As established in the earlier findings, the founders are very aware of the social context of the school and, therefore, also the context within which the event takes place. One of the founders has a long Steiner background and has personal experience of the school and of living with these stereotypes. Because the founders are not outsiders, they have an understanding that the event can function as more than just a fun night. One main goal for the event from the founders' side seems to be to show that the school is "normal", rather than building something reflective of Steiner. According to F2, the name is the only thing especially Steiner-coded about the event, and the point of the event was to show Steiner schools are totally normal; to strip the negative connotations from the word Steiner and make it neutral. He even goes so far as to say the event would have failed if it had mainly strengthened the Steiner identity:

...to emphasize that, hey, these students are just students, just like at any other school in Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa, or anywhere else in the world. They're exactly the same, the same crowd. So, I guess we'd have kind of failed if the event just reinforced that Steiner identity and the impression of the event was, 'Oh, well, these Steiners do this kind of Steiner thing; they have their own thing going on,' and so on.

F2 also suggests that, beyond this normalizing effect, the event can show that Steiner has some positive sides that others may not have:

I don't think we've really tried to create a Steiner-style event, because maybe the message we specifically want to convey is that... That Steiner schools are schools just like any others, that we just kind of invest in group bonding, and that there's this cool event here, so we haven't really tried to focus on that.

F1 explains the goals of the event along the same lines; dismantling the stereotypes and making the school seem more "normal" through legitimate artists performing in a credible venue:

That (stereotypes) is also, of course, one of the things we've wanted to break down and change with Steiner Fest. So that when people associate the word Steiner with an event

like this, where there are actually real artists performing in the right setting, it would help raise public awareness even more than this is a pretty normal school, even though it organizes exceptionally great events.

Due to Steiner Fest, as established before, being a public-facing event that is visible on social media and talked about by the students, and directly contradicting the stereotypes of being “cult” or “hippie” by being associated with artists and a venue that are already considered cool, the event may work more broadly against the stereotypes. In addition to functioning as defense in random interactions, it may have the power to slowly impact the broader image of Steiner in general, thereby legitimizing the school socially.

4.2.3 From hiding to visibility and pride

The founders emphasize making the school seem like any other school, and their and participants’ accounts suggest that this goal of changing the image of the school may really work over time. When examining the students’ perspectives on the effects of Steiner Fest on a broader social scale, these accounts suggest that the founders’ goals succeed to some degree, but the effects also seem to go beyond that.

Although the founders emphasize not focusing on an amplification of the Steiner identity through the creation of the event, it may have had that effect anyway. Through making the school seem more normal and cooler outwardly, students describe feeling more comfortable showing the world how they relate to the school. As established earlier, the connotations of the school based on stereotypes and labels seemed to make the students somewhat apprehensive about claiming a Steiner identity. Here, students describe Steiner Fest as acting as almost an antithesis to the stereotypes and therefore dismantling them.

If Steiner Fest helps weaken these stereotypes, it may also give students more room to position themselves outwardly in relation to Steiner without having to begin from a position of defense.

Two quotes by S3 describing life before and after Steiner Fest highlight the difference an event can have. In the first pre-event quote, they describe the inward retreat that used to be the reality for the students:

We were kind of living in our own little bubble, so I feel like we didn't really try that hard to go out into the world. We had our own thing going on, and I feel like Steiner was mostly a topic of conversation with other Steiner schools. It wasn't really a big deal to think about the rest of the world.

In a second quote, S3 describes the feeling of Steiner Fest letting the students be themselves and embrace the Steiner identity without the weight of the stereotypes weighing on them as much:

I feel like it (Steiner Fest) reinforced that feeling that we're just Steiner and we do our own thing, and we're just not really interested in hiding from others anymore or worrying about what they think. But in a positive way.

These quotes are particularly telling in contrast to each other, highlighting the shift from inward retreat or indifference toward a greater willingness to be visible outward.

Steiner Fest cannot be claimed to entirely change outsider perceptions, or that they stop mattering altogether. The findings do, however, suggest that the event may help the stereotypes weigh on the students less heavily than before, giving them more room to relate to the school on their own terms and to publicly position themselves more freely in relation to it. In some cases, this seems to move beyond an increased acceptance of visibility toward more openly positive positioning.

This shift is visible not only in greater outward openness, but also in how some students begin to speak about the school more explicitly positively. The school is now seen as institutionally more regular, allowing it to be framed as not only not weird, but even as socially exceptional. Though the students did express pride towards the school culture earlier, here that pride is expressed more outwardly, and the comparisons to other schools do not read as defense. In other words, the shift Steiner Fest brings forth is not only from hiding to visibility, but in some cases from defense to more openly positive distinction.

S2 explains here that they frame Steiner as a better school than others, partially credited to Steiner Fest and it being an event unique to the school:

I always try to explain to everyone that this school is actually very different from other high schools, but in a good way... I always mention Steiner Fest, because it's kind of the main event at our school. It's so different from what other high schools have.

