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The 9th International Conference on Marketing and Retailing**EXPERIENCING VIRTUAL EVENTS: A CASE OF COVID-19**

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a significant impact on the event industry all over the world. Numerous events, festivals, conferences, gatherings and other functions have had to be postponed or even cancelled as states began adopting social distancing measures to combat the outbreak. Since then, virtual event has been introduced as an alternative. It is an occurrence of people gathering together not physically in the same location but are connected in a common environment. Understanding the event experience among event attendees which is related to the quality of the event is important for ensuring its success. Hence, this study aims to examine the role of event experience among event attendees towards their commitment to attend virtual events and to examine the role of service quality in attending an online event. A significant implication of this study helps event organizers examine the importance of event experience to achieve a successful virtual event organization.

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1. Introduction

All different kinds of events and functions including corporate activities and conferences had to be postponed or even cancelled as states began adopting social distancing measures to combat the COVID-19 outbreak. Since then, virtual events have been known and introduced as an alternative to physical events. A virtual event is an occurrence of people gathering together where some or all of the attendees are not physically in the same location but are connected in a common environment (Virtual Event Definition, 2012). Only video conferencing tools or a social media platform might be used to conduct a virtual event.

2. Literature Review

The sports industry is a significant contributor to the economic growth of many countries. Hence, the quality of events and sports event venues should be well managed (Lu et al., 2020) to ensure increased patronage for optimum profitability. The sports venue industry is no different from any other service industries – stiff competition is present within the industry due to an increasing number of new entrants offering slightly differentiated products and services.

Nonetheless, providing quality service in this industry (i.e. the sport venues), can be very challenging due to the nature and purposes of the establishments (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000; Çevik et al., 2017; Tsitskari et al., 2006). This may be very costly to venue owners and managers as reduction in user or customer satisfaction may lead to reduced loyalty, with switching of venues becoming a distinct possibility.

2.1. Event Commitment

Event commitment is something that will drive and also give new experiences of attending events to the attendees. Providing good quality of service to the attendees will be one of the big factors in measuring attendee's satisfaction. Alexandris and Lovelock (2001), as cited in Ho Voon, Abdullah, et al. (2014) stated that sports venues are associated with high-contact and people-processing services, which dramatically fluctuate with level of demand; the usage is extremely high during competition seasons. Besides, sport venues which provide services dealing with sports or fitness behaviours may exhibit more complex intangible associations than organizations dealing with transitory interactions such as banks. Supplementary services augment the core service, whilst contributing to the perceptions of service quality at a sports venue. Such services may include reservation, parking, billing, payment and use of toilets, and all of them may involve a high level of user contact. As such, service failures will most probably lead to negative emotional or unpleasant experiences, which will in turn impact the user satisfaction (US) negatively (Ho Voon, Lee, et al., 2014).

2.2. Service Quality (SERVQUAL)

SERVQUAL measurement is one of the significant measurement tools for firms to understand consumers' needs and wants by analysing the experience of consumers and customers' satisfaction on the

services provided. Firms need to understand the experience of customers and their perception of the service used to provide better services in order to attain the satisfaction of current customers and acquire new customers (Ghotbabadi et al., 2015). This gap model has inspired the literature about service quality over the years, being natural to apply to the events sector. Experiences are becoming increasingly important in events and festivals, which are prime manifestations of the experience economy and some authors have developed research in this area, bringing evidence about the quality of services (Menezes et al., 2020).

The service quality and a good responsiveness by event organizers may increase the satisfaction of the attendees and a good commitment to the future events (M. Three distinct dimensions of service quality: they are interaction quality which focuses on the interaction between staff and customers, the quality of the physical environment and finally the quality of outcomes obtained by customers including the fulfilment of a customer's expectations from using the service (Brady & Cronin, 2001). As the industry moves towards stiffer local and global competition, service quality is increasingly perceived as a critical operational factor that contributes to the overall organizational performance (Ho Voon, Abdullah, et al., 2014), and this includes the event organizations as well.

Reliability consists of the quality being trustworthy or performing consistently well. Although the effects of satisfaction commitment of an event organization have not been directly tested, the expectation that satisfaction drives commitment has obvious intuitive appeal (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014). It is assessed by checking the consistency of results across time, across different observers, and across parts of the test itself. For that reason, commitment to an event is important and not merely for the duration of the event but also means to build a pool for volunteers who are available for the future events (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014).

Functional value was strongly related to behavioral intentions. "Cost" was identified as a significant factor contributing to attendee loyalty (Jung & Tanford, 2017). The measurement of cost in those studies comprised the cost of transportation, accommodation, and registration. The excitement factor was positively related to both satisfaction and loyalty. "External activities" such as visiting the surrounding area, was one of the significant antecedents to convention choice and satisfaction (Tanford et al., 2012), as well as other events like festivals, product launch and business event.

