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Re-imagining and transforming events: Insights from the Australian events industry

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ABSTRACT: Over the past year, COVID-19 has hit the events industry with unprecedented force, resulting in event cancellations, reduced employment and salary cuts, with most event organisations moving either partially or fully to virtual events. Most challenging is the uncertainty in regard to the way(s) that events will be reshaped and rejuvenated. Our aim in this study is to discover how practitioners interpret the pandemic in relation to events and how events are reimagined and transformed in a pandemic world. Theories relating to transformative experiences and resilience are used to explore the phenomenon. This study contributes a framework based on qualitative insights by event professionals, suggesting the industry should focus on key priorities for event transformation, namely connectivity, meaningful experience design, adaptive capacity and education and, finally, practitioner well-being. Research limitations are discussed, and future research is proposed.

KEYWORDS: event education, event experiences, event industry, human connectivity, meaningful events, transformation

Introduction

COVID-19 struck the events industry with unprecedented force, resulting in the cancellation of events, reduced levels of employment, and salary cuts. The shutdown of businesses as well as event cancellations globally has had a negative impact on the capacity of event companies to function effectively or plan for a sustainable future. While some businesses were able to pivot and diversify their services (Norris et al., 2021), others shut down completely and show no signs of recovery. However, large conference centres offered their space for different industry stakeholders to come together and exchange ideas on food solutions (Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre, 2020) while other small business owners offered free webinars to exchange ideas and share knowledge on the road to business recovery (Stayches, 2021).

In Australia, associations and governments launched various programmes to coach business operators and provide strategies for well-being and support. For example, the Victoria Tourism Industry Council (VTIC) launched the VTIC industry support hub for its business members (2021), while the Australian government provided financial support to businesses during the latest lockdown stages. However, it has yet to be determined how and when the event industry will recover and be transformed. Academics (Sharma et al., 2021) have called for research in the industry, specifically on how business owners interpret the pandemic impact. Researchers have also suggested that the pandemic has created opportunities for industry transformation (Lew et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020). Questioning the alignment

between the event industry and educational programmes, Arcodia et al. (2020) call for further research on the skills and attributes required by this industry because they claim that there is a disconnect between industry needs and event management curricula. The influence of the pandemic means that event management curricula need to be adapted to a new set of industry needs. Therefore, it is important to explore event managerial views on: (1) how the event impact is translated; (2) the opportunities that have arisen as a result of the pandemic; and (3) the key skills and attributes that are required if the industry is to move forward. It is the purpose of this article to explore managerial perspectives, while also contributing a theoretical framework on the key foci that will reshape the event industry. Accordingly, the structure of our article is as follows: firstly, we use a theoretical framework on transformative and resilience-related theories to help us understand the phenomenon; we then present exploratory findings based on empirical research undertaken. Finally, we design a framework drawn from qualitative data that contributes insights on the theoretical and practical implications for the events industry.

Literature review

Transformation

The concept of transformation dates back to Mezirow (1997) who conceptualised transformative learning theories demonstrating how learning environments can emotionally prepare and change learners' mindsets. Drawing from psychology, Kottler (1997) claimed that consumers may change their worldview

and personally transform via well-planned, customised travel experiences. The link between learning and travel is also reflected in studies by Morgan (2010) who highlighted the influence of cultural elements on the broadening of mindsets. Taking a global focus, Rosenbaum (2015) and Fisk et al. (2016) used transformative service research (TSR) theories to understand global phenomena and contribute to societal well-being. TSR has been applied in contexts such as refugee crises (Nasr & Fisk, 2019) with frameworks designed to improve collaborative and service exchange systems (Previte & Robertson, 2019), while Sedgley et al. (2011) focused on social inclusion and human rights. While researchers have expressed diverse views regarding the primary focus of TSR, all authors emphasise the human element and societal well-being. Indeed, as a result of the pandemic, the protection and prioritisation of the well-being of humans has become the top priority. The need for collaboration among stakeholders has been discussed across the broader hotel and hospitality industry (Melissen et al., 2016). Fisk et al. (2020) calls for interdisciplinary collaboration among academics to exchange ideas and join research teams whose goal is to improve human well-being. Via the newly established platform known as SERVCollab, Fisk et al. (2020) invite researchers to collaborate in order to address global issues such as social inclusion, human suffering and well-being, to name a few.