Compared to the earlier efforts to show the school is regular, this different attitude stands out. Here, difference is no longer only something that needs to be downplayed, but something that can also be presented positively. S1 adds to the same point of Steiner Fest amplifying pride toward the school:

Well, yeah, basically it kind of adds to the fact that, like, our school has this cool thing people might know us from, and when I tell my friends from outside the school about Steiner, I do mention that we have Steiner Fest. It does kind of add a little extra pride to the fact that I go to Steiner, and it's a source of pride that our school has an event like that, and that other schools don't.

These findings do not argue that Steiner Fest removes all tension around Steiner identity, but that it potentially has the power to over time diminish the stereotypes, and that it may reduce the weight of external perceptions enough for students to position themselves in relation to the school more freely in public, and even express their explicit pride toward the school and the event outwardly without it being a form of defense.

What the findings in this chapter show is that Steiner Fest is not only a fun event organized by the school, but also something that can socially impact the school by intervening in how the school is seen and related to. It can affect both how the school is seen from the outside and how students relate to it from within. By giving students something concrete, credible, and socially legible to point to, Steiner Fest can be used to challenge stereotypes and make the school appear more normal and legitimate. At the same time, it may create more room for students to position themselves openly in relation to the school, and in some cases to express pride more outwardly.

4.3 Belonging and sense of community

Having shown how Steiner Fest functions in relation to the school's socially marked identity, I now turn to another perspective of its social meaning: how it functions within the school as a setting for belonging, connection, and community. The material suggests that Steiner Fest supports belonging not simply by gathering students in one place, but

by creating a somewhat different social setting from everyday school life and by extending shared experiences beyond the event night itself.

4.3.1 A different social setting: lowered thresholds and loosened boundaries

The event being held outside the school, both in space and time, and it being a voluntary event, can have a boundary-breaking effect on social behavior. It can loosen the everyday social partitions of classes and groups and lower the threshold to speak to people one might not approach in school, creating a social setting in which usual boundaries appear less fixed than in everyday school life.

S2's account suggests that Steiner Fest not only gathers students in the same place but may also lower the threshold for contact in ways that ordinary school settings do not. "At least in my experience, I've talked to a lot of new people there, including students from other Steiner high schools. I think it (Steiner Fest) really creates a sense of unity, which is really nice."

S3 describes the threshold for talking to new people as lower in connection to the event, and also describes feeling a level of connection with people at the event:

It made it possible to get more connected on some level, so that you could ask someone else, like, hey, are you going over there? And then they'd reply, are you? And then, do you want to go together? and stuff like that, so I feel like it really had that kind of connecting effect, and then it was easier to, like, talk to people there.

This quote where R1 describes having received positive student feedback, where Steiner Fest had made a concrete difference, shows not only that the event has these effects, but that they are visible even to the school leadership.

Students have actually come up to me to thank me, saying it was really great and that they made new friends. For example, right after the last edition, a student came here to say that they made a lot of new friends there. They had talked to people there whom they had never once managed to talk to here at school. That was a great example of how this kind of thing works.

This type of boundary-crossing is not an accidental effect of the event, but is described by F1 explicitly as one of the original intentions of the event:

Yeah, definitely, when we first started producing the event, the idea was to get students from within the schools, and students from different Steiner schools, to get to know each other and also to build relationships that go beyond the boundaries of individual Steiner schools.

These accounts suggest that Steiner Fest does more than simply gather an already existing community in one place. The event appears to create conditions in which unfamiliar students become easier to approach, contact across usual group boundaries becomes more possible, and a broader sense of unity can be experienced. The point of the event, then, is not only that people can meet at the event, but that the event seems to temporarily reshape the conditions under which interaction happens. This does not mean that effects like these are uniform for everyone, but the findings do suggest that Steiner Fest can make everyday social boundaries more permeable and create a setting where both new and existing social ties can be reinforced.

4.3.2 Collective orientation: anticipation, recurrence, and continuity

Steiner Fest also appears to support belonging and sharedness by extending beyond the event night itself. Rather than remaining something that gathers the students for a single evening, it appears to be becoming part of the social rhythm of the school year, something students expect, talk about, and which brings them together.

S1 describes the event as a pick-me-up in the daily life of the school and as something that is discussed within the school and that creates a buzz: “It’s kind of like a pick-me-up during the school year, or it just gives you a good vibe, that, in addition to the breaks, there’s an event like that happening alongside school.”

S2 also describes how disappointed they would be if the event ceased to exist: “Well, that would be a real shame, because it’s kind of become a tradition. So, of course, it would be sad, and it would upset me that our school wouldn’t organize it anymore”.

These accounts suggest that Steiner Fest is becoming more than something that just engages students in the moment they attend it. It is increasingly expected in advance, emotionally invested in, and thought of as something that should absolutely continue.

Its absence would not only mean that the students would miss one night of fun, but that something now built into the school year would disappear.

From an organizational perspective, R1 talks about the school “having” to organize the event now, since it is expected by the students and has been marketed towards potential new students. This shows that the event’s growing importance is not only felt by students, but also recognized institutionally:

In many ways, it's becoming a more and more important part of our school's activities. We've kind of promised that it is happening, and it's also been a part of our school's marketing, so in a way, it has to happen.

