

Article

Stille Nacht: COVID and the Ghost of Christmas 2020

Murray Parker  and Dirk H. R. Spennemann * 

Institute for Land, Water and Society, Charles Sturt University, P.O. Box 789, Albury, NSW 2640, Australia; muparker@csu.edu.au

* Correspondence: dspennemann@csu.edu.au

Abstract: Annually, there are between 2500 and 3000 Christmas markets in Germany. While purported to be rooted in century-old tradition, the current concept of the markets, shaped in the 1930s, gradually transformed from primarily mercantile operations to experiential events. The experiential dimension is a collection of visual, auditory, and olfactory components that create a compound sensory response: the ‘Christmas atmosphere’. The prevalence of COVID-19 meant that traditional Christmas markets were largely absent from the festive calendar in Germany in 2020, disrupting the usual sensory experiences associated with these events. A review of the online presence showed that augmented markets and virtual reality were subsequently utilized in an attempt to re-create the experience and the ambience of the traditional markets, but had limited interactivity with many of the senses. We explore to what extent these multiple-sensory components may have been lost during the Christmas period of 2020 due to the COVID-19-induced transition from the traditional multisensory live market to a predominantly online experience, and highlight problems which arise through the documentation of such complex intangible heritage.

Keywords: COVID-19; intangible heritage; German Christmas markets; multisensory interactions; virtual reality



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1. Introduction

Every year, between 2500 and 3000 Christmas markets (‘Adventsmarkt’, ‘Christkindlmarkt’, and ‘Weihnachtsmarkt’) are hosted by German towns. Given the large number, and the role these markets play in the cultural fabric of German society during the pre-Christmas season, it is surprising how comparatively little attention they have received in German academic literature.

Following German tradition, Christmas markets take part across the European winter season from Advent (fourth Sunday before Christmas) through the modern Christmas period, ending around Epiphany on 6 January. Unlike other Christmas events fixed in Christian tradition, these markets have a more commercially based foundation [1,2], with some authors expressing this as a form of mass culture [3], or being at the boundary of tradition and mercantilism [4]. The literature pertaining to these markets is narrow to date, and has been limited to the examination of tourism and the economic roles of Christmas markets [5–9], supplemented by community and industry surveys [5,7,10–13]. Scientific and social research into experiential and social heritage components of these markets have been essentially ignored thus far.

Elsewhere, the authors have discussed the historic background of Christmas markets in Germany, and the many dimensions which ensconce these markets into German culture and society [2]. Drawing on this discussion, this paper examines to what extent COVID-19 governmental restrictions had on the operations of these markets in 2020, and what experiential issues arose as a result. It specifically explores the loss of the multisensory experience of the Christmas market over the Christmas 2020 period as a case study of a complex form of multisensory intangible heritage which needs appropriate documentation, and how a stochastic event of a global pandemic may prove to be a learning tool from which future documentation of multisensory interactions could be improved.

2. Christmas Markets in Germany

Modern Christmas markets have roots stretching back to the early fifteenth century. Despite this extended history, much has changed in market operation and character over time, including the type of products available for purchase, reformed directives permitting broader activities, and the overall spirit and atmosphere of the marketplace setting.

Christmas markets developed during the medieval period as opportunities to purchase supplies and goods in the midwinter period in the run-up to Christmas arose. Continually operating annual markets include the Dresden Strietzelmarkt (since 1434) [14], the Christkindelsmärik at Strasbourg (since 1570), and the Nuremberg (Nürnberg) Christkindlmarkt (at least since 1628) [15,16].

During the nineteenth century, the principal German markets of Nuremberg, Dresden, Frankfurt, and Berlin could be considered true ‘Spielzeugmessen’, or toy fairs, due to the numerous dolls and figurines being sold in specialty stalls [4]. The growth of such markets is correlated with the wealth of the community. During the nineteenth century, communities regulated the markets and restricted what could be sold and who would be allowed to trade. By the 1870s, traditional mercantile interests increasingly regarded Christmas markets as unwanted competition. In conjunction with the implied political power of the emerging department stores, Christmas markets were relegated to increasingly peripheral settings.

With a comprehensive history of German Christmas markets available for examination elsewhere [2], it is significant to repeat that the re-emergence of the Christkindlmarkt in Nuremberg and other markets in the twentieth century was largely due to the reinvigoration of the market as a ‘wonderful German custom’ during the Nazi period in Germany. During the late 1960s to late 1970s, Christmas markets transformed from individual experiential events to those of mass culture, facilitated by increased personal wealth in the post-reconstruction period and by increased car ownership and thus individual mobility [4]. This was aided when several communities extended the trading period of the Christmas markets. Central to these modern markets are the mercantile, social, and experiential dimensions. While discussed fully in other writings [2], we wish to highlight each of these dimensions below, in particular the experiential dimension, as an understanding of this feature is paramount in comprehending any hiatus of experience caused by COVID-19 restrictions across Christmas 2020.