Human connectivity and experiences

Even prior to the pandemic, Sheldon (2020) had developed a theoretical model demonstrating how human connectivity should be at the forefront of research studies. The theoretical model comprised four key concepts that contribute to transformation: (1) deep human connectivity; (2) engaged contribution; (3) deep environmental connectivity; and (4) self-inquiry. Sheldon (2020) argued that deep connectivity can be achieved when humans are mobile and take part in special events in local communities. This may be possible on the road to recovery from the pandemic as humans have already shown signs of pivoting and adopting innovative practices to protect the environment and remain connected. Indeed, during the pandemic, events that pivoted and turned to virtual platforms, resulted from a human need to connect (Fasheh et al., 2020). This suggests that the design of event experiences should include elements that facilitate human transformation as seen in festival design experiences (Neuhofer et al., 2020) and with engaged contribution in mind (Sheldon, 2020).

The need for transformative experiences was noted long before the pandemic. Pine and Gilmore (2014), pioneers of the experience economy, had already proposed that transformation has become a necessity, claiming we are now in the era of the transformation economy. In a recent study, Neuhofer et al. (2020) found that attendees experienced personal transformation and elements of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) during a festival and under the influence of positive emotions. Further, the surroundings and the various environmental elements, known as servicescape elements (Singleton & Losekoot, 2020), can help to create or influence a transformative experience. Accordingly, there are key elements that facilitate event transformation, and these may also enhance human connectivity. Various authors (Fisk et al., 2020; Neuhofer et al., 2020; Sheldon, 2020) agree that the design of events with the human element as the key focus will facilitate a transformative experience. As the pandemic forced industry disruption (Sigala, 2020), it is important to consider how event practitioners are

adapting to the crisis and the role of technology in the future design of transformative experiences.

Human capacity and technology

In navigating the road to business recovery, consumers quickly adopted technology tools. Arcodia et al. (2020) call for research on the skills required for event curricula programmes in order to train future event managers. With the pandemic impact, event transformation that implemented a range of technology became a necessity. Professional conference organisers were forced to learn new technologies to deliver their business events in order to avoid cancellation (Council for Australian Tourism and Hospitality Education [CAUTHE], 2021; Sustainable Event Alliance, 2021), while mass festivals suffered automatic cancellation. This enforced adaptation meant that employees and employers needed immediate training, thereby adding to the already increased workloads of event managers (Clark et al., 2017). These authors claim that event managers need to engage in ongoing learning in order to keep abreast of technological advancements.

However, with the already increased workloads, the well-being of individuals and businesses is affected; hence, the issue of resilience is now at the forefront of theoretical studies on tourism business recovery (Prayag, 2020; Sigala, 2020). From an industry perspective, in a bibliometric study of 35 articles undertaken by Sharma et al. (2021), the authors contributed a resilience framework that proposes four key factors for recovery: government response, technology innovation, local belongingness, and consumer and employee confidence. Although resilience did not emerge as a new concept resulting from the pandemic, the need for resilience programmes was identified prior to the pandemic, with Prayag (2020) calling for frameworks that addressed issues such as sustainable destination management.

With regard to human capital, Clark et al. (2017) discussed the need to review human issues relating to workloads and the imbalance detected in the events industry. For example, in the hospitality and events industry, managers may run events during weekends or outside working hours with extra human resource input, without receiving extra remuneration. This may lead to personal burnout and stress following the event. Therefore, resilience extends from individual to collective well-being, while also showing care for the environment. With the increase in online seminars on how to survive the pandemic, and the well-being issues that have arisen as a result of COVID-19, understanding how event skills and attributes are changing over time is important (Arcodia et al. 2020).

At the core of these issues lies the need for human well-being and connectivity (Sheldon, 2020). The literature shows that human connectivity should be a priority when designing an event experience, especially given the pre-pandemic trend to include personalised elements. With the pandemic influencing the transformation of events, it is unclear whether practitioners are prepared to maintain the level of transformation or revert to traditional ways of conducting events. There is little evidence of event managers' engagement in the transformed industry and the priorities that need to be considered when adapting to the new reality. This article seeks empirical insights from event managers and businesses, specifically on how they interpret the pandemic and how they see events being reset and reimagined. It is anticipated that these insights will clarify the skills and attributes required to strengthen the link between event

management curricula and industry, as this will guide future event management training programmes in uncertain times of transformation.

