

Designing the virtual and hybrid event experience

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Abstract: This case study examines the significance in the growth of virtual and hybrid events and its potential in a post-pandemic events landscape. The greatest challenge for event students and professionals is in developing a meaningful event experience for virtual and hybrid events. The teaching note challenges students and professionals to consider how the event customer journey can be mapped to capture the nuances of differing or competing consumer needs.

Subjects: Event Design, Virtual & Hybrid Events, Innovation, Event Experience, Consumer Journey

Introduction

Event technology has been a cornerstone of the events industry for decades as it enables event professionals to develop and deliver high quality event experiences. The embedding of technology within events also enables innovations to practice to continuously evolve to meet growing consumer demands and expectations. Virtual events, for example, have been developing for over 40 years but the global Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the growth and development of our virtual activity across the sector. Virtual events were the only event option available due to national lockdowns and restrictions and there was an unprecedented demand for events to continue.

The pivot to the virtual world and working methods within the space of a few weeks required those working in the events and hospitality sector, and respective supply chains, to adapt, innovate and overcome. As a sector, events are well-versed in managing immediate crises, but the global pandemic required us to go beyond what was known territory and utilise our innate ability to survive. For nearly two years Covid-19 provided the driving force for the accelerated development of virtual and hybrid events, and as the events industry (among others) emerges from the pandemic it has an opportunity to capitalise from these developments that can grow the event experience.

As a result of the pandemic, event professionals have been focused on enhancing the techniques and calibre of virtual events and the supporting platforms and evolve the commercial opportunities of virtual and hybrid events, that are ultimately designed to enhance the consumer experience. The biggest challenge, however, is that in person event experiences are easier to manage and design, whereas virtual event experiences can be significantly more difficult to create due to the artificial nature of the event environment. As Nolan (2018, p. 136) prophetically posited “the general consensus is that live events cannot be replaced by virtual ones and many of us would only choose to attend a virtual event if a live event were not available”. This was due to several reasons, such as pre-pandemic there was a perceived

lack of confidence and skills from both event professionals and consumers in using technology for events, creating barriers for virtual and hybrid event delivery (Sox et al., 2017). For example, the atmosphere, ambience, and emotive response of a live event are difficult to replicate online (Getz & Page, 2020), and whilst technology is embedded within our normal lives there was a reluctance to use this in place of tried and tested live event experiences. There are also perceived high costs associated with developing and delivering virtual and hybrid events, as well as the socialization and networking that live events offer are hard to artificially construct online (Nolan, 2018), which continues to be a challenge for both virtual and hybrid events.

The Covid-19 pandemic, however, has resulted in a significant development in people's technological capabilities, and confidence in using technology. As a result, people have become far more adept at working virtually and utilising new technologies and platforms in order to work effectively and to stay connected socially (Ritcher, 2020). The events industry also capitalised from this crisis and rapidly developed and experimented with new innovations including: enhancing the calibre of the virtual event platforms enabling these to integrate with other applications (such as social media, networking apps, and so on); developing practitioner guidance on enhancing the delivery styles and content for virtual events (such as using interview formats for conferences and presentations); and more interactivity for the audience (through live polling, chat functions, and voting). This has resulted in an exceptional growth in virtual events and an appreciation of the benefits that both virtual and hybrid events can provide. As a result of the pandemic the global value of virtual events has increased from an estimated \$18.6 billion in 2015 to \$139 billion in 2022 and is anticipated to grow to over \$650 billion by 2030 (Grand View Research, 2022). The question, however, is how can event professionals capitalise on virtual and hybrid events post pandemic to create exciting event experiences?

2. Designing virtual event experiences

In this section, we are using a fictitious case study that is based on various prior experiences to demonstrate the challenges and opportunities of designing and delivering virtual and hybrid events.

In 2021, as Covid restrictions were progressively removed, Imogen had an opportunity to attend a conference in London. As a final year events management student, she was excited to attend an event in person and represent her university. However, a week before the conference, Imogen had a personal emergency and she was unable to travel. The conference was offering a virtual attendance option as well as the in person attendance (hybrid delivery) and she transferred her ticket so she could still engage with the event. She was disappointed that she couldn't attend in person but pleased that the opportunity wasn't lost, reflecting Nolan's (2018) commentary about how attendees previously wouldn't choose to attend virtually.

Berridge (2007) outlined that for events there are three key premises for the designing of events and their respective experience. Firstly that “all event environments are created” (Berridge, 2007, xv) and this is the same perspective for any in person event or virtual or hybrid event. Secondly “all experiences within the event environments are purposefully designed” (Berridge, 2007, xv) meaning that event professionals must have a clear plan and understanding of what they are trying to create within their event in order to have a positive impact for all participants. And finally, “all stakeholders are the direct recipients of the designed experiences” (Berridge, 2007, xv), which is especially critical when considering hybrid events and the different audiences, and stakeholder engagement.

