GUEST INTRODUCTION: MAKING SENSE OF EVENT EXPERIENCES

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Introduction

This introductory article aims to set out the context for this special issue, discussing the contribution events studies and events management education can have in improving the understanding of the impact event experiences have on individuals and societies worldwide, firmly placing learning from experiences as central to the advancement of both knowledge and industry practice.

This special issue was born from the AEME (Association for Event Management Education) Forum in 2016, which sought to examine the event management field and consider the theme of the conference, which was to see events as experiences that could feed and test our senses and in turn test and elevate our understanding and knowledge of the world. The seven articles in this special edition add to the body of literature in event management in two main ways. They continue the discussion on event studies viewing events as spaces of encounter and interactions, from a volunteer and consumer point of view, but also as learning experiences, from a student, educator, and participant's point of view. Events engage the senses to create cognition, to alter one's understanding of the world, which surely can be described as learning, for all involved. However, this introduction ends with the question of whether learning truly takes place if there is no reflection in line with Kolb's Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984), and how and when this reflection takes place is an issue for event managers, event educators, and researchers in terms of embedding learning and knowledge.

Conceptualizing "Events" and "Event Experiences"

It is widely accepted that making sense of event experiences is difficult. As Ooi (2005) and O'Dell (2007) aptly summarized: "experiences are highly personal, subjectively perceived, intangible, ever fleeting and continuously ongoing" (p. 35). However, undeniably, in the context of event management, event experiences are more than random phenomena occurring in the minds of individuals. As O'Sullivan and Spangler (1998) pointed out, experience is about

> Involvement and participation; the state of being physically, mentally, socially, spiritually and emotionally involved; the changing knowledge, skill, memory or emotion; a conscious perception

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of having intentionally encountered, gone to live through an activity or an event; and effort that addresses a psychological need. (p. 23)

This understanding is intrinsic to the conceptualization of planned events and the development of event management as a discursive discipline within event studies (Getz, 2012; Page & Connell, 2012; Pernecky, 2016). Accepting that event attendees' experiences will inevitably make each event unique; the role and value of "planned events" or to put it in another way of *planning for events* is to arguably improve participants' experiential encounters with them; learning from the sharing of past experiences with the view of improving them for the future (Berridge, 2007, 2012; Getz & Page, 2016).

The concept of learning from experience [here event experiences] is slippery and seemingly difficult to define (Beard, 2014) as it is indeed inescapably linked to the notion that experiences are complex, multifaceted, fleeting, and ongoing. Yet as Beard and Wilson (2006) pointed out "experiential learning is the underpinning process to all forms of learning since it represents the transformation of most new and significant experiences and incorporates them within a broader conceptual framework" (p. 19). Experiential learning is transformational learning in that it allows new, meaningful knowledge to be created. Yet, for it to be effective it requires a conscious abandonment of our preconceptions, assumptions, cultural filters, and indeed "comfort zones" that may act as barriers to learning. Furthermore, it demands an acceptance of the need to engage with careful processes of critical reflection, introspection, retrospection, and prospection that is learning from the present, the past, and through visualizing the possible future scenarios that may affect us (Devine & Carruthers, 2014; Getz, 2012; Yeoman, Robertson, McMahon-Beattie, Backer, & Smith, 2014). As Beard and Wilson (2013) highlighted, meaningful learning can be derived from present and old experiences as well as through the analysis and reflection "on the experiences of others who have been involved with an activity that we are contemplating in the future" (p. 44).

It could be argued that the development and progressive acceptance of the key tenets of the experience economy, as enunciated by Pine and Gilmore (1999), has further reinforced the need to manage event experiences in a way to ensure value creation for a range of disparate stakeholders. Forwarding a predominantly economic argument for change in business practices worldwide, the authors contended that experiences (rather than goods or services) are the only way to achieve industry economic growth:

> Let us be clear: goods and services are no longer enough to foster economic growth, create new jobs and maintain economic prosperity. To realise revenue growth and increase employment, the staging of experiences must be pursued as a distinct form of economic output. (Pine & Gilmore, 2011, p. ix).