Research question

The key research questions are:
1. How do event practitioners interpret the pandemic?
2. How are events reimagined and transformed as a result of the pandemic?

Methodology

This study utilises experience-based approaches (Neuhofer et al., 2020) to understand the human perception of how industries are undergoing transformation as a result of the pandemic, with particular focus on the events industry. This research is exploratory and seeks to highlight issues and insights that have arisen over the past year. When exploring a new phenomenon, studies recommend undertaking interpretivist approaches (Losekoot & Hornby, 2019). Qualitative studies seek to understand broad perspectives of phenomena especially in relation to human issues (Creswell & Poth, 2017). For this study, we utilised semi-structured interviews as outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018). A purposive sampling approach was adopted in order to select interviewees who have industry experience and who represent diversity in terms of background, gender and age. This approach allowed the researchers to use their judgement in selecting a sample that is most likely to address the research questions adequately (Robinson, 2014). Zoom was used for the interviews because it is convenient and time-saving, while at the same time enabling in-depth responses to be made (Gray et al., 2020). A thematic analysis was conducted of the data obtained from 16 semi-structured interviews, utilising QSR NVivo software (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). This analysis generated several patterns and exploratory insights.

Analysis and discussion

Most event practitioners agree that the events industry will bounce back post COVID-19. However, in the short to medium term, and even in the longer term, the events industry may look very different. A reshaped industry may have a better outlook, particularly if it is transformed and reimagined, more resilient, and more relevant to the needs of all stakeholders. Flexibility and adaptability arise as key attributes in the transformed industry, while technology will play a role in the future design of transformative experiences. Results also indicate, while skill development remains important, that managing workloads and practitioner well-being still remains an issue. This is an important finding, as it can influence the design of event management curricula. Findings demonstrate that managing heavy workloads forms part of human well-being and this needs to be prioritised and incorporated in future event management curricula.

Forming connections
Findings reveal that despite the challenges of the pandemic humans will always seek to connect. The adaptation of events to virtual platforms was a result of the need for social connection. Virtual elements will remain as a necessary component of events over the next few years until the pandemic is controlled.

Participants commented that events will rejuvenate as humans will always have the need to connect socially. As participant P13 noted: *humans crave social connection and when you don't have it and it's taken away, people go, "oh I actually miss that"*.

In future, the format of events will place stronger emphasis on the client's objectives in order to create social connectivity; therefore, event managers are urged to obtain a clear understanding of these objectives. Extending the notion of social connectivity, P12 noted that humans can feel fulfilled when also caring for the environment. Therefore, apart from connectivity, event managers need to consider issues such as corporate social responsibility when delivering customised event experiences. Connectivity can incorporate environmental goals which enable humans to connect with the environment while learning about key environmental issues. As P12 commented in relation to connectivity goals: *my job is to inspire* [clients] *so hopefully they* [clients] *spend their money in meaningful ways. So, there is an educated piece*. The design of meaningful experiences can incorporate the utilisation of local services and educating clients and guests on how to enrich their event experience by including environmental goals. Designing personalised experiences with environmental care in mind enhances human connectivity (Sheldon, 2020).

The forming of virtual connections was a key insight contributed by P6, who runs a sporting event business. P6 commented on the positive strategy of using virtual events as tools to communicate with participants globally. P6 discussed how businesses, who were depending solely on face-to-face events, were suddenly forced to refocus and change their priorities. For example, in some businesses, operational managers adopted consultancy roles in an attempt to help others. However, P6 used the virtual element resulting from the pandemic as a tool to enable his business to make global connections:

> Fundamentally, I think these days events are about data, and databases and virtual platforms give you the opportunity to have connections and conversations with your database and participants and the like 24/7, 365 and anywhere in the world...as opposed to just for a few punctuation marks through the year...