Designing and creating meaningful event experiences are essential for every event. Virtual and hybrid events must similarly provide considerable attention to the event design to ensure that the experience is as rich and immersive as live in person events. This is of particular importance for hybrid events due to the differing needs of the in-person event and virtual aspects (Fryatt et al., 2012).

A week before the conference, Imogen received her login information and set up her profile. It wasn't as straight forward as she was expecting but after a few attempts she was logged in and started to make connections using the meet up function on the platform. She had a look at the programme of speakers and the 4 tracks of conference sessions and registered for the sessions she really wanted to attend. There was a lot of choice and Imogen found that there were several times where there were clashes of sessions she wanted to engage with. This situation reflects the challenges noted by Fryatt et al. (2012) and Berridge (2007) where the event design has failed to consider the virtual experience.

In facilitating the virtual or hybrid event experience it is critical to map the audience journey of the entire event. This will enable the event professional to visualize the event from the consumers and stakeholders' perspectives and perceive how the event will be experienced and therefore how the event objectives will be fulfilled. This will highlight any potential difficulties that an attendee or stakeholder may encounter and develop appropriate solutions for these that enhance the overall experience. The complexity of hybrid events, however, means that the event professional does not only need to visualize and map both the in person and online journeys but also how to link these two audiences and deliver equally meaningful experiences to both. To facilitate the experience design for an event, including virtual or hybrid events, there are three considerations that need to be examined: the event objectives; the space; and the people.

Developing and defining the event objectives are a crucial starting point for any event, irrespective of type, size, or scale, and are essential in shaping the event concept, its potential impacts (economic, environmental, social) and the desired event experience being proposed in line with consumer expectations (Brown, 2021). Therefore, setting the right objectives for virtual and hybrid events are imperative as this will affect the event development, delivery, and experience, but this should not be

undertaken in isolation. Consulting key stakeholders, including consumers, sponsors, and the events team, will result in more meaningful and appropriate co-created objectives being developed, and enhanced event experiences. Ensuring the objectives are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timely) is critical in enabling the event to be effective, as well as provide realistic evaluation and learning to take place post event.

Imogen's objectives for attending the conference were to learn more about the various topics being discussed, particularly about event sustainability, to observe a professional conference being organised, and to make new connections that could potentially lead to career opportunities. Given that she had had to move to online attendance, she added an objective to understand more about how virtual events operate. Imogen had not attended an organised event online before but through the pandemic all the taught sessions for her course had been via the university virtual learning environment. Imogen had identified her goals but there is a risk that the event objectives are different and therefore the experience may not meet her expectations.

Space refers to either the physical or virtual environment within which the event occurs, or for hybrid events, both. From an online perspective (for virtual and hybrid events) this space will be the event platform that is best aligned to the event context and provides the appropriate functions for participants and audience. As a result of the pandemic there has been a significant increase in the diversity of online event platforms each offering a similar basic functionality, such as webcasting, video presenting modes, chat functionality, and polling, as well as more bespoke functions that can be added depending on the event type or needs, such as automated registration, integration with external applications (i.e., Twitter, LinkedIn, etc), real-time data analytics, social spaces and so on. For virtual or hybrid events, the online platforms must be designed for enhancing interactivity and engagement, and for hybrid events to enable connectivity between those attending in person and those attending virtually.

Imogen started to rethink how she was going to engage in the conference via the online environment. She thought it would be very similar but quickly realised that it would be a different kind of experience. She didn't know if she would have to have her camera and microphone switched on all the time and if her bandwidth would be stable enough. The delegate information pack didn't say very much about what the virtual attendance would be like, so she searched online for feedback from attendees of other virtual conferences to inform her expectations of this one. She found that there was a lot of mixed feedback and varied experiences of virtual events and that some event types such as conferences worked better online than others, such as trade fairs.

Finally, people refer to the various stakeholders of the event, who all need to be considered within the mapping of the event design and experience. For example, how can event sponsors enhance their brand

through the online and or in person components; for any presenters how user-friendly is the technology to enable a high-quality delivery; how can the audience interact with others and enhance their own experience of the event (this is especially important for those joining online); can the event team manage, and problem solve, any online technical issues and or in-person needs. For virtual and hybrid events, participants may be geographically spread, and therefore creating a seamless event experience is crucial as this will encourage interactions, resulting in a positive overall experience, increasing the potential to participate in future virtual or hybrid events. All together these elements create the Value Proposition for stakeholders by which we mean the point at which the stakeholder perceives value for money and value for time.