This suggests that Steiner Fest is seen as more than just a one-off experience. The repetition makes the event an anticipated part of the school year, which in turn gives students a recurring point to orient themselves around together, while also making the event institutionally visible as part of school life. This is also visible in the following description by S1:

I feel like it's become kind of a phenomenon, like when Steiner Fest comes around, everyone's wondering who's going to perform there, and people get excited about it and want to suggest artists to invite the following year and stuff like that. So I feel like that kind of gives it a life extension, because when everyone gets excited about it and wants to know who's coming, and thinks what if their favorite artist shows up, because for a lot of people I know, that has happened. And then people want to keep talking about it afterward. I feel like it keeps the event alive for quite a while

This quote captures a stronger pattern particularly clearly. Steiner Fest is not only described as something that happens one day and is over the next one, but as something that contributes to social life before and after the event. Students speculate about the event, suggest artists, and get excited beforehand, and continue talking about how the event was afterward. The point is then not that the event has become recurring, but how this recurrence gives the event greater social effects within the school.

F2 also reflects on this kind of longer social effect in more concrete terms, describing how one of the goals of Steiner Fest was to create shared experiences that can remain usable afterward in everyday school life:

The fact that you share a common experience with other students, which you can then draw on when chatting to someone during lunch or if you end up doing group work with someone, can really lead to a lot. Of course, we can't do that networking work or make friends on anyone's behalf. But I think it's been a wonderful idea to try to offer everyone a low-threshold opportunity to form new friendships.

This quote shows more concretely how the event can continue to function socially beyond one night. Steiner Fest can become a shared experience, and something students can draw on in ordinary situations, such as lunch conversations or group work. In that sense, the event's significance does not end with the event itself but can continue afterward through the shared reference points it leaves behind in everyday interaction.

A description by S2 exemplifies clearly how Steiner Fest can function as a talking point both before and after the event, giving it a social life that extends beyond the event-night itself:

There's that hype for a month or two before the event, where everyone's talking about it nonstop, and then even after it, of course, when people post about it on social media and talk to each other about how much fun it was and how great it was to see those artists and so on. It really sparks a lot of conversation.

Together, these quotes suggest that Steiner Fest is more than simply an enjoyable event that gathers people for one evening. Because the event is recurring, it creates collective anticipation and becomes something students talk about both before and after it takes place. It gives the students a collective experience and shared point of reference that they can draw on later in everyday situations. In that sense, the event does not only matter in the moment but can remain socially meaningful beyond the event night itself.

4.3.3 Unevenness and limits

Though common themes emerge through the material, it also shows that there is some unevenness in how the event is perceived. The point of this chapter is not to question whether the patterns discussed above matter, but to show that their effects are rarely experienced evenly.

It is important not to treat these emerging effects as universal, but rather as uneven. Some participants describe Steiner Fest as personally low-salience, for example, by

depicting the event as “just a fun night” rather than something monumental, while still also recognizing broader communal effects elsewhere in their descriptions, for example, shared talk and outsider-facing meaning. What makes this analytically important is that personal and communal effects do not always coincide. A participant may not describe the event as especially meaningful to them personally, while still recognizing its wider role within the school community. This is therefore not necessarily a contradiction but rather suggests that Steiner Fest can contribute to belonging and community in different ways, while the kind and intensity of those effects vary across participants and contexts. One participant may also experience different effects in different ways.

The distinction is therefore not simply between participants who are affected and participants who are not, but also between different levels of effect. Some meanings are experienced more personally, while others are articulated more at the level of the wider school community.

Within the interviews, there are indications that social connection and community already existed within Steiner before Steiner Fest, with Steiner Fest not being something that creates school community from zero, but as something that may contribute to it. These effects are not experienced equally by everyone and are not guaranteed for each participant. Some students might not experience a positive social impact on any of these levels.

The findings, nevertheless, support a cautious claim that Steiner Fest can function as a recurring site of community building within the school ecosystem. It may enable boundary-crossing interactions both within the school and across the wider Steiner school system, while also becoming a recurring and socially meaningful point of reference within school life.

5. Discussion

Chapter 4 presented the findings through the study’s two main perspectives: first, Steiner Fest in relation to the school’s existing stereotype context, and second, Steiner Fest as a setting of belonging and community. This chapter builds on those findings by discussing them in relation to the literature reviewed and the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2. The discussion returns to the five themes identified in the

literature review: events as settings for belonging and social connection, events as sites where identity is expressed and made visible, events as embedded in non-neutral social contexts, identity as negotiated and relational, and identity as shaped by external perceptions and labeling. Sections 5.1 to 5.4 engage especially with the themes connected to stereotype context, identity, and outward perception, while Sections 5.5 and 5.6 focus more directly on belonging and community, as well as the limits and unevenness of those experiences. In this way, the chapter uses the theoretical framework developed in the literature review to interpret the empirical findings and to examine more closely how Steiner Fest functions both as a site of identity negotiation and as a setting for community building.

5.1 Steiner as a socially marked category

The findings indicate that “Steiner” as a label is not treated neutrally but is already entrenched in meaning. Stakeholders describe hearing stereotyping words like “hippie”, “culty”, and “freaky” being used to describe the school, and their descriptions of such behavior show that they are not surprised by it, but rather that they expect it. When Steiner is brought up, it is not met neutrally, because it already has assumptions attached to it.