Meaningful experiences
When considering event goals and objectives, participant P9 commented on the importance of providing meaningful experiences to event volunteers, as they play a crucial role in the overall attendee experience. According to P9, events offer a sense of belonging (Kerwin et al., 2015) and can impart new skills to volunteers (Muskat & Mair, 2021); therefore, managers should identify motivational goals and incorporate these into the event delivery. However, because not all volunteers know why they wish to volunteer, P9 recommends having a procedure in place. P9 noted: *I have an application form...I ask them* [volunteers] *what do you want to learn? What do you want to get out of it?* P9 offers a mentoring system for volunteers who are unsure of their individual goals where they are matched with buddies throughout the event. P9 shows flexibility in being willing to change positions with volunteers so they can achieve personal fulfilment. Events then become opportunities for skills building and are enriched with meaningful personal experiences. P9 noted that to achieve skill enhancement and provide a sense of belonging, *volunteer roles need to have meaning for volunteers.*

P2 suggested a different means of achieving meaningful experiences. Given the cancellation of large-scale city events, organisers could design experiences in regional areas over a period of time, thus enhancing profiles which *otherwise may have gone unnoticed*. These customised experiences can include personalised elements that will provide a sense of authenticity. According to P2, the pandemic has opened up new worldviews for managers and customers. She noted: *Look at something different* and *design for a purpose*.

Examples, including a *beautiful garden lunch and theme* at a boutique winery in a regional area, suggest that experiences are now smaller and include a *purpose to travel*. Where social events might previously have had a particular celebratory purpose, P2 highlighted the need to add value to all types of events. For example, a charity element could be included in the event, as charities have been largely affected by the pandemic and are *desperate at the moment*. By including a charity in smaller events, P2 suggests that events *can change people's mindsets* and gives them the opportunity to contribute to corporate social responsibility causes. Regional wineries can impart information to their guests regarding regional produce, for instance, thus strengthening social connections in a shared learning environment.

Adaptive capacity and education

Recognising the importance of flexibility, P13 remains positive about the rejuvenation of events while admitting that it is up to individual businesses. He commented on the need to adapt businesses and provide solutions to ensure the continuity of events. P13's clients are seeking advice about the organisation of events under the COVID-19 requirements in order to maintain collaborations with partners. Thus, events become a tool to capture new relationships and build on existing partnerships. This can be done if businesses and event professionals are prepared to be flexible and adaptable to situations. P13 reflected: *There will be so many* [event] *opportunities if we're prepared to make our business relevant, focused and above all, adaptable.*

From being a professional conference organiser responsible for the delivery of face-to-face business events, P8 quickly adapted his business operational model to the delivery of online podcasts. This meant investing in new technology such as speakers, a microphone and subscribing to virtual platforms such as Zoom to interview key event personnel. The desire to connect and engage with people from the industry motivated P8 to invest time in learning how to use new technology tools, simultaneously acquiring new skills. In recognising the importance of technology as a way of adapting quickly to the new situation, P8 commented:

> The business event industry has definitely adapted very quickly, especially from the big tech companies that were able to utilise their resources pretty quickly and basically turned it overnight, whereas smaller clients may not have the money or technical expertise, so still trying to adapt...

P8 noted that audiovisual (AV) companies adapted their business models to offer virtual platforms in order to continue to offer customer service. In fact, P8 believes that the number of his business clients has increased, as the time required for planning a conference has been reduced significantly:

> Then there's been a myriad companies that have decided that they'll do virtual platforms in order to

service clients...now doing 15 clients a month... it [usually] *takes four to six weeks for an event manager to understand what their client wants to get it onsite and get it ready.* [Business events] *have been able to respond a lot quicker than sporting events.*

The importance of adapting events to virtual platforms and learning how to deliver online events was also recognised by P7. Despite her lack of direct knowledge about the delivery of virtual events, P7 leveraged her partnership with an AV company who supported her in her virtual event delivery. P7 soon learnt which platform was the most appropriate for her clients' needs and adapted to an online platform rather than cancelling the event altogether. P7 commented on the result as an opportunity for ongoing learning, flexibility and adaptability. Although P7 discovered that her online-delivery skills were limited, she recognised the importance of event partnerships in helping her adapt to virtual platforms, which in turn enabled her to maintain and continue to service her clients. She stated:

> Virtual events and organising a live in-house event are completely different set of skills...I ended up realising my limitations in terms of my technology and audio visual [capacity]...so I worked with an AV company and it went really well.