3. The Mercantile, Social and Experiential Dimensions of Christmas Markets

Christmas markets can attract very large numbers of visitors in Germany, with almost 27 million tourists visiting the top ten Christmas markets in 2012 [10]. Tourists are predominantly locals, travelling from nearby communities, with few travelling more than 100 km [5,6,17]. For Germans, Christmas markets as ephemeral events have three dimensions: mercantile, social, and experiential.

The foundation of the Christmas markets is centered on the mercantile dimension, being historically a locale where artisans, merchants, and producers could sell their wares in the midwinter period and where the community could purchase supplies and goods in the lead-up to Christmas [18]. This dimension has more or less continued through to modern markets, with the composition of stalls now equally divided between those selling goods and those selling confectionery, food, and drink. However, in more recent times, evidence suggests that Christmas markets have lost their primary role as mercantile centers for Christmas presents to both shopping centers and the internet [19–21].

Instead, the main function of the markets today rests primarily in the social dimension, with tourists stating that the central reasons for attending the markets were collective experiences such as obtaining food and drink (34%), spending social time with friends and family (22%), and to experience the atmosphere (22%), rather than commercial activities such as buying objects for themselves or others (5% and 9% respectively) [6–8,10,22,23]. This trend towards the focus of markets as a location for social activity is visible both

at smaller [7,9] and regional markets [6,8], and at both historic [24] and more recently established markets [17].

The experiential dimension of a Christmas market is more challenging to define. Again, while full descriptions are published elsewhere [2], it is essentially a combination of all visual, auditory, and olfactory stimuli components produced by activities in the space, augmented by tactile stimuli and thermo-sensory stimuli on the skin caused by the subzero temperatures incurred by an outdoor market set in midwinter. In describing the experiential dimension, one must resort to poetic-like writing and word-smithery in an attempt to convey anything reaching the experience actually encountered. This process is of course subjective, influenced and biased by the writer's background, culture, and gender. Nevertheless, unique visual stimuli exist in these markets and include the colorful stalls and a multitude of lights adorning the space—festoon lights hang off many stalls, and floodlights highlight features of historic buildings, and, combined with the lit Christmas trees and merry-go-rounds, the visual stimuli provide a striking contrast to the darkness of the night sky, drawing the eye into a Baz Lurhman-style visual spectacle (Figure 1). Auditory stimuli consist of ubiquitous Christmas festive music emanating from both stalls and stage, with live music provided by choirs and brass bands mixing with the sound of distant merry-go-rounds. These musical sounds are interspersed with vendor cooking sounds and the constant chatter and laughter of the countless visitors themselves. The heady scent of warm food odors fractures the cold night air; the spicy concoction of mulled wine ('Glühwein'), the sweet smell of candied roasted almonds and rich earthy scents of roasted chestnuts mix with the piquant aroma of fried sausages ('Bratwurst'), with the taste component complementing the other sensory components for those actively engaging in chomping and sipping their way through the delicious morsels offered by the stallholders. This mélange of visual, auditory, and olfactory (and, to a lesser extent, gustatory) components forms the 'Christmas atmosphere' or 'Christmas mood', and is the subject of numerous visitor satisfaction surveys [17]. Considered to be important components of an appealing Christmas market [5,17], essential elements of this Christmas atmosphere have previously been reported to include the components described above, notably: subzero Celsius temperatures [11], stalls selling mulled wine (79%), Christmas festoon lights (79%), and Christmas trees (78%), as well as stalls selling sweets (75%) and food (specifically candied roasted almonds) (69%) [12].



Figure 1. Christmas market on the Römerberg at Frankfurt 19 December 2016 (Photos DHRS).

Despite this, the experiential dimension of Christmas markets worldwide has seen little rigorous qualitative or quantitative analysis to date. One exception in Austria surveyed visitors at the Christkindlmarkt in Salzburg, and noted a high level of importance attributed to scents and odors in this vicinity, with polarizing responses to another space of Mirabellplatz [8]. Reportedly important components included such visual stimuli as fairy and festoon lights, alongside auditory stimuli such as emanating Christmas music. Decorations were noted to invoke lesser significance to the visitor in this study. As no formal qualitative or quantitative analysis has taken place in German Christmas markets, this presents an issue for research and documentation of an experience deemed highly important by tourism and travels surveys. This becomes more so if we take into consideration how the stochastic event of the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the experience of the Christmas atmosphere of these markets from late 2020.