Using the theories on stigma by Goffman (1963), this can be explained as a form of social marking, a phenomenon where people are interpreted through a set of shared expectations of them, rather than on their own terms. In the case of Steiner, the school itself is not an issue, but rather the meanings attached to it in a broader social context that shape the way it and people associated with it are viewed. What Goffman (1963) helps clarify here is that interviewees seem to be expecting to be misunderstood, questioned, or reduced to simple stereotypes before even having a chance to explain anything from their own perspective.

Bernburg (2019) adds a different layer, arguing that labels are not neutral, but always carry judgements that shape interaction with them. Steiner as a label certainly seems to work like that. It is tied to stereotypes that the interviewees are already aware of, even when nobody directly brings them up. Bernburg (2019) is especially useful here because the label continues to carry social judgements even when they remain unspoken.

Therefore, reactions to these meanings can be seen even when no references are explicitly made to them, since the participants know of their existence.

Another relevant theoretical concept is how ideas of what is considered “normal” are formed. O’Connor (2015) claims that these boundaries are socially shaped. In the empirical findings, Steiner is often described and contrasted in relation to what is thought of as a “normal” school. This suggests that there is an understanding that Steiner is not seen as that, at least by outsiders. Seen in this light, “normal” is not just a neutral comparison point, but part of a social boundary between what is treated as ordinary and what is treated as different. This theory helps explain that because Steiner is seen as different from other schools, and other schools are seen as normal, participants feel a need to defend and normalize their school background in interactions with people outside the school (O’Connor, 2015). This also helps establish the context for the next section: identification with Steiner does not develop in a neutral setting, but in relation to meanings that are already attached to the label from the outside.

5.2 Identity negotiation under stigma

The findings do not indicate that the participants either do or do not have a clear “Steiner identity”. Instead, they show that students continuously negotiate their relation to Steiner, and that this relation can shift depending on context. In some situations, participants may distance themselves from the label, while in others they express pride, attachment, or a sense of shared experience. The positions taken are not stable, and different positions often appear within the same description.

One example where this can be seen is when participants reject the idea of a fixed “Steiner identity”, while still in the same account describing the school as meaningful to them and themselves as part of the school. Some emphasize that Steiner is in fact “normal” and equal to other schools, while others underline what makes the school different from them in a positive way. There are also descriptions where the school is painted as its own social world, more detached from external perceptions. These various responses do not suggest the absence of an identity, but rather that identification is uneven and conditional.

Prins et al. (2013) align well with this phenomenon seen within Steiner, arguing that collective identities are not always stable or shared in one coherent way, but are instead

often negotiated through different, even conflicting meanings. This helps explain why stakeholders sometimes resist the label while simultaneously expressing attachment, and why they move between emphasizing both similarity and difference. The point is not simply the inconsistency, but the constant negotiation of identity itself (Prins et al., 2013). The findings do not show a clear boundary between identifying or not; they show that a range of ways of relating to Steiner can coexist.

This negotiation does not take place in a neutral setting. As the previous section showed, “Steiner” carries meaning shaped by outsider perceptions. Goffman (1963) and Bernburg (2019) help explain why that matters in terms of self-identification. If a label is already connected to certain assumptions, identifying with it also means relating to those existing assumptions. In turn, the participants distancing themselves from “Steiner” as a label does not automatically mean a lack of attachment to the school. It can simply reflect resistance to a version of “Steiner” defined through external perceptions. Describing the school through positive terms, then, can be understood as an attempt to redefine or reclaim what the label stands for (Goffman, 1963; Bernburg, 2019).

This also underlines that identity is not something fixed that people have, but something managed in interaction and in relation to outside forces. Swann and Bosson (2008) show that identities are shaped through ongoing interaction with others, rather than existing as fixed internal conditions. In the findings, students seemingly adjust the way they present Steiner depending on the context, suggesting that identity is not only expressed, but actively shaped in relation to how it is likely to be received.

In light of these theories, the variations in how the participants relate to Steiner are not random or only a personal issue. Rather, identification happens under conditions that they did not choose themselves. The students are not simply deciding whether or not they identify with Steiner, but they are forced to negotiate what that identification would come to mean in a context where they know the category already comes with predefined assumptions. In the next section, the focus will shift to how Steiner Fest affects those conditions by offering a new way of representing the school publicly.

5.3 Steiner Fest as an intervention in stereotype and identity

According to the findings, the role of Steiner Fest goes beyond being just a school event. In 6.2, students describe the event as a “proof-point” when talking about the school to outsiders. It is described as a concrete counterargument against the stereotypes about the school and is often brought up when the school is questioned or misunderstood. This shows that the event not only matters internally but can be used in how the school is represented to others.

This becomes important because it shifts the discussion from identity as something that is described or defended in words to something that can be shown. Steiner Fest appears as something students can refer to to challenge assumptions about the school. It functions as a concrete proof of Steiner being different from those assumptions, instead of relying on the students’ own narrations of the school. In that sense, the event is highly socially usable.

Jaeger and Mykletun (2013) define festivals and events as more than moments of participation, as sites where identity is expressed and made visible. When applying this theory to the case of Steiner Fest, the event not only reflects what Steiner is, but it also contributes to how Steiner can be seen. The event provides the school with a setting where it becomes visible in a form that outsiders can engage with, making it a strong reference point in interactions with them.

