

Academic Paper

The Perspectives of Event Experience Post Covid-19: Insights of the Stakeholders in Event Education

Belinda Fong Chong Lynn

School of Hospitality & Service Management, Sunway University

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Belinda Fong Chong Lynn

School of Hospitality & Service Management, Sunway University

Research Paper

Corresponding Author:

Belinda Fong Chong Lynn,
School of Hospitality &
Service Management,
Sunway University

E-mail:

belindaf@sunway.edu.my

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ABSTRACT: In the events sector, research on the event experience is gaining more and more significance. Active, pleasure-seeking customers seek "fantasy, emotions, and fun" via consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), which has helped to boost experience marketing by emphasising the need to amuse, thrill, and emotionally connect with consumers through their consuming experience (Schmitt, 1999). According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), authentic, individualised experiences produced via active interaction are more valuable than objects or services. As the number of events increases, event organisers are under increased pressure to provide distinctive experiences in order to maintain a competitive advantage (Geus, Richards, & Toepoel, 2013). This working paper intends to investigate the knowledge of event experience education management in Malaysia, particularly in post-COVID event planning where the event experience must be carried over to both physical and virtual platforms. The planning and curriculum design for adequate operationalisation and assessment of event experiences education and skills will need to change, and determining how to implement this change will provide more accurate relevance and useful insights for event academics and the industry, as well as current and prospective students in Malaysia.

KEYWORDS: *Events, Events Experience, Events Education, Post-COVID-19, Events Management*

1.0 Introduction

Experience is a core product of the events, which is critical for surviving and gaining a competitive edge in the market (Manthiou, Lee, & Tang, 2011). Otto and Ritchie (1996) define 'experience' as "a

subjective mental state perceived by visitors throughout a service contact” (p. 166). Earlier research has offered important insights into the features of the event experience, both in terms of design and administration, as seen in works of Brown (2014), Monroe (2006), Silvers (2012) and Matthews (2008), as well as on motivation and pleasure (Morgan, 2009; Getz, 2012).

Modern event management requires the delivery of experience or experience possibilities. Events give attendees with new perspectives and opportunity to connect in a community experience where novelty is guaranteed since they are unusual and temporally different (Tassiopoulos, 2010). Events are concerned with the variety of human experiences connected with attending or being influenced by a planned event, and hence make up a significant portion of the experience industry (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). An experience, according to Schmitt (1999), is defined as “private occurrences (moments) that occur as a consequence of a stimulus that creates a response that moves the whole living organism.” An interactive emotion may be created by a product, service, or event that alters physical and cognitive levels over time (Diller, Shedroff, & Rhea, 2008). This list includes sensory, symbolic, temporal, and meaningful sensations. Understanding the nature and character of this experience is difficult, however, due to its subtle, varied, and shifting nature (Rossman & Schlatter, 2003; Ooi, 2005; Getz, 2012).

The experience economy (4Es), created by Pine and Gilmore (1999), encompasses educational, entertainment, escapism, and aesthetics experiences. According to the experience economy, people want unique experiences beyond just purchasing items and receiving services, since constant, high levels of product and service quality can no longer be used to distinguish customers’ choices. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), the industry must change their attention from the “delivery-focused” service economy, which prioritises high quality services, to the “staged” experience economy, which prioritises creating a memorable consuming experience. Schmitt (1999) further explained that positive and extraordinary encounters stimulate customers’ emotions and sensations, making them loyal and devoted to the brand. Sheth and Mittal (2004) defined emotion to be the “knowledge of some physiological arousal followed by a behavioural reaction, as well as the perceived importance of both”. A pleasurable encounter affects clients’ emotions, stays with them for a long time, and influences their subsequent behaviour. The impact of experience on emotion, affect, cognition, and behaviour has been validated by Allen, Machleit, and Kleine (1992), Mano & Oliver (1993), and Westbrook & Oliver (1991).

Undoubtedly, it is important to note that the experiential element in events boosts client satisfaction. Schmitt (1999) defines the experiential element as a way to create experiences that will be felt by customers when using products or services through the five senses (sense), affective experience (feel), creative thinking experiences (think), customer experiences related to the body in physical behaviour and lifestyle, as well as with experiences as a result of interaction with other people (act), and finally, creating experiences connected to social circumstances, lifestyle, and social situations. Positive experiences in places the consumer likes will build customer contentment. According to Fiore and Jeoung (2007), “new demand for distinctive and unforgettable experiences demands enterprises to provide a distinct value-added supply for goods and services that have already attained a high degree of functional quality.” This is also evident in event tourism and food tourism where attendees may immerse themselves in a region’s culture and traditions, making the experience unique and personal

(Coppola, 2016).

Because customer experience is developed and impacted by both internal and external factors (Verhoef et al., 2009), the customer experience should be seen holistically (Gentile et al., 2007). This comprehensive definition of customer experience requires a better understanding of the numerous aspects that impact the customer's experience (Verhoef et al., 2009), more so following the post-pandemic era. Virtual events, hybrid events, supplemented integrated platforms, as well as the extension of the content to the online platform from the physical event and many more are what attendees are hoping to see more and more. Therefore, this explanatory paper aims to investigate the insights of the events education stakeholders to further understand the current impact of event management education, the educational preparedness and how to meet the demands of the events industry post-COVID-19.