4. Restrictions and Limitations of Festivals under COVID-19 in 2020

The emergence of COVID-19, the disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) [25] in January 2020, and its progression into a global pandemic, has been documented globally. At the time of writing over the Christmas period in 2020, the disease was still prevalent in all global continents [26]. On Christmas Day (25 December 2020), Germany had recorded over 1.6 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, and almost 30,000 associated deaths [25].

With the first wave of infections through to early March 2020, German businesses encouraged employees to work remotely, and nearly all of Germany's 16 states prohibited gatherings of more than 1000 people [27]. Soon after, on March 22, severe federal restrictions, for an initial period of fourteen days, were imposed to limit social contact in public places, including the banning of public gatherings of more than two people (with exceptions for families), the implementation of a minimum distance of a 1.5 m between all people in public, and the closure of all gastronomy businesses with the exception of food delivery and collection services [28]. With decreasing case numbers, restrictions were then gradually relaxed in stages over April and May, including the reopening of department stores and shopping malls, a phased return of restaurants and bars, and the gradual reopening of schools [29]. However, with the return of a stronger second wave of infections from October 2020, Germany entered a 'lockdown light' phase from 2 November, with the closure of all restaurants and bars except takeaways, the cancellation of large events, the banning of overnight stays in hotels for tourists, and the capping of numbers for public meetings to 10 people in total [30]. Following a further steep increase in confirmed COVID-19 cases, additional restrictions were implemented from December 16th for the lead up to Christmas. These restrictions, which constituted another 'hard lockdown', were authorized until 10 January 2021 and included the closure of schools and non-essential businesses, the advocating of companies to allow employees to work from home, and the banning of alcohol consumption in public places, including Glühwein stalls [31].

4.1. Impact of COVID-19 on Christmas Markets

The rising numbers of infections in October and November saw the German population becoming increasingly risk averse in situations involving crowds. According to a representative poll conducted in early November, only 7% of the respondents planned to visit a Christmas market, and 8% intended to attend a Christmas church service [32]. However, in previous months, various communities had already considered cancelling their Christmas markets. In response, the peak body for fairgrounds and markets, the Deutscher Schaustellerbund, commissioned (in September 2020) a feasibility study to develop and implement Christmas market concepts that minimized infection risks [33]. While the concept might have been feasible in an environment with a low infection rate, the second wave of infections from October negated these efforts. Cancellations followed in rapid succession. By the end of October, cancelled markets included the WeihnachtsZauber Christmas at Gendarmenmarkt, Berlin, as well as other Christmas markets in Cologne, Frankfurt, Erfurt,

Rostock, and even the world-famous Christkindlmarkt in Nuremberg [34]. The fact that the cancellation of the Christmas markets drew the attention of international media in Australia [35], the UK [36], the USA [37], and the Arabian Peninsula [38] highlights the importance placed on these markets as a major event in the global eye.

Thus, the prevalence of COVID-19 meant that traditional Christmas markets were largely, if not entirely, absent from the festive calendar in Germany. The closure of Christmas markets across Germany disrupted the *mélange* of sensory experiences associated with this event, as the visitor was no longer able to absorb the amalgamation of visual, auditory, and olfactory components that were usually on offer. With the absence of stalls, the vast array of wares for sale were non-existent, Christmas music emanating from both each individual stall and live concert/singing performances were silenced, as was the continual chatter and laughter of visitors during the market hours. The heady concoction of scents—the odors of Glühwein, roasted nuts and fried Bratwurst—was suspended on the large scale offered by these markets.

Since takeaway services were permissible during ‘lockdown light’, attempts were made to salvage some of the business by offering pop-up and mobile Glühwein stalls akin to coffee vans [39], with some media likening that idea to street prostitution [40]. These were soon terminated when lockdown restrictions were tightened in mid-December, as these activities did not adhere to rules regarding social distancing nor the required wearing of masks [41]. While media reports suggested the closure of all traditional Christmas markets across Germany [42], it is difficult to ascertain whether any markets actually operated live during 2020. While some short-term events may have occurred during the early part of the Advent period, the heavy restrictions imposed over the Christmas period put an end to any offerings.