This connects back to what was discussed in 5.2. about stigma and labeling. If “Steiner” as a label is already heavily loaded with meaning and stereotypes, challenging those requires more than just verbal correction. Bernburg (2019) argues that labels often carry durable meanings that are often not easily changed through explanation alone. This is where Steiner Fest comes in as something more than just anecdotal. Because the event is visible, growing in recognizability, and associated with already valued elements such as known artists and an established venue, it offers a very credible counter image to the existing one Steiner as a label carries. Through its existence, students are able to actually show in a way that others take seriously that the stereotypes are wrong.

Critical work on marginalization and events suggests that events may help reposition socially marked groups by linking them to new forms of visibility and legitimacy, even while older assumptions remain in place (Walters, 2019). Steiner Fest appears to do

something similar. Rather than removing the stereotypes surrounding the school, it associates Steiner with recognizable cultural value in a form that students can use when explaining the school to outsiders. In this sense, the event becomes more than just a positive example: it functions as a socially effective counterexample to existing assumptions about the school (Walters, 2019).

Event literature on image and identity also makes points that help strengthen this finding. De Bres and Davis (2001) show in their research that events can contribute to how groups and places are represented and understood. Although Steiner Fest is not a festival tied to a place in the traditional sense, the logic can be applied here as well. Steiner Fest provides a forum through which Steiner as a school can be associated with something publicly recognizable and positively valued. This explains why participants describe the event as affecting how outsiders react to the school.

Though Steiner Fest is often framed as something which is making the school seem more normal, especially by the founders, this shift also allows the school to be presented as distinctive in a positive way. The event does not erase differences but rather changes how that difference can be understood. This also fits with Elias-Varotsis' (2006) argument that events can do more than reflect identity; they can help reinterpret it in a new social light. If the school is freed from the negative stereotypes, it could be seen as creative, social, or cool (Elias-Varotsis, 2006). The tension between normalization and positive distinction is important because it shows that Steiner Fest does not simply have the ability to reduce negatively perceived differences but can make it possible to claim positive ones.

This shows that Steiner Fest can actively shape how the school can be understood. In the next section, we move on to what this shift means for how students can relate to the school publicly.

5.4 More room to identify

The findings suggest that Steiner Fest does not create identification with the school, but it may change how identification can be expressed openly. In 6.2, participants describe being more open about their connection to Steiner, less concerned with hiding or downplaying it, and more comfortable talking about it openly. The event, then, does not

give the students a new identity, but it may change the conditions in which their identity is expressed.

As discussed earlier, identifying with Steiner is not neutral. Self-presentation is shaped by how people expect to be seen by others (Goffman, 1963), and labels carry meanings that affect interaction (Bernburg, 2019). Participants have to relate to these meanings when managing how openly they want to be associated with the school. In connection with this, the role of Steiner Fest becomes clearer. Students describe situations where they feel Steiner can be mentioned more easily, without the same need to, from the outset, defend or justify it. Stereotypes are hard to shake, and they do not necessarily disappear through Steiner Fest, but it seems the event is making them easier to manage in interaction with outsiders. This also fits with Swann and Bosson's (2008) view that identity is shaped in interaction, since students appear more able to present their school connection openly when they expect it to be received more positively.

This also relates to school pride. There is no evidence for a move from shame to pride, as students seem to have felt pride towards the school from the very beginning. The event can, however, act as an amplifier of pride, and it can let students express this pride more openly, since their focus does not have to be on defense. Jaeger and Mykletun (2013) make a case for this, connecting events to recognition, visibility, and positive identification. They argue that a good event can increase pride in a community, and through that make identification with that community stronger. The positive visibility brought on by Steiner Fest can then be connected to increased pride in the school, and, in turn, a stronger identification with it (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013).

The point is not that Steiner Fest changes the school or who the students are, but that it changes how students feel they can position themselves in connection to the school. Through stereotypes being counteracted, identification can happen more on the students' own terms, and through increased pride due to the event, identification may become stronger. This shows that Steiner Fest not only matters as a representation for the school, but also in connection to how students can relate to the school in everyday interactions.

In addition to Steiner Fest influencing identity, it can also affect how participants view belonging within the school. The following section, therefore, turns to Steiner Fest as a site for belonging and sense of community.

5.5 Steiner Fest as a recurring site for belonging

The findings show that Steiner Fest can strengthen belonging within the school through creating shared experiences, lowering thresholds for interaction, and creating common reference points that live on beyond the event itself. The finding is not that Steiner Fest creates community from nothing, but rather that it can strengthen or renew it, as a part of the original intentions of the event and something the school invests in.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe some of the central elements of sense of community as emotional connection, a commitment and belief that members have a shared history, common places, time together, and similar experiences. They highlight that strong communities are those that offer members positive ways to interact. That connects well to the functions of Steiner Fest, which not only brings students together physically but gives them something to anticipate, experience collectively, and refer back to afterwards, creating a shared reference point, which in turn can strengthen community bonds.

