

Is the Wissenschaftsball really the best ball in Vienna? A pseudo-scientific review, 10 years on

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DOI: 10.25012025/sciball
<http://dx.doi.org/10.25012025/sciball>

Abstract The inaugural Wiener Ball der Wissenschaften (Wissenschaftsball) in 2015 has been described as “the best ball in Vienna”, a testimony the ball organisers continue to display on its homepage ten years later. In this paper, we revisit this statement using a pseudo-scientific approach to evaluate the robustness of the claim. Results suggest that the claim can indeed be upheld, while offering some recommendations for further improvements in the next decade.

Keywords *Wissenschaftsball, Vienna, event evaluation, sustainability, impact*

I. INTRODUCTION

IN January 2015, we described the inaugural Wiener Ball der Wissenschaften (*Wissenschaftsball*) as “the best ball in Vienna” [1]. While the seminal value of this claim cannot be disputed, the exploratory nature of the original field research raises the question of whether the Wissenschaftsball really is the best ball in Vienna and if the robustness of this claim can be validated through a (pseudo-)scientific analysis.

In this paper, we review the Wissenschaftsball ten years after its debut and examine whether it can, indeed, be claimed the best ball in Vienna. In order to be able to uphold any claims of being “the best” ball in Vienna, it is essential to take a critical perspective towards such superlative evaluations. What does being “the best” constitute in a city that holds over 450 balls every year? How can such a subjective evaluation be supported by scientific methods?

Of course, it could be argued that a quantitative survey might be considered the most robust approach to measure attitudinal claims; however, it is regrettably beyond the scope of this study to collect data from a sufficiently large sample of ballgoers who have themselves visited an adequate number and variety of balls to provide a data set that will allow us to make any claims of validity. Likewise, the available funding meant it was not possible to conduct an extensive qualitative ethnographic study comparing the Wissenschaftsball with other major Viennese balls such as the Opernball.

Consequently, this paper lays the groundwork for future empirical research by first presenting a conceptual framework for the claim of being “the best” ball and then evaluating the Wissenschaftsball against this framework with a combination of secondary data and auto-ethnographic reflection on the

author’s own experience of regularly attending the Wissenschaftsball over its first decade. The paper ends with a brief conclusion and recommendations for the future development of the Wissenschaftsball.

II. “THE BEST BALL IN VIENNA”: A CONCEPTUAL FRAME

Reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the Wissenschaftsball itself, the conceptual frame draws on literature from a range of disciplines. Brown et al.’s review on event evaluation draws attention to the continuing importance of basic applications such as cost-benefit/ROI measures while also highlighting the need to consider (then) newer paradigms such as the triple-bottom-line (TBL) integrating sustainability perspectives such as environmental costs and socio-cultural value [2]. In order to measure such socio-cultural value, we draw primarily on Armbrecht’s six-factor scale for measuring the perceived value of cultural institutions, which comprises items relating to image, social, education and skills, health, identity and economic development [3], as well as Dowell et al.’s discussion of value creation at cultural events [4]. Additionally, given that the Wissenschaftsball is officially hosted by the Wolfgang Pauli Institute [5], a federally-funded organisation supporting international and interdisciplinary research as well as the promotion of Vienna as a centre of excellence for the global academic community, we also examine the Wissenschaftsball’s activities in light of Lindgreen et al.’s more recent conceptualisation of how to define and measure societal value for academic research [6]. By triangulating these perspectives, we hope to provide a holistic frame that allows us to substantiate the claim that the Wissenschaftsball is indeed the best ball in Vienna.

III. FINDINGS

As the internal cost structure of the Wissenschaftsball was not available to the authors, we have based our cost-benefit/ROI analysis on the value for the external stakeholders, i.e. the ball attendees. As a simple baseline comparison, we analysed the cost of the ball tickets for all the balls mentioned on the Vienna tourist board's ball season webpage [7], assuming these are the largest and most widely accessible, where the data was available on the ball organisers' respective homepages (see Figure 1).