As a delegate, Imogen felt that she had enough information to get started but wasn't really engaged in the event experience. Imogen had emailed the conference organisers with some of her queries and they had replied to reassure her of the technical support available throughout the conference and they had directed her to some pre-conference online networking activity via the virtual platform that mirrored the live social events. As the conference date came nearer, she was a little apprehensive but keen to participate in the conference and learn more about the virtual experience. She was already making some notes on how she might do it differently if it was her event. She noted that it was difficult to create effective networking and socialising online as Nolan (2018) had identified and it led her to think about the revised Value Proposition for her as a conference delegate.

The virtual and hybrid event experience is outlined in figure 1 and examines how the three aspects of environment, interactions and immersion are all intrinsically linked to the event experience. The environment can be either physical or virtual (or for hybrid events both) and incorporates numerous design aspects such as audio (music, sound, PA system, in built microphone capabilities), visual (film, video, live streaming), the planned layout of the space (either physical or virtual), and the style and theming of the space (either physical or virtual), which combined creates the event aesthetics that help drive the event experience. The calibre and quality of the environment design will result in the level of interactivity and immersion by participants, and the better the design the better the event experience.

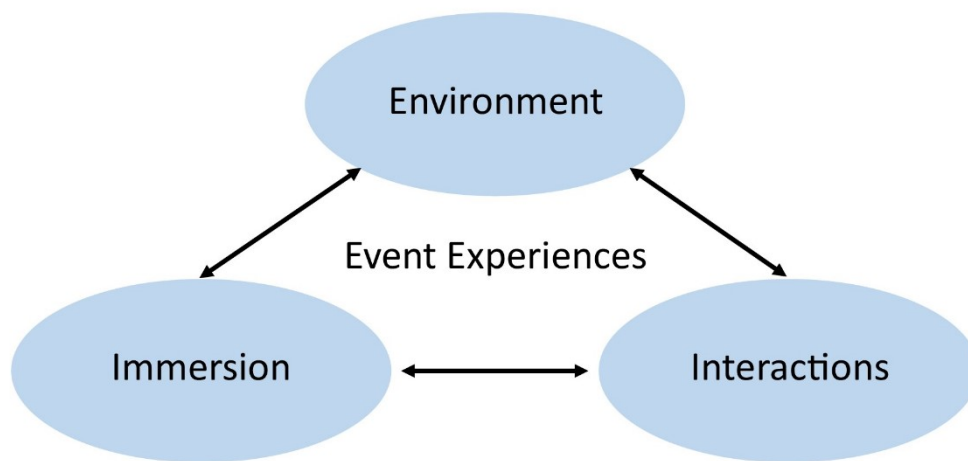


Figure 1. Event experiences (Brown, 2021, adapted from Antchak & Ramsbottom, 2020).

In designing any event, particularly virtual and hybrid events, the calibre of the content is fundamental to engaging with an audience in both the marketing of, and delivery of the event, in order to make the event immersive. The content, therefore, must be relevant to engage the audience, and event professionals must be cognizant that some event concepts may not transfer well to online and vice versa. For example, a conference will translate well to virtual and hybrid events, but an exhibition may not. Hybrid events are potentially more problematic as the event team are attempting to bridge the delivery of the event to two very different sets of audience needs, providing an engaging and immersive experience that will be designed differently for each but that needs to also be consistent to the overall event concept. There will and should be different opportunities being offered to hybrid audiences, and hence different price points for attending either in person or online. For example, for hybrid events providing exclusive content not available to those attending live adds value for those online. The content and focus of the event, especially for virtual and hybrid events, must be carefully considered as a part of the event design in order to sustain the audience's attention.

The first day of the conference arrived and Imogen logged in 5 minutes before the opening presentations. There seemed to be some technical issues at the venue so Imogen could hear the live activity but couldn't see it on her screen. She mentioned this in the Q&A area of the platform and emailed the organisers but there was no route to communicate directly with them via the platform. She was missing the chat function from her university VLE (virtual learning environment) and felt powerless to do anything to improve the situation. She knew she was not alone in being frustrated with this as the conference social media was active with other virtual delegates commenting and asking questions. The first keynote started and said hello to the online delegates as well as those in the room but the camera issue still wasn't fixed. Imogen was trying to concentrate but found that she got distracted by other things. Considering the three main areas of event experience (Brown, 2021), Imogen felt that the virtual delegates were not thought of in the event design and delivery.