4.2. Augmented Christmas Markets and Virtual Reality

The importance of the markets as a national event needs to be stressed, underlined by the results from a poll taken in the first week of December 2020, whereby 53% of the German respondents (women 56%, men 48%) deplored not being able to go to Christmas markets on the second weekend of Advent [39]. Not surprisingly, this had an impact on the public perception of the run-up to Christmas. In essence, the Christmas experience was reduced to the commercial aspects, which were already serviced by shopping malls. Solutions to maintain some dimension of the Christmas markets have been readily found by (temporarily) offering mobile Glühwein stalls [39], and by creating drive-through markets for goods, food, and Glühwein on individual business or on a communal basis (Figure 2) [35,43–46]. At night, the physical reality of these drive-through markets had some semblance to the ‘real’ markets as hosted on the town squares (compare the Rastatt drive-through market in December 2020 (Figure 2) with the Frankfurt market in 2016 (Figure 1)); however, during the day and at dusk these markets revealed themselves as a ramshackle and tawdry affair (Figure 3), lacking all attributes of ambience and experiential value.



Figure 2. Drive through market in Rastatt [45]. (Photo Eliza Walker, Badische Neueste Nachrichten).



Figure 3. Ad hoc drive through market in Berlin-Perleberg. Note the re-used banner with the year obliterated [46]. (Photo courtesy Maria Kotsev/Der Tagesspiegel).

Augmented Christmas markets also took place using virtual reality, creating a simulated interactive online shopping experience offered by single manufacturers [47], by co-operatives replete with canned, tinny-sounding music [48], distributors [49], or by communities normally hosting markets (e.g., Nuremberg) [50]. Some of these were in essence customized variations to standard online shopping platforms (Figures 4–6), while others were more elaborate.

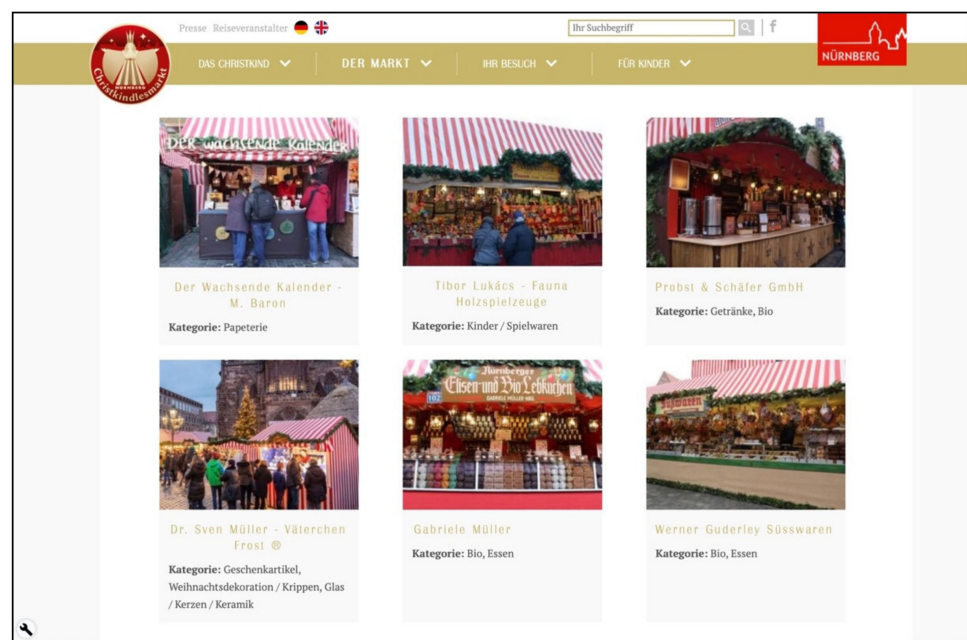


Figure 4. Screen capture of a virtual Christmas market run by the City of Nürnberg [50].

An example for the latter is the virtual Christmas market that was offered by a producers' co-operative of the town of Seiffen in the Erzgebirge, a primary manufacturing

region for wooden Christmas toys and ornaments. The online experience comprised a virtual 3-D 360° simulated market of individual huts set around an open space, mimicking the appearance of real Christmas markets (Figure 7). Each of the huts, some of which were multi-room, allowed the visitor to browse and select for purchase the offerings set out on shelves (Figure 8). The objects, although photographed for the 'catalogue' appeared flat on flat rendered shelves, indicating a rushed production by the media company [51], presumably due to time pressures. The visitor's experience was augmented by an acoustics-only, albeit tinny-sounding, Christmas soundtrack.