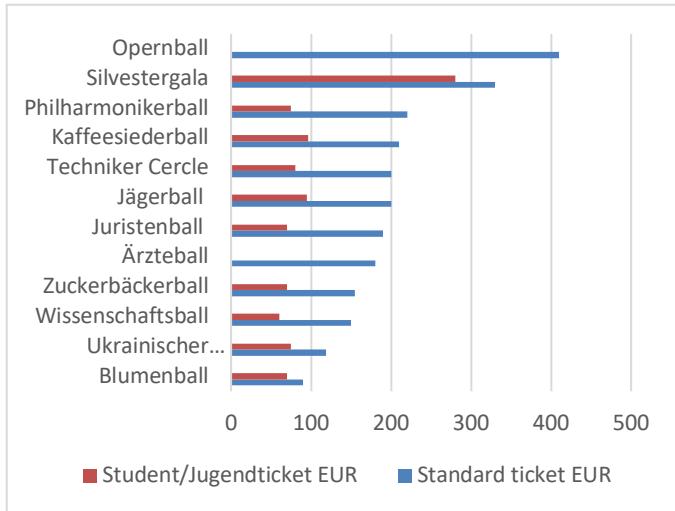


Figure 1. Ticket price (source: ball homepages)

An analysis of the balls' programmes revealed that all have a similar traditional structure comprising an official opening including the pageant of the debutant(e)s, an artistic performance at midnight and a quadrille, as well as usually offering alternative dancing such as salsa, tango, lounge and discos. Additionally, the balls typically showcase their disciplinary specialisations, e.g. flowers and a plant-based menu at the Blumenball or cake tastings and displays at the Zuckerbäckerball. Clearly, the quality of the opening and midnight performances can be assessed in terms of numbers of performers, reputation of the musicians, etc. which could be considered as influential in the perception of benefit (it should of course be noted that, as a Volksoper soloist and an internationally acclaimed artist nominated as for the "Rising Star" category at the 2024 International Opera Awards, the 2024 artist, Katia Ledoux, can be considered one of the city's top cultural assets). Nevertheless, in terms of straightforward financial outlay for a traditionally-structured ball in one of Vienna's prime venues (Hofburg, Rathaus, Musikverein), the Blumenball represents the best value for a standard ticket with the Wissenschaftsball just making the top three ranking, while for students the latter leads in affordability by a significant margin (€60 vs. €70+).

Turning to broader measures of value and Armbrecht's "economic development" factor, all the balls can be said to contribute to the economic value of the city. Here it is true that the long-established reputation of the Staatsoper and Philharmoniker might attract more international guests;

however, the explicitly international orientation of the WPI and its partner institutions, as well as hotel partners for ball attendees, stands out in this respect. While the Blumenball offers vegetarian and vegan options in their catering, the focus lies on the creativity and skill of the city's gardeners [8]. A further dimension of sustainability considerations, relating to age and gender equality and covered by the "social" and "health" factors of Armbrecht's scale, is the integration of over-26-year-olds into the pageant of the debutant(e)s. Furthermore, the inclusion of same-sex dancers among the debutant(e)s, the engagement of queer performers such as Ledoux and the Schmusechor (2024), and the explicitly unisex dresscode make the Wissenschaftsball one of the most LGBTQIA+-friendly of the traditional balls (obviously excluding the Diversity Ball and Regenbogenball). In this respect, Lindgreen et al.'s paper on academic impact highlights the tension between being able to "satisfy the requirements and norms of their peers" [6] while also meeting Reale et al.'s definition as "research which breaks the dominant paradigm" [9]. While respecting the expected traditional structures of a Viennese ball, the Wissenschaftsball nevertheless succeeds in subverting such paradigms in subtle yet significant ways. Indeed, some of these practices have now been adopted by other major balls, demonstrating the Wissenschaftsball's social impact. Additionally, with Austria falling below the EU average on ILGA-Europe's Rainbow Map of legal and policy practices for LGBTI people in 2024 [10], such innovations are essential for improving the attractiveness of a region, contributing to the "image" factor of Armbrecht's scale.^a

While these innovations clearly contribute to concepts of "novelty" value, Dowell et al. also draw attention to the satisfaction of the desire for knowledge, or "epistemic value" [4], manifested in the ball's explicitly science-oriented focus and programme points provided by the city's universities, research centres and museums. Moreover, Dowell et al. highlight the importance of co-creation and "emotional value" that arise from being an active participant in the event. Where other balls' midnight artistic performances highlight the distinction between performer and audience before transitioning into the participant-centred quadrille, the Wissenschaftsball's now ritualised sing-along of the *Europahymne*, Beethoven's "Ode to Joy", not only underlines Armbrecht's "identity" factor but also presents a moment where the audience become the performers, co-creating a climactic point in the ball's programme.