From a delivery perspective, managing and maintaining engagement is critical for virtual and hybrid events. Therefore, creating appropriate interactions throughout the event design will be crucial but must be well thought out and intentionally designed. For example, incorporating shorter more succinct sessions; utilising live polling; encouraging the use of chat functions; developing question and answer sessions; and the use of an emcee or interviewer to interact with speakers and audience and keep the pace of the event moving. By getting these elements right it will increase interactivity with the audience and across the audience, leading to a better event experience. It is also important to consider the accessibility of the event experience and how to ensure that your virtual or hybrid event space is one that is inclusive, meeting and exceeding your audience expectations.

The final perspective of creating outstanding event experiences and mapping the audience journey is to consider the staffing needs for creating, managing, and delivering events. In simple terms, in-person only events and virtual events will only need one core events team, which design the event, develop the plans, determine resources required, create the theme, manage the marketing, and consider the risk management (among other tasks). Staffing for hybrid events requires two separate event teams that work in unison to manage the event but for their different audience needs, with one team managing the live audience and the other the online audience. These teams must work collaboratively to ensure that the overall design and context of the event is consistent, as well as consider the differing event experience and expectations their respective audiences will have. The online team will need to ensure that the event platform is appropriate, allows the right level of engagement, is user friendly for participants, and enables the audience to feel part of the event and able to interact with other online users as well as, if applicable, the in-person audience. The in-person event team will be responsible for the physical aspects of the event, such as the venue, use of space, design aspects and so on, that can be broadcast to the online audience. There will also be common tasks undertaken by both teams in terms of marketing and risk management which takes into consideration the delivery mode and audience expectations. From a delivery perspective the two teams must work in tandem with outstanding communication links between the two in order to ensure a seamless event experience for both audiences.

After the first keynote, the camera issues were resolved, and Imogen felt relieved that she could reconnect with the conference content and feel more involved. The first breakout session started, and she saw that some of the connections she had made before the conference were also in the same session. She used the meet up function to message them and say hi. This session had a dedicated online facilitator to support the live presenter and Imogen got much faster responses to her questions. She felt that her points were being listened to and valued and she was focused on engaging with the session. As the conference progressed, the content sessions were supported with an online conference team, but the breaks and social activities were not, so it felt disjointed and Imogen struggled to engage in meaningful networking. Her perceptions of the

value of the conference were changing as she become more engaged and immersed in the conference activity.

At the end of the conference, Imogen reflected on the experience and her objectives in attending the event virtually. She felt she had developed her knowledge of events management practice and learned more about sustainability but she hadn't made the connections that she had hoped to. Imogen identified that her objectives and those for the conference were not necessarily aligned and that the value proposition for her in attending the conference was different to those who attended in person.

Conclusion

The importance of creating outstanding event experiences cannot be understated and the stakes are increasing year on year as consumer demands and expectations grow. Whilst there is a wealth of literature and material governing the management of events, including virtual events, there is a current gap in the management of hybrid events due to the complexities that this format presents. Practitioners and students should not be put off by this, however, as the potential for hybrid events is significant as they can connect a global audience, increase profitability, reduce the environmental impact, and create positive social impacts. By considering the event experience and how these can be mapped will provide a clearer appreciation of the development, management, and potential for hybrid events.

Considering Imogen's experience of online attendance at a hybrid conference, there were clearly challenges with the virtual event experience that could have been addressed if the organisers had mapped the delegate experience in advance and designed the conference to create a valuable experience for both online and live attendees. Communication, both in advance and during the event, and support for the online activity are clearly an important part of creating a positive delegate experience and managing delegate expectations of the experience.

THE TASK AHEAD

Using the case study, your own experience, and the theoretical perspectives, work in small groups to map and design a hybrid event (such as a festival, conference, or celebration event) with specific consideration of:

- Attendee experience & engagement
- Value proposition
- Stakeholder needs
- Technological requirements

3. Supporting Evidence

When considering the event experience for virtual and hybrid events it is important to have an appreciation of the technological requirements of these events, as well as ensuring event teams have familiarity and proficiency with the technology being used (both software and hardware). From a simplistic perspective a virtual event can be staged with just a laptop as many have inbuilt cameras and microphones, however, investment in higher specification equipment will enhance the production values immensely, especially for hybrid events, which in turn will result in enhanced event experiences.

The technological considerations for virtual events and hybrid events are outlined in table 1. As well as the hardware and software outlined there will also be a requirement for specific event delivery roles, such as technical director, camera operators, audio and visual engineers, and event staff to manage the online interactivity. For hybrid events there would also need to be a differentiation between staff managing the in-person elements and those specifically supporting the online engagement (as previously discussed).