The 3-D simulated market was seen as a means to differentiate the Seiffen online shop from that of competitors [52]. This virtual market attracted some media attention, with commentators lauding the experience [52,53]. The chairwoman of the producers' co-operative argued that this virtual Christmas market would provide some of the "experience, the magic of the stalls ('Budenzauber'), the lights and the ambience of the evening" [52,54]. However, as noble as the attempt may have been to create a festive market themed commercial platform, the use of 3-D technology was not a fully immersive experience of fully virtual reality. Moreover, it was primarily linked to the mercantile dimension, albeit with minor interactive experiences such as options for virtually visiting the Christmas tree, the town hall, the stage area, and the holy crib. These experiences were largely limited to a predominantly visual 3D game-style platform, with limited experiential interactivity with other senses of sound (some) or smell (none).

For the Christmas of 2020, the social and experiential dimensions were largely lost over the centrality of the Christmas period, and the traditional multi-sensory interactive collective was not actually experienced in Germany for the majority of that season.

In many market squares such as those of Frankfurt, Mainz, and Nuremberg, the only things linking these to the customary Christmas markets were the festoon lighting displays and Christmas trees. While offering some consolation to the festivities that traditionally took place [56], it reduced these to purely visual displays, which the public in previous years had perceived to be an important component of a greater, more complex experience [11].

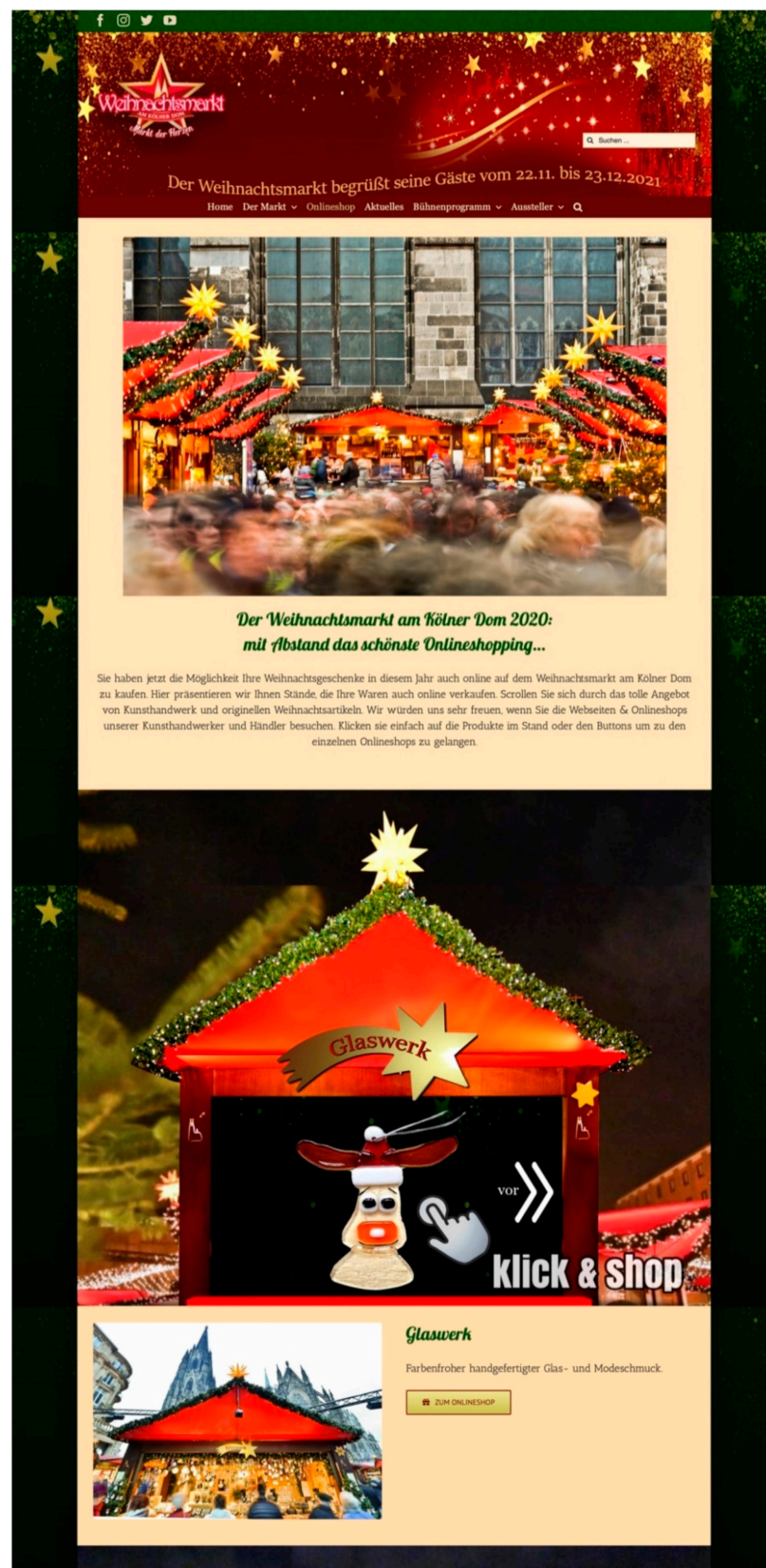


Figure 5. Screen capture of a virtual Christmas market run by the City of Cologne [55].