Self-care and customer well-being

Providing emotional support to staff became a priority for P13 who highlighted the need to ensure staff well-being by maintaining daily communication. Showing care for his own staff meant that staff will also show care for business clients. Maintaining the human connection in his business model assists P13 to strengthen relationships and connections; therefore, he decided to have formal and informal conversations to maintain a sense of business normality. P13 attempted to keep his staff informed about all business decisions while demonstrating genuine interest in their well-being and that of their families.

> We run Zoom calls...it's little things like that, remembering birthdays, chatting to them...and keeping communication going...to let them know this is going to happen...literally being positive. If I went and did the whole doom and gloom, then it wouldn't work.

P16 became a business recovery coach in order to provide support to small business owners for the overall well-being of their businesses, which in turn improved personal well-being. As hard as it was to make the difficult decision to let staff go, P16 recognised that it was more important to become resilient and take ownership of key business decisions. His coaching of small businesses gave these owners the confidence to change their financial strategy in order to adapt to the pandemic world. Via Zoom sessions, P16 offered business counselling, encouraging owners to take action to prepare themselves for business recovery. He noted:

> Coaching is something I have been doing for years. Just in genuine interest in helping others with the pragmatics of running a business...a lot of business owners know their craft but don't know how to run a business...The advice to businesses is very customised...One thing you have to tell them, there is no silver bullet...Now is the time, while you may not generate any income, what can you do to get your business ready when you do open again?

The emphasis on personal well-being was a key factor for P16. Under normal circumstances and prior to the pandemic, P16 worked long hours in order to deliver successful business events. He now feels that the pandemic presented the opportunity to reset and determine key strategies for ensuring his own well-being. To date, the issue of personal well-being in the events industry has been overlooked; therefore, P16 recommends taking the time to learn effective time-management skills in order to reduce the level of stress experienced when delivering events.

> *What I would like is resilience training…being able to cope with all the stress that comes with the job. People don't understand the pressure of the job we are put into; how to think on our feet and be resilient. There is a set of skills that people can learn…to understand themselves better…what pressure situations might look like. Resilience is something that can be taught. It's a set of skills that you can understand and use and certainly it's something that we need more of.*

Discussion

This exploratory research sought industry insights on the ways that events are reimagined in a pandemic world. The analysis revealed a need for connectivity and the exchange of ideas, together with understanding that customer needs are a priority on the road to recovery from the pandemic. The key concepts that have emerged from the data are: (1) human connectivity will remain strong; (2) meaning-based experiences will become a new design focus; (3) adaptive capacity is required; and (4) self-care and customer well-being have become a priority. Findings demonstrate that the need for human connectivity will always remain strong, as P13 identified. By nature, humans wish to socially connect; however, now the dimension of environmental connection has been added to the design and delivery of events. This is consistent with Sheldon (2020), whose framework for human and environmental connectivity stresses the important role that events play in facilitating those connections. The role of technology in facilitating those connections was also prominent in the findings of Fasheh et al. (2020) who maintained that connectivity can be achieved in times of isolation using virtual platforms.

Findings also revealed that there should be more focus on smaller events where attendees socially connect in smaller contexts that contain authentic elements in order to engage in meaning-based experiences. Indeed, Neuhofer et al. (2020) recommended the PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishments) model for exploring the types of meanings sought by festival attendees. By understanding the meaningful goals that individuals pursue, event organisers can design experiences accordingly. Further, experiences can be enhanced with meaningful connections by adding personalised elements and touchpoints (Singleton & Losekoot, 2020).

The current study also revealed that, when reimagining events, it is important to consider the meaningful goals set by volunteers themselves. Indeed, earlier work by Mulder et al. (2015) identified the transformational motives of volunteers who engaged in travel-based volunteer experiences. The volunteers at events are a crucial element of the attendee experience; therefore, understanding the types of meanings they pursue will enhance the overall event experience. The inclusion of meaningfulness in volunteer roles extends the theory by Neuhofer et al. (2020) on transformational design. Therefore, the current study extends the conceptual framework to include meaning-based experiences for volunteers who contribute to the rejuvenation and reimagining of events. The transformations that take place during event experiences are influenced by all players; therefore, the roles and motivations of volunteers should be considered in future studies.