The findings suggest that Steiner Fest may loosen the everyday social boundaries and groupings that exist within the school by bringing students into a new environment. Students describe having discussions with people they would not usually approach, and other stakeholder accounts also point to more interaction across groups that are normally more separate within the school. Hixson (2014) argues that events are capable of creating conditions where social interactions become easier, especially among young participants. Events bring people out of their daily spaces and routines and therefore break the established social boundaries as well. These new interactions do not necessarily always lead to lasting friendships, but through lowering the social thresholds during the event, they can make interactions after the event easier as well (Hixson, 2014). Wilks' (2011) event research on bridging and bonding also connects to this. They argue that events can both strengthen bonds within an existing group and also create opportunities for new connections by bridging prior gaps.

Literature that treats created events as spaces where common ground is created, like Brownett and Evans (2020), also fits here. They describe events as sites of placemaking, where a shared space allows people to come together across differences and develop a sense of connection. Although Steiner Fest differs a bit from the public urban events described in their cases, the broader logic still fits. The event creates a space for both students within the school who might not otherwise interact to connect, as well as creating a common space for students of multiple Steiner high schools to come together. This joint experience can then create a broader sense of connection both in the school and throughout the Steiner network (Brownett & Evans, 2020).

Arcodia and Whitford (2006) show that festivals and events can contribute to social capital not only during the event itself, but also after it. This effect is shown to be stronger when the event is recurring. This aligns well with the findings, which suggest that Steiner Fest matters socially both before and after the events itself, through shared memories, conversations, and anticipation of future events. The event does not just gather the students for one night, but creates common points of reference that are socially usable in everyday school life (Arcodia & Whitford, 2006).

Quinn and Wilks (2013) extend this point about shared reference points, arguing that events do not only matter through forming networks, but through creating shared meanings, collective experiences, and connections that continue beyond the event itself. In connection with Steiner Fest, the event not only creates new interactions within the event itself, but it also gives students a shared reference point that they can return to later on to further create and foster relations (Quinn & Wilks, 2013).

Jaeger and Mykletun (2013) make the point that festivals are occasions where collective experiences, values, and identities are expressed and reinforced over time, contributing to forming shared histories and strengthening a shared “we”. This helps explain how Steiner Fest appears in the findings as something that has become a part of the rhythm of the school year and is expected and anticipated each year. The repetition of the event has contributed to its importance in building community through time. Students describing the event as something the school has implies that it has become a part of a shared calendar structure, making it not only something experienced in the moment, but reproduced across time (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013).

Wood (2005, 2006) is also relevant here because their work shows pride as a broader social effect of events. In connection to Steiner Fest, their theory can be applied to explain how students not only describe the event as something successful or enjoyable, but also as something that reflects positively on the school as a whole and that is representative of the school's values. Pride is then not only attached to the event, but goes deeper, connecting to what the school appears to be (Wood, 2005, 2006). Steiner Fest seems to matter as something that makes the school become associated with more publicly valued traits, but also as something that represents the traits that the students already value about the school.

The effects of the event are not always evenly distributed, and the findings show that Steiner Fest does not hold the same meaning for all participants. Some participants describe it as less personally significant, while still recognizing its broader social impacts within the school. This shows the important notion that personal significance and community significance do not necessarily coincide. McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe the sense of community based on shared emotional connection, but do not assume identical experiences across all members of a community. Steiner Fest can then function as a site of belonging, even when its meaning varies across different individuals. This is also consistent with various event literature showing that social impacts are unevenly distributed and experienced to varying degrees between different participants (e.g. Delamere et al., 2001; Smith et al.; Hixson, 2014). The event's value does not lie in producing a uniform experience, but rather in creating conditions under which belonging can be collectively recognized despite individual differences in significance.

Steiner Fest is therefore best understood as a recurring event that functions as a site where a sense of belonging can be strengthened over time. The findings indicate that it does so by lowering social thresholds to interaction, becoming part of the rhythm of the school year, and creating common points of reference that can be carried beyond the event itself, into the school's everyday life. Its significance is not in creating community from zero, but in providing opportunities to strengthen and renew a sense of community.

5.6 Limits and unevenness

As already hinted at in the last section, the findings also show that the effects of Steiner Fest are not uniform. While earlier sections have shown ways in which Steiner Fest can influence how Steiner is perceived, how students position themselves in relation to the school, and how belonging and community are experienced. These findings do not prove that the effects are the same for all students. Some describe the event as personally less significant, and others claim that for some, it might just be considered a social occasion without deeper significance. The event's impacts can therefore not be understood as consistent or automatic.

This applies, among other things, to representation. While the discussion has argued that Steiner Fest can work as a visible, credible counter-image to existing stereotypes, this does not mean that outsider perceptions are now completely changed or that the event carries the same representational weight for all participants. The findings indicate that Steiner Fest can provide a point of reference in how the school is described outwardly, but not that all broader assumptions related to the label of Steiner are automatically erased.

The same applies to identification. Earlier discussion suggests that Steiner Fest can function in a way that makes it easier for students to speak openly about Steiner and from a place of less immediate defensiveness. This should not, however, be seen as a uniform shift from one position of identity to another. Both Goffman (1963) and Bernburg (2019) show that socially marked identities like Steiner are rarely simply "resolved" through one positive experience. Though Steiner Fest may widen the room in which identification in relation to the school takes place, the students are unlikely to be able to immediately leave behind earlier meanings associated with the label Steiner.