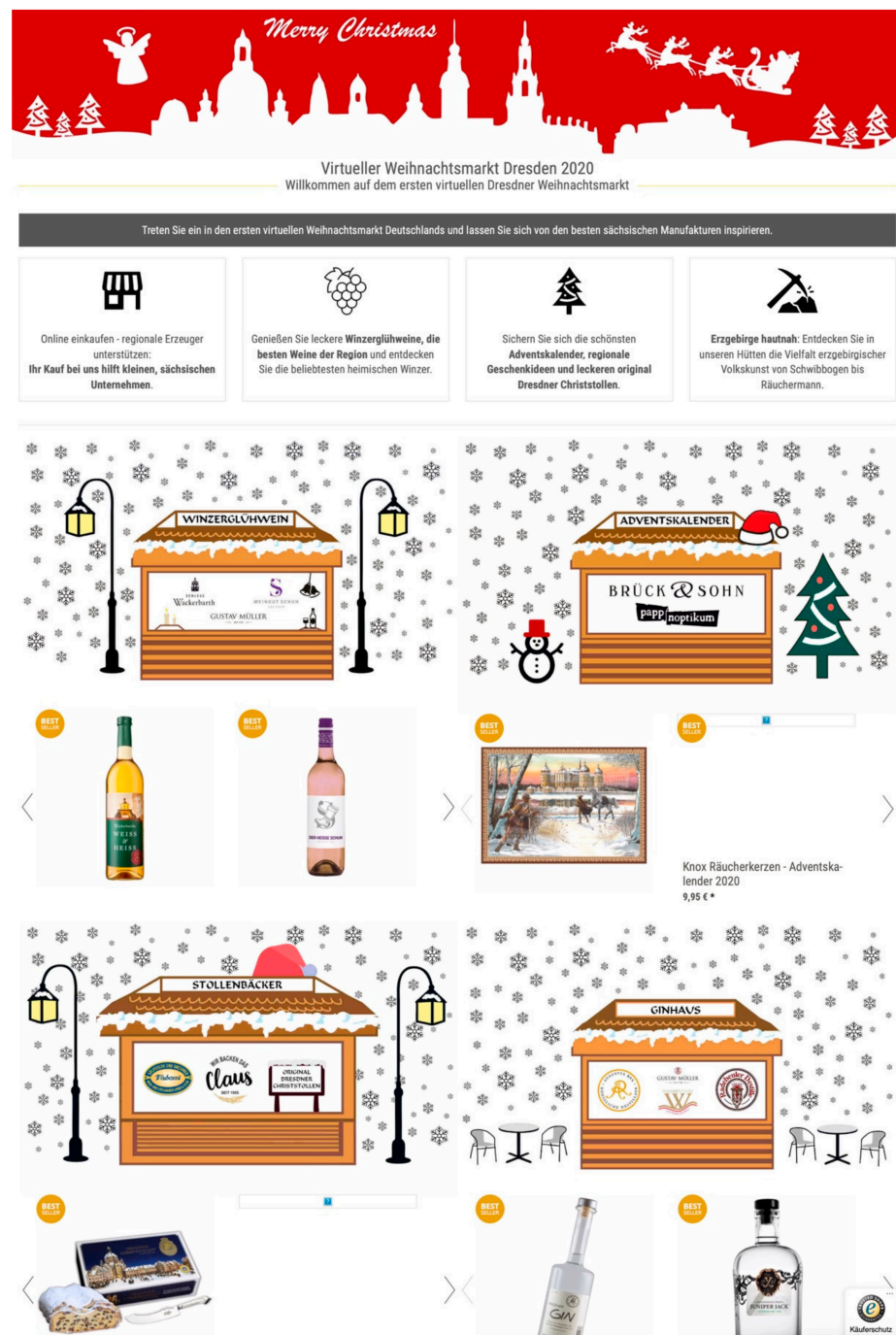


Figure 6. Screen capture of a virtual Christmas market run by a provider from Dresden [49].



Figure 7. Screen capture of a virtual Christmas market run by a producers' co-operative of Seiffen [48].