Technical Equipment	Virtual events	Hybrid events
Visual – Cameras	One or two high-definition video cameras (or a high-quality web camera).	Multiple high-definition video cameras.
Visual - Lighting	Good quality natural light and positioning of speaker to this or small LED lighting.	LED lighting to full lighting rigs needed.
Audio – Microphones	A separate source plug in microphone to provide clear sound quality.	Multiple microphones (such a lapel mics and boom mics) to provide clear sound quality.
Audio – Speakers	Separate sound source (such as a sound bar).	Medium to large PA system.
Computer	Either a PC or laptop with high processing speeds. One to two monitors.	Multiple PCs or laptops with high processing speeds. At least two monitors needed per PC or laptop.
Broadband / Bandwidth	Reliable broadband and speed.	Ensure venue has an appropriate bandwidth and speed to support the broadcast.
Mixing desk	Small video mixing desk or video capture converter.	Medium to large video and sound mixing desks plus specialist technicians to manage these.
Software (if required).	Supporting software for broadcasting – such as OBS Studio.	Supporting software for broadcasting – such as OBS Studio.
Streaming	Platform being utilized – such as Zoom, Teams, YouTube or event specific platform (Hopng, BigMarker, VFairs, ON24, MeetingPlay, Aventri etc).	Platform being utilized – such as Zoom, Teams, YouTube or event specific platform (Hopng, BigMarker, VFairs, ON24, MeetingPlay, Aventri etc) or bespoke platform

Interactivity tools	Polling, chat functions, video, and audio interactions, social media linking.	Polling, chat functions, video, and audio interactions, social media linking, engagement opportunities for those online and in-person.
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Table 1. Technological considerations for virtual and hybrid events (adapted from Brown, 2021).

4. References for further reading.

- Berridge, G. (2007). *Events design and experience*. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Brown, T. (2021). The future of events will be hybrid. In V. Ziakas, V. Antchak, & D. Getz (Eds) (2021). *Events, crisis management and recovery: Impacts and strategies* (pp. 142-164). Oxford: Goodfellows Publishers.
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- Grand View Research. (2022). *Virtual Events Market Size, Share & Trends Analysis Report By Event Type (Internal, External, Extended), By Service, By Establishment Size, By End Use, By Region, And Segment Forecasts, 2022 – 2030*. Retrieved from: <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/virtual-events-market>
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Teaching Note

The case study which explored Imogen's experience of a hybrid event, and supported by a range of theoretical underpinning, highlights the numerous challenges facing event professionals in designing outstanding event experiences. Imogen's observations, difficulties and overall experience at the conference has been developed to facilitate students and practitioners learning on how to design an event experience journey which is based on both research and practical experiences.

Learning Objectives:

1. Students will be able to critically evaluate the use of appropriate technologies in developing events and event experiences.
2. Students will be able to analyse the different consumer and stakeholder needs in designing and developing virtual and hybrid events.
3. Students will be able to develop an insight into the importance of mapping the consumer event experience journey for in-person events, and virtual and hybrid events.

Target Audience

This case study and exercise is suitable for students' studying events management, hospitality, or tourism degree at levels 6 (final year) or level 7 (postgraduate).

The case study will be best aligned to modules that explore events experiences, event design, event concepts or event technology.

Theoretical Background

In order to appreciate the creation of event experiences it is useful to consider some key definitions which will help to shape our understanding and perspective.

Event – according to Dowson and Bassett (2018, p. 2) an event is “a planned gathering.... is memorable or special... is temporary”. This definition is applies to any event type and size, including virtual and hybrid events.

Virtual Events – are defined by Getz (2021, p. 326) as “events ‘attended’ remotely, as through the internet”.

Hybrid Events - Sox et al. (2017, p. 946) comment that a hybrid event “involves a mixture of physical events with elements of virtual events usually running simultaneously and with overlapping content and interactive elements”.

Event experiences - Antchak and Ramsbottom (2020, p. 28) outline that the event experience is “an emotional encounter with the event content that affects an individual’s perceptions, mood and pre-, during and post-event behaviour”

Event Experience Models

There are several experience focused models that can be explored that aid practitioners and students to appreciate the different perspectives and considerations for developing meaningful experiences at events. For example, the PERMA model as outlined by Seligman (2011) which examines the positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments that can be aligned to event experiences. Similarly, the Falk and Dierking’s (1992) interactive experience model can also be adapted to fit events (as well as other experiences) as it examines the relationships between the personal, physical, and social contexts and how these overlap with each other to create an interactive and immersive experience. However, the most appropriate model is the ‘Realms of Experience’ model (also known as the experience economy model) was developed by Pine and Gilmore (1999) and has been regularly adapted and applied to various experience encounters, most notably within tourism and events. Figure 2 outlines the experience realm that has been adapted by Wrathall and Steriopoulos (2022) which examines the model from an event experience perspective.