Finally, the Wissenschaftsball was designed to provide a shared space for disseminating research and knowledge in a creative, accessible yet academically sound manner. While the guild nature of the Viennese balls means that even today they are still used to showcase leaders in their field, to the author's knowledge the Wissenschaftsball is the only one that conducts active data collection and hands-on participation in the discipline as an integral part of the ball programme. This sets it apart in terms of Lindgreen et al.'s concept of societal impact, which includes elements such as service to society, stakeholder involvement and collaborative research, particularly with non-academic partners [6]. Likewise, the selection of guests of honour has not only included leaders in their discipline such as a Nobel-prize winner (Anton Zeilinger, 2024) but also those

tackling systemic bias in public knowledge repositories such as Wikipedia (Jessica Wade, 2024) and collaborating across political divides (Oksana Bilous and Sofia Kantorovich, 2023). It is thus unique in the Viennese ball landscape with regard to the “education and skills” factor of Armbrecht’s cultural value scale, outperforming the other balls across the entire model.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ten years after the inaugural Wissenschaftsball in 2015, this paper revisits the claim that it is “the best ball in Vienna”. Of course, the main limitation of the study is its largely theoretical nature, making a comprehensive and systematic empirical study a promising avenue for future research. Nevertheless, drawing on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework integrating perspectives from event management, cultural management, marketing, and academic evaluation, we find that the Wissenschaftsball not only offers some of the best value for money among the city’s most celebrated balls, but also outperforms the competition across a range of criteria from environmental sustainability and reducing inequality to the dissemination of knowledge and academic and social impact. Indeed, it can be linked to several of the SDGs, such as SDG4 (quality education), SDG5 (gender equality), SDG9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), SDG13 (climate action) and SDG16 (peace, justice and strong institutions).

Recommendations for further improving value for the ball’s stakeholders centre around continuing to strengthen this commitment to innovation and inclusion, which represents its main USP. For example, the gender-neutral approach implemented in the dresscode could be more consistently reflected in the use of more inclusive language when addressing the ball’s attendees (e.g. “Sehr geehrte Gäste” or “Liebe Forschende, liebe Tanzende” rather than the binary “Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren”). Additionally, while the inclusion of sign-language interpreters in 2024 was a welcome addition to increase accessibility, anecdotal evidence suggests that hijabi-wearing members of the Muslim academic community in Vienna would appreciate efforts to feel more represented.^b A concrete recommendation to this end could be inviting prominent hijabi scholars, and communicating the dresscode more clearly with regard to encouraging national dress / traditional clothing (e.g. kilts, sarees, etc.), as ‘full dress uniform’ is somewhat misleading. These are, however, easily addressed.

To conclude, the Wissenschaftsball’s first decade has seen it become firmly established in the Viennese ball landscape. The ball demonstrates a strong performance across Ambrecht’s six-factor model as well as integrating aspects of successful cultural event management and academic impact, making it unique across all the major balls. All in all, based on these criteria, we can thus affirm that the Wissenschaftsball is indeed the best ball in Vienna.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author was granted a substantial discount on a standard ticket for the 2016 ball following the original, unsolicited comment sent by email. The present paper was also submitted unsolicited, and received a generous compensation of two standard tickets in return.

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ENDNOTES

^a These were the figures initially available at the time of writing. While we certainly do not claim that correlation equals causation, Austria has been able to improve its score to 53.98% in 2025, above the EU average.

^b Thank you to the (not so anonymous) reviewer, who pointed out that the feedback from the Muslim academic community in general has been very positive due to the high level of safety and relatively low level of inebriation that characterises the Wissenschaftsball.

Biographical note

Dr. Miya **Komori-Glatz** is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Business Communication, WU Vienna University of Economics and Business. Having completed her first degree at the University of Cambridge, she continued her studies at the University of Vienna. While her main research interests examine the intersection of language, communication, business and higher education, her broader interests include the intersection of Wien, Wein und Walzer.