A consistent theme in the interview data was the ability to be flexible and adapt to the pandemic. Research findings demonstrated that adaptation to virtual platforms helped businesses maintain and continue their staff and customer connections while managing their partner relationships. The use of technology to maintain connectivity and exchange ideas showed that industry practitioners and staff who adapt to new ways of thinking and learning new sets of technology skills have better chances of recovering and continuing to deliver services for client event experiences. Findings also showed stronger affiliations with partners who are able to contribute their skill sets in the delivery of virtual events. The role of technology is multifaceted: it rejuvenates events to ensure the viability of business; it allows consumers to connect; and it has become a necessary tool for everyday communication and client management.

Finally, the research contributes key insights on the well-being of event managers and business owners. The role of mentorship, explained by P16, reveals how important it is to maintain self-care and make the tough financial decisions required for stability and survival. Training in resilience is identified as crucial to moving forward in industry. Fisk et al.'s (2020) work on well-being confirms the need for individual and community care. This, of course, has implications for event programme curricula that perhaps do not include resilience training for future event professionals. Incorporating programmes on how to manage event operations as well as training in self-care and well-being should be part of curricula planning. Formal training and education in well-being may positively influence event workforce issues (Muskat & Mair, 2021), while reducing the challenges faced in heavy workloads (Clark et al. 2017). This study contributes a new concept which would benefit event educators when designing curricula and event training programmes. Effective time management and the acquisition of a resilience skill set will ensure that our industry remains positive and strong during event rejuvenation and transformation. The key concepts that are drawn from exploratory industry insights into the way that events can be reimagined are illustrated in Figure 1.

Conclusion and future research

In conclusion, the present study suggests a framework that will assist event practitioners to move forward with event experiences. Human connectivity will always be at the forefront of human needs. Accordingly, event experiences need to be designed with meaningful goals. Event managers will now need to invest time in understanding client needs in order to deliver personalised experiences. Furthermore, for the future of events management, ongoing learning and adaptability to virtual platforms are vital. The acquisition of resilience, as well as technology and time-management skills will go some way to ensure that this industry will be able to navigate a pathway to successful recovery. Because the well-being of consumers and
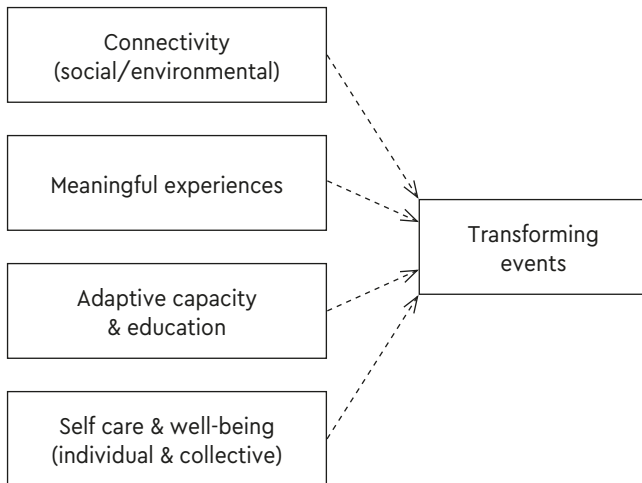
FIGURE 1: Theoretical framework for transforming events

businesses is a priority when making key business decisions, the introduction of mentoring sessions and business coaching may be the ways that business events can survive in the near future.

This study has several limitations. It took the perspective of event practitioners only. Future studies could consider the perspectives of other event stakeholders such as hotel and restaurant managers, customers, food suppliers, risk management personnel, and project specialists. Further, this study was undertaken during the pandemic. It is recommended that longitudinal studies be conducted over the next five to ten years to monitor business transformation on the road to economic recovery. Because technology will also contribute to event transformation, future studies could utilise virtual platforms to monitor client and partner engagement. Finally, quantitative approaches could help to generalise recommendations and industry implications.

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