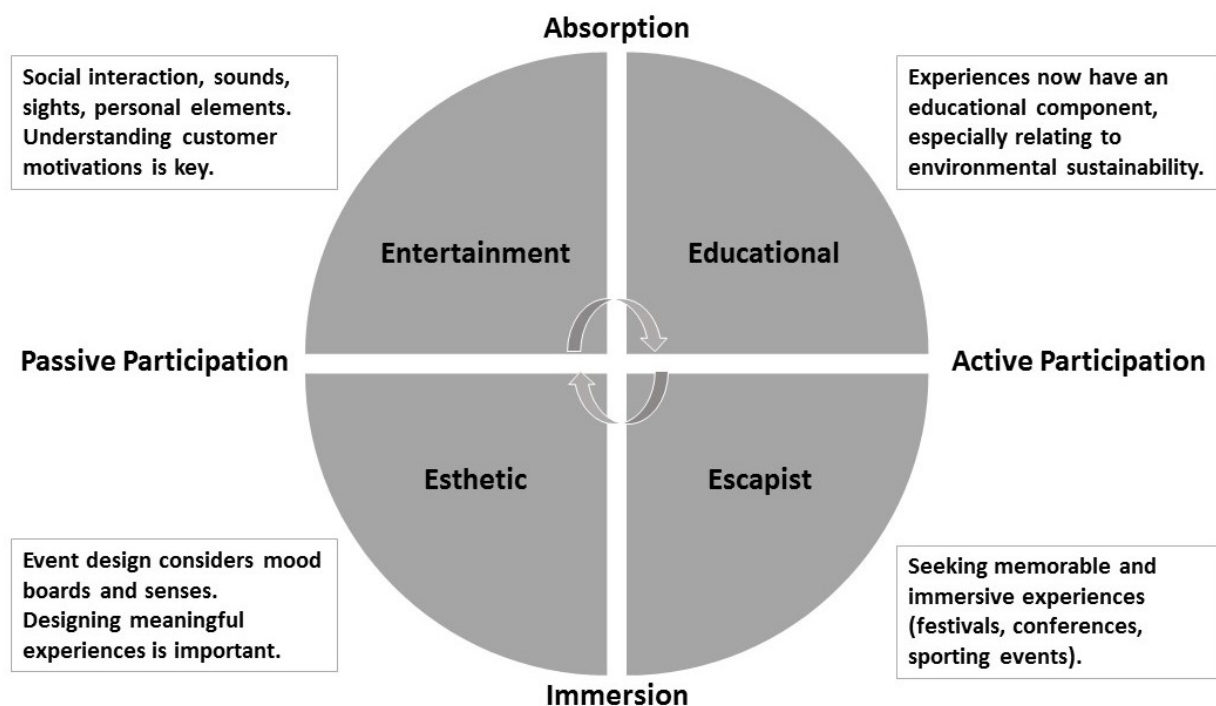


Figure 2. Extending the experience realm (Wrathall & Steriopoulos, 2022, p. 51).

According to Wrathall and Steriopoulos (2022) event experiences are dependent on a number of factors as outlined in the model and that the realms are aligned to the level of attendee’s participation and the extent to which they are either absorbed or immersed in the event experience.

First is the level of participation at the event, which is either passive or active. Passive participation is where attendees are not directly engaging or influencing the event, whereas active participation is the reverse with direct engagement or influence of the event. Secondly, the connections developed between participants and the event environment (which could be physical or virtual) and to what extent this is absorbing or immersive. For example, absorption occurs when the event experience affects the participant (from an emotional perspective), or when the participant fully engages and becomes immersed in the event experience.

Wrathall and Steriopoulos (2022) also outlined the four quadrants within the event experience:

Entertainment – which encompasses passive participation and an absorption of the event experience (for example, listening to a concert). Anticipating and meeting an audience needs, and an awareness of motivational factors is crucial. Different delivery modes (in-person, virtual, hybrid) will require differing entertainment considerations to be explored.

Educational – this incorporates an active participation within an absorptive experience (for example, participating in a quiz). Creating knowledge, ideas and inspiration for an audience is important, particularly in line with sustainability factors and changing behaviours.

Escapist – this involves active participation and an immersive event experience (for example, participating in a charity sports event). The participants become part of the event, which is linked to the event design and environment.

Esthetic – this concerns passive participation and an immersive event experience (for example, watching a parade). Participants are engaged on an emotional level via the event designs, especially audio and visual aspects. This can also be denoted to as an aesthetic experience.

In addition to the four quadrants, Ayob, Wahid and Omar (2011) outlined a fifth dimension, ‘festivity’ which was developed to help illustrate and examining the participants experience within the event settings (which can include in-person, virtual, and hybrid). The concept of festivity focussed on the shared and communal experience that can only occur as part of a broader collective experience (often emotional), creating a sense of shared connection or attachment (Antchak & Ramsbottom, 2020).