In this context, experiences (particularly those capable of engaging all the senses, creating deep affective and cognitive connections with participants) are to be carefully designed and maintained with an aim of influencing customer perception and feelings about the business. Since the appearance of Pine and Gilmore' seminal work almost 20 years ago, many models have flourished (see, e.g., Berridge, 2007; O'Dell, 2007; Oh, Fiore, & Jeuong, 2007; O'Sullivan & Spangler 1998; Wang, Chen, Fan, & Lu, 2012) attempting to encapsulate the complexities of the experiences or, for example, emphasizing the important and active role customers play in the cocreation of experience value (see Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Conceptually this has happened alongside the consolidation and recognition of the sociopolitical and cultural worth of the creative industries worldwide (Getz, 2012; Jeffcut & Pratt, 2002; Prebensen, Chen, & Uysal, 2014; Uriely, 2005; Yeoman et al., 2014) further highlighting the need for event professionals in the design, planning, and management of events.

Event studies as a field of inquiry and a discipline is relatively new in comparison to similarly complex yet more established disciplines such as tourism, hospitality, and leisure, or well-established ones such as sociology, anthropology, business, and management studies (Getz, 2007; Phillimore & Goodson, 2004; Tribe, 2004). Forwarding similar arguments in his review of disciplinary approaches to the study of planned events, Getz (2012) identified three hegemonic and discursive fields of inquiry within event studies to which contributors naturally align themselves. (1) *Traditional humanistic* contributions derived from cultural anthropology and sociology focus on the role, significance,

and meaning of events as discursive, embodied, and performative practices, and socially constructed expressions of societies, personal identity, and place in the world (Edensor, 2002). Those related to (2) *event tourism* concentrate instead on events as "tools" for sociocultural and economic development of places, regions, and destinations worldwide as well as policy making and policy change (Richards, 2017; Richards & Palmer, 2012). This is the largest of the three discipline-based discourses within event studies, and it could be argued that this is where it is possible to ultimately locate the contribution of many researchers involved in the understanding of event value creation and experience cocreation for tourism. More recently, contributions focusing on the (3) *management of events* investigate in-depth aspects of event strategy production, design, operations, marketing, project management, or logistics. Getz (2012) claimed this discursive field is perhaps the most embryonic in terms of developing ontological and epistemological claims and one to have the least societal impacts among the three. In the author's words "it cannot be expected that the media and public will pay much attention to event management until something goes wrong. Then their management and the issue of professionalism leap into the media and public consciousness" (p. 181).

Discussions within these knowledge domains highlight different implications for society and policy making and are significantly valuable for the advancement of knowledge and practice *for* and *through* events. Getz (2012) and Getz and Page (2016) further commented on their value and lamented how, in operating almost independently of each other rather than acknowledging and *learning* from each other, these discursive knowledge domains end up weakening the subject discipline of event studies. For example, similar views are arguably echoed by Pernecky (2016) who pointed out how limiting the understanding of events (certainly by the simplistic measure of economic impact, but really in any way) is to "theoretically impoverish" the field. In fact, one might argue that simply using the word "event" or talking about "Events Management" "corners" us in a small space that does not reflect the immensity of the spheres of influence events can have on human and social life. In the same vein, it is possible to read the contributions of

Lamond and Platt (2016) and Spracklen and Lamond (2016) on the need for critical event studies to attempt to move events away from a concentration on, for example, an interaction with the economic sphere, encouraged by a tendency to measure simply the economic impact of events (an approach espoused by a practical, management approach), and to consider their wider and different impacts they may have on society, culture, the individuals.

However, these debates are also visible in the traditional delivery mechanism of knowledge: the field of education. The field of events management education has historically been more closely linked to planned events. Getz and Page (2016) highlighted that relevant courses offered tend to recognize the vocational needs of future managers and leaders to learn the skills needed to plan events, with a focus on the business and management skills required (the business-like perspectives) (Pernecky, 2016). This reflects the "exponential growth . . . in number and scale of events . . . and the significant rise in employment" (Ferdinand & Kitchin, 2017, p. xi) linked to events. As an economic contributor (see Business Visits and Events Partnership [BVEP], 2017), events have received a great deal of attention in recent years. The value of the economic argument is also perpetuated by the following concurrent realities/practices: (1) the benchmarking of events against criteria such as economic impact and evaluation of their "success" in terms of monetary profit by events managers and organizers, (2) the requirements of students who often have very clear ideas of what they want to learn to be "employable" in their chosen field (where the business and management skills and understanding of events may take precedence over traditional disciplines), and (3) the governments' and society's requirements of HE (particularly in the UK) to deliver programs that yield graduates that are "employable" (evidenced by league tables and measures), with inevitable consequences for course design. Therefore, there is an observed discrepancy between the dominant standpoint of educational practices that tends to focus on a narrow events management field (events management and production) and the wider view encouraged by Lamond and Platt (2016), Pernecky (2016), and Getz and Page (2016), and their encouragement of wider research aims and focus. Therefore, this creates a potential challenge