Unevenness is especially visible in relation to belonging and sense of community, both in the findings and in event literature. Participants differ in the importance they personally attach to the event. Some think of it as a central experience that shapes the way they see the school, while for others it might be more peripheral. What this tells us is that though the event creates opportunities for connection, recognition, and identification, how these are used by the students may vary. Many of the effects vary depending on how deeply students themselves engage with the event, rather than them

always following just from the simple existence of it. McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue that an event contributing to a sense of community is not dependent on all members of the community having identical experiences personally, which helps show why Steiner Fest can be considered to function as a site of belonging and community, even when the meaning individuals assign to it may differ. Other event literature raises similar points, stressing that event audiences are not homogenous (Hixson, 2014), perceived social impacts vary across participants (Delamere et al., 2001), and the social value of events is always complex and uneven rather than universal (Smith et al., 2021). This matters because unevenness does not cancel out community significance; it clarifies that such significance is collective without being identical.

This also means that the social boundaries that exist within the school are not dissolved entirely by Steiner Fest. While the findings suggest that the event can lower thresholds for interaction and momentarily make the boundaries blurrier by creating common reference points, they do not prove that social divisions disappear completely due to the Steiner Fest. The event can create openings for interaction, recognition, and shared experience, but it cannot form a fully unified community, independent of how the community itself chooses to engage with the event.

The real conclusion of this discussion is then a limited one. Steiner Fest can intervene in how Steiner is represented, shape identification in relation to the school, and make it easier to express and strengthen community and belonging within the school. However, these results are not guaranteed and are often partial, uneven, and dependent on context and participation.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine how events may contribute to community building and identity negotiation in socially marked contexts, through the case of Steiner Fest. The study was based on a qualitative interpretative case study and drew on interview data from students, organizers, and school representatives. The research question asked how Steiner Fest contributes to community building and identity in the context of existing perceptions of the Steiner school. This question was approached through two connected perspectives: first, Steiner Fest in relation to stereotype context, identity, and external perception, and second, Steiner Fest as a setting of belonging and

community. The findings showed that the event was significant in both respects. It supported social connection and sense of community within the school, while also shaping how Steiner identity was experienced, negotiated, and presented in a context already marked by outsider perceptions. These findings were interpreted through the theoretical framework developed in the literature review, which brought together events, belonging, identity, non-neutral social contexts, and external labeling.

By combining insights from event studies with sociological perspectives on identity, stigma, and labeling, this study develops a more context-sensitive understanding of how events may matter socially in environments shaped by pre-existing perceptions and labels. Rather than treating the event as a neutral setting that simply produces community or identity, the study shows how these processes are shaped through interaction between participants and the broader social environment in which the event takes place.

The following sections summarize the key findings, outline the study's theoretical and practical contributions, and reflect on its limitations and directions for future research.

6.1 Key findings

The findings of this study suggest that Steiner Fest has two main social functions, which are practically related but analytically distinct. On the one hand, the event contributes to the experience of community and belonging within the school. On the other hand, it has a more outward-facing role in relation to identity, pride, and external perceptions of the Steiner school.

6.1.1 Community and belonging within the school

Together, these findings suggest that Steiner Fest is more than simply an enjoyable event that gathers people for one evening. By taking place outside the everyday environment of the school, it can create social opportunities that may not emerge as easily within ordinary school life. It also gives students collective experiences that they can draw on later in everyday situations. Because the event is recurring, it creates collective anticipation and shared references that make its social significance longer lasting.

At the same time, the findings suggest that Steiner Fest does not create this sense of community from scratch. Rather, it builds upon an already existing and relatively strong sense of belonging within the Steiner school context. In this sense, the event can be understood as reinforcing, intensifying, and making visible an existing community, rather than producing it independently. The findings therefore support the idea that events can strengthen social connections within groups, even when they are not the sole source of that connection. In the case of Steiner Fest, the event appears to gather and concentrate an already existing sense of belonging into a particularly visible and memorable shared experience. This distinction is important. The role of Steiner Fest is not that it suddenly produces community where none existed before, but that it, as a part of the school's investment in community, offers a special setting in which that community can be felt, performed, and extended beyond the event itself.

6.1.2 Identity, stereotypes, outward perception, and pride

The findings show that the term "Steiner" is not experienced as neutral, but as associated with existing stereotypes and outsider assumptions. This means that students do not enter Steiner Fest only as participants in a school event, but also as individuals already positioned within a broader discourse about what "Steiner" is supposed to mean.

Within this context, identity is not simply expressed through participation but actively negotiated. Steiner Fest appears to provide a setting in which this negotiation becomes particularly visible. It creates a moment in which students and organizers can present, reinterpret, and at times challenge the meanings attached to the school.

This is one of the more distinctive findings of the study. For a group that is already socially marked, the event may have a role that goes beyond internal togetherness. It can function as a setting in which pre-existing assumptions are not necessarily removed, but at least questioned, complicated, or partially reframed.

The findings do not suggest that Steiner Fest eliminates stigma or erases external stereotypes. However, they do suggest that the event can have an effect by creating alternative representations of the school and its students, and by giving participants a context in which Steiner identity may be associated with pride rather than only with defensiveness or imposed labels.