When designing event experiences, it is beneficial to consider the ‘realms of experience’ model and how this can be applied to the event context being developed and the differing type of audience needs. This is especially important from a hybrid event perspective as the motivations for attending will be different as

will the event experiences that are developed and how these can work in synergy with each other but without compromising the different experiences required for the different audiences.

We find in practice that designing an event experience requires an iterative process as we draw together ideas, explore options, cost out the resources needed, and design the customer journey. We go through the process of designing the event experience repeatedly adding more detail and adapting as we have more information or as things change. Developing the event design through iterations, particularly if we do so collaboratively, enables us to test and explore ideas to fulfil the event objectives and it helps to set parameters for decision making in delivery when we need to respond to changing circumstances but still achieve the same outputs.

Recommended Readings to Prepare for Case.

- i. Chapter 3 – Event and experience design in Wrathall, J., & Steriopoulos, E. (2022). *Reimagining and reshaping events: Theoretical and practical perspectives*. Oxford: Goodfellow Publishers.
- ii. Brown, T. (2021). The future of events will be hybrid. In V. Ziakas, V. Antchak, & D. Getz (Eds) (2021). *Events, crisis management and recovery: Impacts and strategies* (pp. 142-164). Oxford: Goodfellow Publishers.
- iii. Chapter 3 – Event design and production in Bladen, C., Kennell, J., Abson, E., & Wilde, N. (2018). *Events management: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Abingdon: Routledge.
- iv. Chapter 3 – Event experience in Antchak, V., & Ramsbottom, O. (2020). *The fundamentals of event design*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- v. Chapter 7 – Interactive technologies in Antchak, V., & Ramsbottom, O. (2020). *The fundamentals of event design*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Teaching Plan and Assessment Activities

This case study is designed for flexible delivery for face to face in the classroom, hybrid or online. Tools in the classroom to be used include whiteboards, marker pens, sticky notes, large pieces of paper and similar, with small groups based around tables. Students will need access to laptops for the research and presentation tasks and this means that online tools could also be used in the face-to-face sessions and this presents options for hybrid delivery with students collaborating both face to face and virtually.

In delivering this session online, educators could use breakout rooms with Padlets, MURALS, online discussion areas, Mentimeter, Kahoot, Vevox, or similar tools.

A virtual learning environment (VLE) is useful to collate all the resources needed for the case study to support both synchronous and asynchronous learning activity. The VLE could also be used to collate the presentation elements for moderation or for student portfolios if being used for formal summative assessment.

Introduction (20 min)

Introduce the key concepts in virtual and hybrid events, as well as designing event experiences. Highlight the importance in developing the consumer event experience journey to identify the difficulties they may face and how these can be resolved. Consider the following questions:

1. What are the benefits and disbenefits of virtual and hybrid events?
2. Why should event professionals be concerned with the event experience journey for events?
3. How does pricing play a role in consumer expectations?
4. What guidance do consumers need in using the technology or platforms to attend virtual or hybrid events?

Theoretical Background (15 min)

Introduce the theoretical perspectives concerning the event experience models, in particular the experience realms, and the challenges for event professionals in delivering outstanding experiences in context of higher consumer demands and expectations.

Key Concepts Applied (20 min) – Class Discussion

Based on pre-reading & case study, students to define what a virtual/hybrid event is and how it differs from a live, in-person event. Students are encouraged to share their own experiences – what have the students experienced in virtual or hybrid event experiences? What worked? Where could it have been better? What could we identify from the case study and how might we improve Imogen's experience? How do we apply the theory to designing positive event experience?

Small Group Discussion (20 min)

Discussion title - how do we map an event experience?

Key points to discuss:

- Consider how Imogen's experience in the case study could be mapped.
- Consider the benefits of mapping an event experience
- Consider the different stages of the event journey that need to be incorporated within this event experience map.
- Consider the role of technology, apps, and platforms within the event experience, and how this differs for:
 - In person events
 - Virtual events
 - Hybrid events

Small group task 1 (20 min)

Using sticky notes or equivalent, design and map out the customer experience for a conference, a festival or a celebration event as a live-in person event. Consider how you apply the Event Experience models/concepts.

Small group task 2 (20 min)

In the same groups, review and adapt the map of the customer experience for a virtual or hybrid delivery of the event concept. Consider how you apply the Event Experience models/concepts into the virtual/hybrid context. Students should begin to identify technical needs, which will include for the event team and consumer perspective.