Figure 8. Screen capture of a room in virtual Christmas market run by a producers' co-operative of Seiffen [48].

5. Discussion

A community's cultural heritage is defined by tangible aspects of the physical environment (e.g., historic properties, monuments, cultural landscapes), its objects and artefacts (e.g., archaeological material, art collections, public art), and its intangible heritage (e.g., customs, language) [57,58]. Contemporary heritage management tends to be primarily concerned with the preservation of physical structures [59] and museum objects [60], as well as the preservation of intangible cultural practices. While the rhetoric advocates the preservation of such heritage for the benefit of future generations [61,62], the management processes primarily serve the ideological and socio-political interests of the present [63]. While intangible cultural heritage has been given formal prominence by UNESCO in its 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage [64,65], the standard discourse centers on languages [66,67], cultural practices [68], and cultural expressions in the form of dance [69] and music [70]. Other intangible aspects of heritage tend to be either overlooked or are often regarded as too difficult to address. As shown elsewhere, aural heritage, the sounds generated by, and prevalent, in the human-generated environment, tends to be under-researched [71], as is the interface between intangible aspects of heritage and tangible yet ephemeral manifestations [72,73]. Multisensory aspects of intangible cultural heritage have been largely overlooked, with emerging research in that direction exploring the nature of culinary heritage [74–76]. More than the tangible manifestations, intangible cultural heritage is inextricable linked to personal and community identity, which manifests itself in cultural practices and events [77,78].

The COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on the intangible fabric of the cultural heritage of many communities. While the cancellation or postponement of national (football matches) and international (Olympics) sporting events [79,80], festivals and concerts [81,82], and museum exhibitions [83] readily springs to mind, it also manifested itself in changes to the pattern of the ringing of church bells [84,85] and other human activity sounds [86]. Compared to these more or less one-dimensional impacts, the Christmas markets are an example of how the cancellation of an event has a multifaceted impact on all senses that constitute intangible aspects of cultural heritage: aural, visual, and olfactory. As demonstrated earlier, it is the multi-sensory component that is significant, where the collective is greater than the sum of its parts.

The closure of the German Christmas markets in 2020 therefore has implications extending further than a construed loss or other concerns in the economic or social spheres. While such issues are highly important, especially in the year of COVID-19, with its global shutdowns and lockdowns, they are to be expected, and have been discussed elsewhere in the literature [87,88]. However, the closure of these markets brings to the fore an issue which has been largely undiscussed in the literature to date: that of events or activities which have multiple-sensory components of aural, visual, and olfactory features, which, when combined, can form a multifaceted intangible heritage collective, needing appropriate heritage documentation. While the Christmas markets in Germany originated in a mercantile dimension and still possesses this, they now form an essential part of the history and culture of the cities and villages that host them. These markets have a number of abstract elements that involve more than just the addition of each ingredient.

Given the substantive change these markets underwent over the past centuries, the sensory experience/intangible heritage aspects as currently experienced differ from those of the past. Cultural heritage value is informed and shaped by the common experiences of the oldest living generation (i.e., grandparents and great-grandparents) [89–91], and is defined by its relevance to the majority of the community [63]. Consequently, the intangible heritage aspects of Christmas markets as they are experienced today are the significant sensory experiences of the markets of the immediate pre- and post-World War II period. Given the mutable quality of heritage values, significant sensory experiences will continue to undergo change. It is therefore important to document both the individual components and the intangible multisensory collective.

The government-imposed restrictions of 2020 in Germany highlight the temporal nature of such markets. As Christmas markets are seasonal, the key consideration will be whether the COVID Christmas of 2020 will be an aberration or will shape future Christmas markets. There are two independent observations that have informative value. A study of the effects of the March/April 2020 lockdown in Sydney and Melbourne showed that the observed drop in human activity (compared to the same period in 2019) had snapped back to close to pre-lockdown levels in August [86]. At the same time, experience in numerous countries showed that people reverted to pre-COVID behavior in social settings [92–94]. Moreover, the feasibility study to develop and implement Christmas market concepts that minimized infection risks as developed by the Deutscher Schaustellerbund shows how risks can be managed if the community infection levels are low [33]. The other observation provides some indications about the resilience of Christmas markets as a concept. On 19 December 2016, an Islamic terrorist drove a truck into the crowds of the Berlin Christmas markets at Breitscheidplatz, killing 12 people and injuring 56 [95]. While the symbolism was not lost on the German public [96], there is no indication that external negative incidences influenced the perception of the cultural value of Christmas markets.