In this sense, the event has not only an internal social role, but also a representational one: it matters for how the school is shown outwardly, how it is spoken about, and how students themselves relate to that representation.

6.1.3 Synthesis of the findings

Collectively, these findings suggest that Steiner Fest should not be understood in only one way. It is neither simply a community building event nor only a representational event. Rather, it has two related but distinct functions: it strengthens and extends an already existing sense of community within the school and builds connections to others, while also providing a setting in which Steiner identity, pride, and outward perception are actively negotiated.

This is also why the two perspectives of the research question matter in the conclusion. One concerns the event as a setting of belonging and connection within the school, while the other concerns the event as something that interacts with broader meanings, stereotypes, and representations. Keeping these perspectives distinct makes the findings clearer and more faithful to the empirical material.

6.2 Theoretical contributions

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in showing how perspectives from event studies and sociology can be brought together to understand the social significance of an event in a context shaped by stereotypes, labels, and external perception.

Contribution 1: Identity in event settings is negotiated in relation to external perception

First, the study contributes to existing research on identity in events by showing that identity is not only something that can be expressed or reinforced through participation but is also actively negotiated and shaped in relation to external perceptions. Because events take place within the context of these perceptions and can also influence them, they may play a more active role in shaping identity than previous event studies have often suggested.

Contribution 2: Social impacts of events in an already existing school community

Second, the study gives a more specific empirical account of how social impacts of events can work in a school context where community building is already ongoing. In

this case, Steiner Fest is not separate from the school's wider work of building community, but one part of it. At the same time, the event has a distinct role because it creates opportunities for both strengthening existing belonging and creating new connections, for example, across year groups and across different Steiner schools. In that sense, the study does not simply repeat that events can support community but shows how that can happen in an already existing everyday community rather than only in a broader regional or place-based setting.

Contribution 3: Non-neutral event contexts matter at the level of identity and experience

Third, this study adds to critical event research by showing that the non-neutrality of event settings matters not only at the structural level, but also in how participants understand themselves and their place within the event. It suggests that events may operate simultaneously as internal spaces of belonging and as outward-facing resources through which identity and external perception are negotiated. This offers a more differentiated account of how events function socially than approaches that emphasize cohesion alone.

Recognizing these different functions allows for a more precise understanding of how events operate socially and avoids reducing their effects to a single perspective such as community building.

6.3 Practical implications (arts management)

The findings of this study also have practical relevance for arts and event management.

First, they suggest that event organizers could benefit from paying attention not only to what happens within an event itself, but also to the broader social context into which the event enters. Existing perceptions, reputations, and stereotypes may shape how an event is experienced by participants and how its meaning is interpreted by others. Familiarity with the social context of a group may matter for how events are designed and experienced by them. In the case of Steiner Fest, the founders' insider understanding of the Steiner context appears to have helped shape the event in ways that respond to the meanings and stereotypes already attached to the school.

Second, the study indicates that events involving socially marked groups or communities may have representational effects in addition to internal social effects. In

cases like these, events can matter beyond strengthening belonging within the group by also shaping how the group is seen outwardly and how participants themselves then relate to that representation.

Third, the findings suggest that events do not automatically unify participants or produce shared outcomes in a straightforward way. Even when events are proven to have positive social effects, those effects may be uneven and depend on what kinds of social meanings already surround the group or institution involved and how deeply participants engage with the event.

For arts managers and organizers, this means that event planning should take context seriously. Events can create valuable spaces for connection, visibility, and pride, but their effects are shaped by the institutional and social environments in which they take place. By understanding this social context, events can be planned more effectively in terms of social impact.

6.4 Limitations

This study is based on a qualitative case study of Steiner Fest within one Finnish Steiner school, and the findings are therefore context specific.

The relatively small number of interview participants, as well as the interpretive nature of the analysis, limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized beyond this specific setting.

Additionally, the perspectives represented in the material are shaped by those who were willing and available to participate, which means that other experiences of the event and the school context may not be fully captured.

These limitations do not reduce the value of the study, but they frame its contribution as one of in-depth understanding rather than broad generalization.

Additionally, my position as a partial insider may skew the study one way or the other, with my interpretations being influenced by my own experiences of living with the stereotypes I have described here. While this position may have provided a deeper

sensitivity to the context, it also requires reflexive awareness of how my personal experiences may shape interpretation.

6.5 Future research

Future research could expand on this study by including a broader range of participants, particularly individuals who did not attend Steiner Fest or who may experience the school community differently.

Studies involving larger samples or using survey-based or mixed-method approaches could also complement the interpretive findings of this research and provide a broader understanding of how such events are experienced.

Comparative research across different Steiner high schools in Finland would be particularly valuable in determining whether the effects identified in this study are specific to this case or shared across similar contexts.

It would also be relevant to explore whether comparable events exist in other Steiner or Waldorf school contexts internationally, and whether similar dynamics related to identity, stigma, and external perception are present there.

Additionally, it could be interesting to examine how similar events function in more “ordinary” school contexts that are not shaped by the same kind of stereotype structure, in order to clarify which effects are specific to the Steiner context and which may be more broadly applicable.

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