Entire class discussion (20 min)

The groups report back on the key points and approaches they have developed as part of their discussion. Key elements/questions that should be incorporated by the groups include:

- How do virtual and hybrid event experiences differ from the live?
- We have mapped our event design. What next?
- What are the critical factors for success in creating virtual and hybrid event experiences?

Learning Activity / Assessment

In pairs research and prepare a pre-recorded presentation that examines the concept that “hybrid events are the future cornerstone of the events industry”.

The students should prepare a 10-minute pre-recorded visual and audio presentation. The presentation should include:

- Introduction and context
- Define hybrid events
- Outline the benefits of hybrid events, uses of technology and apps, perceptions of value by stakeholders and consumers, opportunities for inclusion and accessibility, and enhancing opportunities for engagement.
- Outline any potential challenges of developing hybrid events
- Propose solutions / recommendations to these.

Subject to the educator’s discretion and the context of the teaching of this case study, the presentation may be graded in accordance with the appropriate benchmarks for the level of study.

Discussion Questions and Answers

1. How and why do we map an event experience?

Considering the issues faced by Imogen, how can we visualise the customer journey? Consider from the starting point of the event concept how do the consumers engage with the event at key stages? What do they experience on this journey? How do they get to the event? What do they see, hear, smell, taste? How does the event make them feel? How does this consumer journey align to the event concept and original design? How can this be adapted for virtual and hybrid events?

2. How do we identify value for our customers?

Consider what is important to our customers – what are their pains and gains (as specified in the Value Proposition)? Where in the map does the experience alleviate a pain or enable gain? How do we resolve these?

3. How do virtual and hybrid event experiences differ from the live?

Think about using the ‘Extending the experience realm model’ from Wrathall and Steriopoulos (2022, p. 51 – figure 2 used previously). How does each quadrant differ between virtual, hybrid and in-person?

Entertainment – passive participation v absorption may / will vary in the different delivery modes (in-person, virtual, hybrid). How do we amend the entertainment / content to meet the event experience in the three formats?

Educational – active participation and an absorptive experience is a key reason people attend events and may be more appropriate in virtual and hybrid contexts due to the apps and technology that can be employed for the event experience.

Escapist – active participation and immersive event experience may be more challenging for virtual and hybrid events but must be considered as part of the event design.

Esthetic – passive participation v immersive event experiences should work well within virtual and hybrid contexts due to the enhanced audio and visual aspects, but is not guaranteed and needs to be carefully designed.

4. We have mapped our event experience design. What next?

Firstly, we need to test that the event design meets the objectives of the project and fulfils our customer needs. Then we need to start thinking about the budget, resources, operations, logistics, technology needs, and marketing and expand on the design in each of these areas to test the feasibility of the event design and develop the project plan. Skills gaps are also a key element of this task – what are event professionals proficient at undertaking and where are there gaps in their knowledge and skill set? For in-person events this will be a strong skill set, but gaps may emerge for virtual and hybrid events. How do we bridge this gap? Within the event design we also need to consider the layers of sustainability, inclusion and intended event impacts, and how this can be evaluated.

5. What are the critical success factors for creating virtual and hybrid event experiences?

Starting with considering the different stakeholders, consider how they would identify the event as being successful. What are the event objectives for the various stakeholders and are these realistic and achievable? Then explore how these objectives / CSFs might be measured – what kind of metrics or data might you need to evaluate these? Where might you gather this data from? How will you analyse and use this data? What will you learn from the results and how will you apply this learning?

8. List of references.

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Wrathall, J., & Steriopoulos, E. (2022). *Reimagining and reshaping events: theoretical and practical perspectives*. Oxford: Goodfellow Publishers.

9. Suggested Online Resources

Clark, B. (2022). How to Produce Successful Virtual Events - <https://unemployable.com/podcast/virtual-events/>

Linthicum, A. (2021). Hybrid Events in 2022: What You Need to Know - <https://www.cvent.com/en/blog/events/hybrid-events-what-you-need-know>

Plumhoff, K. (2022). The 2022 Guide to Best-In-Class Hybrid Events - <https://hopin.com/blog/what-is-a-hybrid-event>

VanCuren, O. (2021). Virtual Event Design: Top Tips for Immersive Online Experiences - <https://socio.events/blog/virtual-event-design>

Virtual Events Institute - <https://www.virtualeventsinstitute.com/>

Aventri - The Essential Virtual Meetings and Events Guide - <https://www.aventri.com/strategy/virtual-events>

Liveto - How to create an event customer journey map - <https://blog.liveto.io/en/liveto-blog/how-to-create-an-event-customer-journey-map>

Social Tables - How to Write an Event Value Proposition - <https://www.socialtables.com/?s=How+to+Write+an+Event+Value+Proposition+in+5+Easy+Steps>