In addition to COVID-related aspects, however, we need to take into account a longitudinal trend. With the growth of general online shopping and the preference of many Germans to purchase products online in the case of convenience [97,98], and the large numbers of the German population aspiring to scale down the quantity of Christmas lighting due to climate change concerns (a 2019 survey showed that 57% of respondents would reduce or eliminate festive lights in the future) [99], it is highly likely that some of the mercantile aspects of future German Christmas markets will remain online, or will morph into online experiences. This would be especially the case if the virtual markets currently operating are deemed to be commercially successful while providing a modicum of an enjoyable experience to the visitor. To what level the virtual development will persist remains unclear. It will be centrally dependent on the length of time (number of months/years) Germany remains constrained under restrictions, the availability and efficacy of vaccines, and the reaction of different population sectors to large scale events post- (and during) COVID-19. Research investigating this issue is warranted, as is further qualitative and quantitative research into the multiple-sensory components of Christmas markets across Germany, and their degree of importance as intangible heritage in German culture.

Given that the aural, visual, and olfactory components of any of the German Christmas markets have intangible heritage, an important issue arises regarding their actual documentation. While there are instances of the general population having taken video/audio footage of Christmas markets pre-COVID-19 [100] and during the restrictions of COVID-19 [101], inherent problems with this manner of documentation become immediately apparent. Even in cases where footage is undertaken in a methodical manner, recording numerous stalls serving their products and foodstuffs, the lack of the total sensory experience (notably the olfactory sense, alongside the cumulative sound experience and dazzling visual experience) is evident. In a similar vein, one could purchase some candied roasted almonds from an online Christmas market and consume them outside a pop-up Glühwein hut in the cold whilst listening to Christmas kitsch, yet these individual components do not seriously equate to the genuine traditional Christmas market experience. The restrictions of COVID-19 over Christmas 2020 highlight significant gaps in our understanding and research into multisensory interactive heritage and subsequent documentation for posterity. It is not our view to expect an online merchant to take the time to create an immersive multisensory virtual reality platform replacement to purchase Christmas gifts, nor should one be able to do so adequately within such a short timeframe under the conditions of a pandemic shutdown. We simply highlight that the results of a stochastic event such as COVID-19 provides an ideal learning position in which we can pause and consider what disparities exist regarding current intangible heritage identification practices, and how complex multisensory interactive heritage events such as German Christmas markets should be more thoroughly researched and appropriately documented in future heritage programs.

There are many global examples of intangible heritage which would similarly require such consideration and documentation, and Christmas markets just provide one example of the issue of documenting multi-sensory events and festivities. Other examples of such an intangible heritage collective include, inter alia, the Gióng festival of Phù Đông and Sóc temples in Vietnam [102]; Schemenlaufen, the carnival of Imst in Austria [103]; and the Holi Festival celebrations in the village of Chilkiya, Uttarakhand, India [104].

Understanding that all sensory experiences are loaded with personal bias, it would be important to then investigate the experience of any persons involved, with reference to these individual sensory components, and these components as an entity; how it made them feel, to what degree these components ‘effected’ the event, and what personal values could be placed upon them. It is the collectivity of these personal perceptions that give rise to communal perceptions and thus community heritage. In this research, it is important to not only provide a participatory and collective process in the assessment of any intangible heritage component, but also to provide an understanding of any processes of transformation [105].

In terms of documentation, while intangible heritage components have been evaluated in cultural festivals [106,107], alongside specific research into individual components of sight [108], sound [109], and smell [110,111], to date, little (if any) research has identified and developed methods to successfully document and archive such a collective group of components in the social sphere. Augmented virtual reality and multi-sensory interactive museums may prove as a solution [112,113], whereby traditional visual and auditory sensations may be enhanced by olfactory, haptic, and kinaesthetic experiences and stimuli for the visitor. However, the validity and success of such approaches will be tempered by of issues such as ‘genuineness’ or ‘authenticity’ of such ‘heritage’—a discourse which is beyond the remit of this paper.

6. Conclusions

The main function of German Christmas markets today rests primarily in the social and experiential dimensions. The experiential dimension is formed out of a combination of all visual, auditory, and olfactory components perceived by visitors in the space. The prevalence of COVID-19 has meant that traditional Christmas markets were largely, if not entirely, absent from the 2020 festive calendar in Germany. While augmented Christmas markets and virtual reality were employed to offer some semblance of normality, these offered limited experiential interactivity for the visitor, and the social and experiential dimensions of the traditional markets were largely lost over the majority of the Christmas period. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic here provides an opportunity to consider how complex multisensory interactive heritage such as German Christmas markets should be more thoroughly researched and appropriately documented in future heritage programs.

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