to those who are teaching events management (such as the events management educators who meet annually for the AEME Forum) and we need to take a more holistic approach towards understanding event experiences.

This special issue builds upon these philosophical concerns and specifically responds to the need for a greater interdisciplinary understanding of the value and role of event experiences now and in the future; opening up to consider, evaluate, and *learn* from the contributions that different disciplines may bring to the advancement of knowledge around planned events. Therefore, central to this issue is the notion of *learning* from experiences, with an aim of improving the course of the future. This is the overarching ethos that binds together the articles included in this special issue, and which we believe will stimulate reflection and ultimately meaningful learning.

*Theoretical Background of the
Articles in This Issue*

To address these concepts and developments, this special issue brings a range of articles together that discuss research on different aspects of event experiences. All three dominant discursive fields of inquiry within events studies as identified by Getz (2012)—Traditional Humanistic, Events Tourism, and Events Management—are present and evident within the articles of this issue.

Although all articles have implications for Events Management, their contributions vary considerably with regards to the elements of management in focus. For instance, Michopoulou and Giuliano designed a bespoke "customer value package" for events to enable them (and event managers) to better understand customer satisfaction of mega-event experiences. More importantly, they reiterate the importance of the recreational carrying capacity notion, as opposed to the traditional conceptualization of capacity as an operational measure of people to space ratio. These contributions have direct implications for event management practitioners to improve their planning and operations.

Although contributions to events management are expected, articles with conceptual underpinnings in tourism and humanities were also included in this issue. In particular, two articles are firmly

grounded in Event Tourism. Azara, Wiltshier, and Greatorex discuss their case study event as a heritage-based tourism product, highlighting the contrasting effect tourism can have on the event itself. They acknowledge the presence of tourism as a catalyst for both the event's preservation and destruction. They view the event experience as a vehicle for solidifying the identity of the local community with implications for place making and destination development. Fragkogianni's work is also situated within the bounds of event tourism. In her article she focuses on visitor loyalty for a tourism event, using World Travel Market as the context of the study. Using a theory of planned behavior (TPB)-based model (TPB originating from the field of psychology) she examines key determinants for maintaining revisitation intention (loyalty) for event experiences among business tourists.

With regards to the Traditional Humanistic field, Duffy and Mair's work, although making explicit references to events tourism, takes an interdisciplinary ethnographic approach to examine the role of the senses to explore community events. This work cuts across disciplines, tapping into sensual geography, anthropology, and tourism studies, in order to elaborate on constructs such as connectedness, inclusion, cohesion, and belonging. Event experiences are then discussed through the lenses of embodiment as a political act, because the various bodily, emotional, and affective responses can indicate the belonging or not, to the festival community.

Lamb and Ogle are bridging consumer behavior and events management fields. Their study sought to understand push and pull motivation factors for a particular participant segment: the volunteer. They concentrated on event experience of volunteers and focused on understanding the diversity of motivational factors brought about by the inherent heterogeneity in the volunteer base. Their findings have important implications for event managers in terms of optimizing targeting, recruitment, and retention of volunteers.

Finally, the articles from Venske and Wright are situated within the field of Education with a particular focus on events, providing the link between Education and Events Management. In this special-issue, Wright provides a refreshing, personal look at the value of work experience or project-based

learning in Events Management education, reflecting that experiences can be experienced entirely differently within the same cohort of students, and in fact that the experience can be affected and in turn have an impact on the tutor/facilitator. Venske contributes to the debate about the value of work experience for events management education and highlights the need for more development of soft skills as well as mentoring.