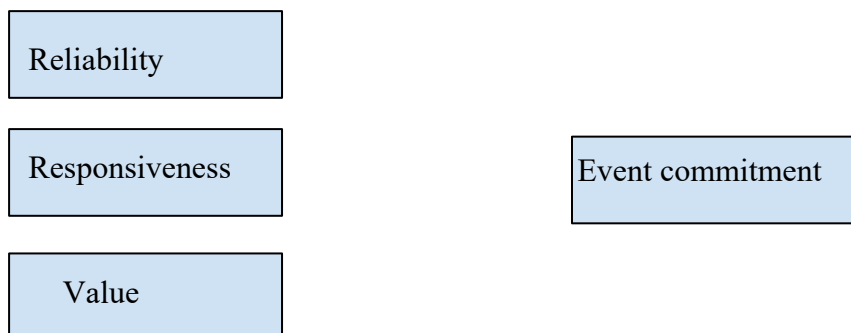


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Adapted from Ho Voon, Abdullah, et al. (2014)

3. Research Methods

The design of the study is correlational research (Seeram, 2019). The analysis developed in this study based on the examination of reliability, responsiveness, value and event commitment (refer Figure 1). For this research, the data was collected from participants who had experience and attended the virtual events during the restrictions or movement control order during the COVID-19 pandemic. Convenience sampling has been chosen as the method for this study consisting of 115 respondents. The survey was conducted by questionnaire through online distribution using Google form to get instant feedback from the participants of the events.

The development of the questionnaire was adapted from Ho Voon, Lee, et al. (2014) and guided by a review of the literature of the current study. The questionnaire was structured into four (4) sections, in which three (3) sections included the independent variables and one (1) section of dependent variable. The final questionnaire included questions on reliability, responsiveness, value, event commitment and participants' demographic information. Ordinal and nominal scale were used to measure the participants' demographic information, whilst reliability, responsiveness, value and event commitment were measured using Likert's scale. The data of the study was analyzed using linear regression statistical tests in an SPSS.

4. Findings

4.1. Demographic

The analysis data for demographic background of the participants is shown in Table 1. From the result, it shows that female participants (73%) is more than male participants (27%). The largest age group which participated in the virtual events is from 21 to 23 years old (61%). Participants among students which is 82 respondents (71.3%) contributed the highest numbers of respondents who attended the virtual events. Other than that, the result of demographics found that 22.7% of the respondents had attended virtual events more than 10 times, 4.3% had never attended virtual events, while the remaining 73% of the respondents had attended virtual events less than 10 times.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistic

	Factors	N	%
Gender	Female	84	73.00
	Male	31	27.00
Age Group	18-20	14	12.20
	21-23	61	53.00
	24-26	23	20.00
Occupation	Above 26 years old	17	14.80
	Employed	29	25.20
	Student	82	71.30
	Unemployed	2	1.70
Numbers of Virtual Events attended	Less than 3	35	30.40
	More than 3 but less than 10	49	42.60
	More than 10	26	22.60
	Never attend any virtual event	5	4.30

4.2. Descriptive Analysis

The result of analysis in Table 2 indicates that the mean score for event commitment variable is relatively moderate (M=3.99, SD=0.76). The service quality mean scores indicate a slightly high (M=4.13, SD=0.59). Whereas, the mean score of each independent variable is slightly high which the highest is value (M=4.21, SD=0.62) and followed by responsiveness (M=4.20, SD=0.60). Reliability also shows slightly high mean score (M=4.03, SD=0.56) but it is the lowest mean as compared to means value and responsiveness.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Event Commitment	3.99	0.76
Service Quality	4.13	0.59
Reliability	4.03	0.56
Responsiveness	4.20	0.60
Value	4.21	0.62

4.3. Descriptive Analysis

H1: There is a relationship between the role of service quality and event commitment among attendees to attend online event.

Table 3 depicts the results of correlation between service quality and event commitment. The results of the study show that service quality has a significant high degree relationship with event commitment (R=0.734, P<0.001). It can be said that the result is aligned with the hypothesis therefore the hypothesis is accepted. It is also indicated that service quality explains the total variation of event commitment by 53.9% (R-Square=0.539) which is relatively moderate.

Table 3. Regression Statistics

Model	R	R Square	P-Value
Service Quality and Event Commitment	.734	0.539	<.001

4.4. Multiple Regression Analysis

H2: There is an interaction effect between reliability towards event commitment among attendees to attend an online event.

Result of coefficient in Table 4 indicates that reliability has an interaction effect towards event commitment (P=0.01), therefore the hypothesis of the study is accepted.

H3: There is an interaction effect between responsiveness and event commitment among attendees to attend an online event.