2.0 The Event Experience

Event experiences are part of the leisure experience domain, and while previous research has provided useful insights into the qualities of such a leisure experience, there is a lack of understanding of the event experience in terms of design and management. The majority of study on event experience has been on motivation and enjoyment rather than the event itself (Morgan, 2008; Getz, 2010). An event experience can start before the event terrain is reached and will last until the event is over. 'Festival goers leave with a variety of memories, but the fun doesn't end there. Festival visitors will have opinions on the festival and will engage in particular behaviours as a result of their visit, such as uploading images to websites, sharing stories to their friends, purchasing music from performers, purchasing tickets for the next edition, and so on.' (Van Vliet, 2012). As a result, the whole experience is almost always far larger than the activity on the ground. In the case of outdoor recreation, it has been observed that the entire experience is a package deal; each component has the power to provide diverse experiences, and all components are required (Clawson & Knetsch, 1966).

As earlier mentioned, though researchers such as Brown (2014), Monroe (2006), Silvers (2012), and Matthews (2008), who provided vital insights into the event experience in terms of both design and administration, whilst Morgan (2009) and Getz (2012) looked into motivation and enjoyment, there is still a gap existing into how these research is translated into the designing of the event education curriculum, as well as the delivery carried out by the event stakeholders. In the event industry, more research and studies are required to understand the holistic event experience (Getz, 2012), where previous research has shown a vast gap between industry-required and taught capabilities especially in most event management curriculum (Beaven & Wright, 2006; Junek, Lockstone, & Mair, 2009; Park & K., 2015). Active and enjoyment-seeking customers seek "fantasy, emotions, and fun" via consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), which has helped to boost experience marketing by emphasising the need to amuse, thrill, and emotionally touch consumers through their consuming experience (Schmitt, 1999). According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), authentic, individualised experiences produced via active interaction are more valuable than objects or services. As the number of both leisure and corporate events increases, event organisers are under increased pressure to provide distinctive experiences in order to maintain a competitive advantage (Geus, Richards, &

Toepoel, 2013). This is particularly true for post-COVID event planning, since hybrid and virtual event experiences are now a reality. Even though thorough operationalisation and evaluation of event experiences should provide significant insights for both academics and management, holistic event experiences have been largely ignored in the majority of previous research.

In the field of event management, design should be seen as crucial to the success of an event since it leads to enhancements at all levels of the event (Brown & James, 2004). Priority is given to the interaction between the event organiser and the experience rather than a preconceived set of activities (the design) on the side of the event organiser. As previously said, it is difficult to comprehend the nature of a genuine experience and the relationship between the experience creator and the experience receiver. It is believed, however, that event experience design models may be used to anticipate the quality and kind of experiences in a substantial manner (Shedroff, 2001; Silvers, 2012; Rossman & Schlatter, 2003). These models may be utilised to give different content and features that help identify event categories based on size, type, context, and content (Shone & Parry, 2004; Silvers, 2012; Van Der Wagen & Carlos, 2005; Bowdin, Allen, O'Toole, Harris, & McDonnell, 2010). The notion of categorising events according to their content involves a variety of participant experiences, such as feelings, emotions, and values. It is crucial to have structures and technologies in place that enable the creation of such experiences.

3.0 The Shift in Event Education

Due to the current Covid-19 epidemic, what was formerly considered conventional in the business has now expanded into new worlds and dimensions of events, astonishing and stunning stakeholders and attendees alike. As a result, there is a significant need for education and training programmes in event management and operations, with the skillsets and competencies required to bring novel event ideas to life (Miranda-Fernandez, 2019). However, in making this happen, it has to be understood that whilst the management and operations of events is the mind and body, the understanding of the event design and experience is the heart and soul.

Individuals' "experience" gained through attending events is gaining popularity in academics and the professional sector. Because of its subjective character, the study of experience has now been extended to fields other than psychology, sociology, and philosophy, including marketing and management (Berridge, 2014). Many academics and researchers in the subject of consumer behaviour have researched how customers' motivations and behaviour have developed through time, with an emphasis on both the utilitarian and hedonistic elements of the equation. How might these concepts and practises be applied to the event experience? As event expert Getz (2007, p.10) contends, "If we cannot clearly articulate what the event experience is, then how can it be planned or designed? If we do not understand what it means to people, then how can it be important?"

Consumer experience is formed and impacted by factors both within and beyond the control of service providers (Verheof, et al., 2009). Consequently, customer experience is best understood from a comprehensive standpoint (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007). This holistic conceptualization

of the customer experience implies that the research of customer experience requires a broader understanding of the multiple factors that affect the customer's experience (Verheef, et al., 2009); otherwise, it would be quite one-dimensional, with a focus on business management and/or operational concentrations, rather than the overall, which also includes experience management.