Perspectives on "Event Experiences"

The variety in expectations from event experiences will inevitably affect the cocreation of events and the corresponding satisfaction for both consumer and supplier. In turn, one must recognize the range of satisfiers that exist in the event experience, from the need to make a deal at a business event to the intangible feelings of happiness from a more leisure-based event. These differences support the need, as reflected in wider "Critical Events Studies," to challenge the oversimplicity of measuring the "success" of events by economic impact or profit and growth. We may ask, what is "success?"

To that end, in this special issue, Michopoulou and Giuliano and Fragkogianni concentrate on understanding satisfaction and customer loyalty, the former applying an ACSI model to a case study at the Milan Expo 2015 and the latter using the World Travel Market as a case study. In both articles, authors are aware of the difference in experience between different types of customers (internal and external and depending on their professional interests). Michopoulou and Giuliano in particular are keen to emphasize the importance of the internal consumer as a customer, and they develop customer satisfaction criteria for staff and volunteers as well as the visitor. This point being established here about the sheer variety of people "coming together" at/in events is taken further by Lamb and Ogle, who write about volunteer participation and motivational factors, volunteers being an example of the internal customer. Azara et al. concentrate on the internal customer also, in terms of preserving community feeling in their attention to a unique and legacy event, the Ashbourne Royal Shrovetide Festival, and they recognize the contrasts of these internal customers' needs compared to the needs of the festival consumer or tourist. Duffy and Mair

add significantly to this consideration of participant experience by not asking what people think in terms of their satisfaction of motivation, but observing what they do; and the authors move away consciously and particularly from a perception of events from an economic point of view, to identify the senses that events can engage in order to promote inclusion. Their study is a sensual exploration of how consumers react to events in their study of Noosa Jazz Festival.

Already in the articles mentioned we see the variety of event type and experience, from apparently corporate event (Expo 2015 and the World Travel Market) to more social, community events (ISPS Handa Perth International golf tournament, the Telstra Perth Fashion Festival, and Ashbourne Royal Shrovetide Festival), but each author recognizes that the characteristics of each event may not fit neatly into any framework or typology. Lamb and Ogle stress that the events they use as case studies "present concomitant event characteristics." The similarity and duality of profitable consumer and internal participant is also recognized, with equal weight given to both in terms of the value of their experience. Although articles in this issue contribute to our understanding of the role of the customer in events (be it internal or external and at diverse settings), there is a lot more to *learn about* and *from* event experiences.

Of course, the participant in an event is also a learner, whether this was ostensibly the intention of the event or a byproduct. Indeed, in Azara et al.'s work knowledge and learning is at the heart of the event in order to preserve the event in the community's identity and legacy. They also recognize the dual roles of participant and event manager in their case study (and this is similar in many community events) that reflects the need not simply to replicate planned events but to reflect on them in order to learn from them and improve, in the light of the interactions that have taken place.

Methodological Considerations

Conceptually, ontological and epistemological differences inherent in the three discipline-based dimensions identified by Getz (2012) inevitably inform the methods and materials deployed for research. Yet the works of Holloway, Brown, and

Shipway (2010) or the latest contributions included in the edited volume by Lamond and Platt (2016) demonstrated how researchers are investigating events using different theoretical perspectives. This is arguably hardly surprising given the growth and establishment of postmodern and postpositivistic paradigms alongside the conventional ones (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). As Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2017) pointed out "various paradigms are beginning to interbreed such as that two theorists previously thought to be in irreconcilable conflict may now appear, under a different theoretical rubric, to be informing one another's argument" (p. 109). In this framework, this special issue also contributes to the advancement of event research in terms of the methods employed for the research.

In this special issue, an interesting range of quantitative and qualitative approaches is used to investigate a variety of cases with an aim to both "elucidate causes that extend beyond the unique special instance" (see, e.g., Michopoulou and Giuliano and Fragkogianni) (Byrne, 2009, p. 1) as well as a way "to describe and explain how everyday practices are connected to larger structures and processes" (Schwandt & Gates, 2017, p. 341) (see Lamb, and Azara et al.). Quantitative articles include Michopoulou and Giuliano's work with an online quantitative survey and Fragkogianni's use of structured questionnaires to collect responses from the World Travel Market. Lamb and Ogle use a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions in their online survey to ascertain the motivational factors involved in volunteering. With regards to qualitative studies, Wright uses summative content analysis of students' module evaluation questionnaires to assess responses to their student experience. Venske adopts a qualitative case study approach and conducts a focus group and interviews to collect data. Duffy and Mair, and Azara et al. take an ethnographic approach to their case studies, deploying participant observation and interview data collection methods. The last two also respond to the need for further use of phenomenological, conceptual, and methodological frameworks complemented by other research approaches such as ethnography and participant observation in order to obtain a more thorough understanding of the lived experiences and meanings of individuals within the context of events (Ziakas & Boukas, 2014).