In the current study, responsiveness shows no interaction effect towards event commitment (P=0.19), therefore the hypothesis of the study is not accepted.

H4: There is an interaction effect between value and event commitment among attendees to attend an online event.

From the result in Table 4, it shows that value has an interaction effect towards event commitment (P=0.00), therefore it can be said that the study accepts the hypothesis.

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analysis

Regression Statistics						
Multiple R						0.734
R Square						0.539
Adjusted R Square						0.527
Standard Error						0.520
Observations						115
ANOVA						
	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F	
Regression	3	35.124	11.708	43.297	0.000	
Residual	111	30.016	0.270			
Total	114	65.140				
Model	Coefficients	Std Error	t Stat	P-Value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%
Intercept	-0.280	0.380	-0.736	0.463	-1.032	0.473
Reliability	0.381	0.149	2.550	0.012	0.085	0.677
Responsiveness	0.224	0.170	1.316	0.191	-0.114	0.562
Value	0.424	0.127	3.348	0.001	0.173	0.676

5. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the relationships between the three factors of service quality namely responsiveness, reliability and value, towards commitment of attending an online event. The correlation results suggested that service quality dimensions had a positive and significant relationship with event commitment. The coefficient results showed that only two (2) dimensions of service quality namely reliability and value had an interaction effect towards event commitment. Whereas, responsiveness had no interaction effect towards event commitment.

First, reliability had a significant interaction effect towards event commitment. This result was significantly consistent with a study on the effects of business service quality on commitment (Lee & Seong, 2020). Another study had also suggested that the service quality affects customers' commitment (Sari et al., 2018), in which reliability has been taken into account as one of the dimensions, nevertheless the strength of the effects was not stated in the study. These findings are in accordance with Fullerton (2005), research which states that service quality has a significant influence on customers' commitment. The findings indicate that service quality has a significant influence on commitment which means the greater the service quality that is given it will determine the commitment of customers.

Second, responsiveness shows no significant interaction effect towards event commitment. The result is inconsistent with a study by Lee and Seong (2020) where responsiveness has been proven as a dominant factor to submersion and trust in education. The result of current study is also contradicting to overall results of service quality and commitment in previous research (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2020). The result difference of the current study is due to difference of setting where the current was conducted in the event setting and the other studies were conducted from the perspectives of educations. Another result indicated that responsiveness was positively influence commitment of telecom service users (Kalia et al., 2021).

Third, value has a significant interaction effect towards event commitment. The study concluded that understanding the event experience among event attendees, especially related to the quality of the event, is important for ensuring the success of an event. It was also found a significant relationship between the three factors of service quality namely responsiveness, reliability and value, towards commitment of attending an online event.

6. Conclusion

Event management basically involving a large gathering of people at the same place to celebrate numerous occasions (Thomas & Stephens, 2022). However, COVID-19 pandemic has created a significant impact towards the event management industry due to the restrictions of people gathering in popular event venues and public spaces due to the implementation of movement control order throughout the world. As a result, event organizers and the players in the event management industry has introduced a new mechanism of organizing event known as virtual event as an alternative for the industry to keep on moving, albeit at a much slower pace. Virtual event has been carried out online using various digital platforms. Through virtual event, event attendees can share the same event experience in a common environment although they are physically situated in different locations. Hence, understanding the event experience among attendees of virtual events is crucial in order for those events to be a success, as well as maintain its quality and sustainability.

As been mentioned, the main purpose of this study is to explore the event experience among event attendees attending virtual events, especially related to the quality of the event. The objectives were to examine the role of event experience among event attendees by investigating towards their commitment to attend virtual events and also examine the role of service quality in attending those events. The result found a significant relationship between the three factors of service quality namely responsiveness, reliability and value, towards commitment of attending an online event. In summary, this study proposed that these attributes of service quality are critical in attaining event attendees' commitment for attending virtual events.

The study has several limitations that should be addressed. First, generalization from the present findings should be undertaken with caution, since data were collected from mostly a similar location consisting of mostly sample that was from a certain age category. As suggested by several researchers such as Spiers and Walker (2008), generalization with regards to the findings and consequences in different cultures should be treated with caution as the sample of this study comprised only Malaysian event attendees which were made of those from similar cultures and ethnicity. The future research should

continue testing in other domains, different locations and cultures, and enhance in terms of establishing the robustness of the findings and address remaining conceptual and other empirical questions. In contrast with other previous studies, this study evaluated the virtual event experience from the attendees' point of view, hence, more studies can be done to explore this topic from the event organizers and organizational perspectives. Most importantly, the study has theoretically contributed towards the leisure and event literature by confirming the importance of service quality towards the commitment in attending future virtual events as suggested by Ho Voon, Lee, et al. (2014).

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