To encourage desired customer experiences, service providers must learn to create the right setting and environment with elements that enable customers to connect with the service in a personal, memorable way (Schmitt B. , 1999b). This will result in customer happiness and, eventually, customer loyalty (Gupta & Vajic, 2000), as well as market competitiveness and conformity with the endemic's new trend.

The opportunity to connect directly with the events industry is one of the most significant aspects of event education, and has been practiced and carried out in all event curricula in order to carry across the requirement of needed skillsets and knowledge (Ryan, 2016). This is why the majority of event management programmes developed to date emphasise on the physical hands-on operations and management – the “how to” and “what to”. This is also due to the fact that the environment in which people interact is structured to achieve a variety of administrative purposes, ranging from customer satisfaction to maximising the financial return of the venue or programme offered (Getz & Wicks, 1994; Perry, Foley, & Rumpf, 1996; Stafford, 1994).

Hence, revamping the event education curriculum in close collaboration with the industry is critical at this time in order to place the proper focus not only on the numerous skill-sets and knowledge as required by the industry, but also on the soft skills, the character-building, and the needed mental strength and capacity. Higher education institutions (HEIs) and business must form stronger alliances and collaborate more effectively to provide an all-around job-ready graduates in the post-COVID-19 environment. By improving education, educators and institutions want to boost graduates' employability and quality (Junek, Lockstone, & Mair, 2009) and ensuring that education satisfies industry standards (Harris V. , 2004). This is reflected in studies discussing the skills and knowledge needed for graduates (Arcodia, Novais, & Le, 2020), the ideal event management curriculum (Nelson & Rutherford Silvers, 2009; Ryan, 2016), or the balance between systematic knowledge creation/theory development (Getz, 2012), as well as students' practical industry exposure (Beaven & Wright, 2006; Sperstad & Cecil, 2011). International event education situations are especially significant for quality discussions owing to cultural variations and diverse educational and management systems (Banner, 2016; Hou, Montgomery, & McDowell, 2014; Werner & Ding, 2020).

That being said, as the primary participants in the three-way relationship, students are the ones to enjoy the advantages of the practical programmes. Being technically and intellectually prepared, as well as having an appropriate degree of learner autonomy, are crucial requirements for successful practical learning programmes. It was found by event researchers that the industry felt that event management graduates are lacking in essential and basic knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) to produce effective events (Baum, Lockstone-Binney, & Robertson, 2013; Kashaf, 2015; Ledger, 2013). Therefore, students and recent graduates must be made aware of their specific responsibilities for obtaining the necessary skills and actively participating in boosting their future employability.

There must also be an understanding that learning does not stop after acquiring a bachelor's or master's degree, since the complex and dynamic event environment need continuing upskilling and lifelong learning of talents and all stakeholders involved in the organisation. Students need to develop the growth mindset (Succi & Canovi, 2020) where the acknowledgment and understanding exists that skills and mental strength can be continuously honed through effort and practice, rather than the fixed mindset, where they believe that their intelligence and skill sets are unchangeable. In having the correct mindset from the very beginning, they will be able to cultivate the passion and eagerness to improve and learn. Students with a growth mindset see failures as stepping stones on the path to success, consequently, those who believe they have the potential to develop, will perceive challenges and constructive criticism as opportunities to learn and improve, rather than being easily disappointed, hurt and disillusioned. Additionally, a more refined curricula will be able to facilitate leadership growth by focusing on students' vertical development (Spence, Gess, McDonald, & Jowdy, 2009). According to Cook-Greuter (2000, p. 276), vertical development is defined as "how we change our interpretations of experience and how we transform our views of reality".

Therefore, to comprehend how the futures of education and the event industry will continually develop, educators and industry professionals will need to continue to remain in alignment with one another. Knowing how the job market operates, the hard and soft skills students will need, the mental strength and endurance, and the ways in which the many education stakeholders may support students in acquiring those abilities are all part of being informed. It is vital to that the students be equipped not just in terms of general design and administration, but also in terms of the potential experiences and brand associations that participants will desire (Getz & Wicks, 1994; Harris & Jago, 1999; Junek, Lockstone, & Mair, 2009; Perry, Foley, & Rumpf, 1996; Royal & Jago, 1998; Stafford, 1994; Wang & Tsai, 2014).

4.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, although the debate of the required skills and knowledge coupled with the appropriate event management curriculum have long been on-going between researchers and practitioners (Nelson & Rutherford Silvers, 2009; Ryan, 2016), there is no doubt of a divide between industry and academia. As Harris (2004) has pointed out, educators and the industry need to interact better and continuously to develop more useful and relevant research and education programmes for all the stakeholders involved. As Arcodia et al. (2020) have argued the importance for research in this area so that "educational providers have confidence in their programmes; event management aspirants have trust in the appositeness of the education and training available; and the industry is assured that the skills taught, and the attributes encouraged are used as a platform for increased professionalization" (p. 663). With COVID-19 having a major influence on the worldwide event business, making stakeholders pay careful attention to industry trends and think on its future, this is the most appropriate time to relook into the programmes and re-evaluate their direction in order for the graduates to be fully equipped for the new shift towards achieving a holistic event experience.

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