Although both quantitative and qualitative designs are present among these articles, they all predominantly use case studies. As such, the quest for the "truth" is inadvertently linked to the specific situational bounds. Hence, the explanations and interpretations of event experiences offered are constrained by contextual conditions and underpinned by personal or collective constructions of meaning. However, they do provide fresh insights into event experiences, particularly if viewed under a phenomenological prism, which asserts that experiences (phenomena) cannot be separated from the context (case study) in which they occur. Hence, to better understand an events experience "it is necessary to make sense of the complex factors that shape it" (Ziakas & Boukas, 2014, p. 69). Reflecting the interdisciplinary focus and ethos of this special issue, the contributions included here develop the view of events from different perspectives; seeking to evaluate experiences in a variety of ways, again in keeping with the wider view of events studies.

Conclusion

The special issue explores theoretical approaches, foundations, and issues in the study of events management. Events management, as with any area of academic study, is an evolving field of academic research and industry practice, set within a dynamic social context. The field is interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary, and can be influenced for instance by geography, psychology, anthropology, technology, and marketing. Past research has attempted to view, explain, and unpack the inherent complexities (Getz, 2012; Pernecky, 2016; Richards, 2017) within events management through a variety of lenses, including economics, gender, marketing, and customer segmentation, to name a few (see Alexandris, 2016; Andrea, & María, 2014; Girish & Richard, 2012; Hanya, 2015; Mike & Liz, 2012). The consumers' role in event experiences (as an example of popular research focus in events) is perhaps well rehearsed, and the more recent concentration on "cocreation" recognizes the consumer's key role at the center of the experience (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). As with many other aspects of events studies, this role is ever changing, wildly diverse, and highly contested, inherent with conflicting requirements.

What a consumer wants continues to interest and challenge business leaders and event organizers, although they may take distinctively different approaches. For instance, 2017 has been a significant year in terms of festival acquisitions (Stand Out, 2017) with a number of large businesses buying out or buying a stake in the small, previously "independent" festivals. At the same time, a Top 10 Global Consumer Trend is reported to be "authenticity" and the seeking out of the real rather than the fake (Kasriel-Alexander, 2017). The potential clash between big business and previously boutique festivals, or globalization versus localization, may be on the horizon. In a similar vein, we might expect the idea of consumers seeking escape (Hirst & Tressider, 2016) but being marketed increasingly standardized events through their always-on mobile devices (Vinson, 2017) to become mood-breakingly ironic. Similar clashes potentially exist between age groups, with the younger person's desire for the extraordinary (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014) contrasting older people's seeking of comfort through events (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014) and Hirst and Tressider (2016) also recognized the spectrum of the sacred and myth making to the seeking of comfort in event experiences.

Although the requirements and expectations of event experiences may vary considerably, one can argue that events will always be *learning* experiences, whether intended as such (in the case of students taking part in work experience) (see Venske), as a preservation of history (see Azara et al.) or simply challenging participants to experience a new environment/atmosphere or entertainment (see Duffy & Mair). What these authors do raise is the need to reflect on event experiences in order to learn (Azara et al.) and the power of distance from an event experience in order to recognize that learning has taken place (Wright).

This issue continues the discussion that has been called "critical event studies," recognizing the variety of levels and experiences and emphasizing the necessity to examine events from beyond a business and management skills angle, while of course offering perspectives on how events can be "improved" with the information garnered from this research (thus representing the value of sense making in order to build knowledge and to learn). The world of events is evidenced as multifaceted and credence is given to the argument that continuing research should be done to recognize the breadth and depth of events. Most importantly, these event discourses should enable us to *learn* from our own reflections of good and bad experiences and from each other, and hence advance our knowledge and understanding of events.

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