The Festival Customer Experience: a conceptual framework

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Introduction

Creating customer experiences has attracted significant interest among researchers and practitioners in recent years (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Events are recognised as platforms where attendees can build a connection with a brand through memorable experiences (Whelan and Wohlfeil, 2006). Hedonic events such as festivals provide a pleasurable, temporary escape from day-to-day life where customers may be more receptive to experiences (Morgan, 2008). However, Mair and Weber (2019) note that despite the natural fit between festivals and customer experience, the domain of experiential marketing at festivals remains under-researched. Festivals provide a valuable opportunity for brands to engage and build relationships with prospective and existing customers however research on brand experiences in event marketing contexts is limited (Tafesse, 2016). Therefore, this paper responds to the call for more academic attention on event experience and specifically, building a connection between the customer experience at festivals and the brand experience (Getz et al., 2010; Mair and Weber, 2019).

Schmitt and Zarontello (2013) differentiate between customer experiences, which are marketing-related such as brand activations at festivals, and consumer experiences which focus on the consumer’s perception of their experience. This paper takes the customer experience perspective since we aim to contribute to the conceptualisation of festival customer experience from a marketing viewpoint. The customer experience at festivals can be examined from various perspectives however the few studies that exist tend to overlook the organiser’s role in key areas of the festival experience (Rivera et al., 2015; Semrad and Rivera, 2018), such as the social environment or digital use. Alternatively, studies tend to focus solely on those areas rather than considering the holistic festival experience and its dimensions (Sun et al., 2019.; Hoksbergen and Insch, 2016). There is little theoretical work which explicitly connects the digital, physical and social realms of customer experience (Bolton et al., 2018) yet it is essential to consider all three realms when successfully managing the customer experience (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). There are two main objectives of our paper. First, to contribute to theory by creating a new conceptualisation of festival customer experience based on adapting Bolton et al.’s (2018) framework of digital, physical and social realms. Second, to identify the interrelationships between the concepts in our
framework to provide insights on how festival organisers can be more effective in providing optimal conditions for brand experiences at festivals.

We begin by discussing the concept of customer experience and defining it in the context of an event or festival. Next, we propose our conceptualisation of the festival customer experience and identify different aspects of the experience based on the interrelationships between the three dominant concepts in our framework. Finally, we suggest implications for theory and practice based on our proposed conceptualisation.

The customer experience

The importance of experiences in people’s lives has long been recognised by scholars (Abbott, 1955; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). The seminal works of authors such as Pine and Gilmore (1998) and Schmitt (1999) have changed the way we view economies and popularised the idea of the customer experience as providing a competitive advantage to brands and organisations. These works have continued to influence researchers into the 21st century (Tasci and Milman, 2019), and established the concept of experiential marketing wherein value is located in the consumption itself and provides the basis for an experience-centred relationship with the customer (Chou, 2009; Schmitt and Zarantonello, 2013; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). From 2000 onwards, customer experience has also been prioritised by firms as they have become more customer-focused, recognising the value of customer experience in brand relationships as influencing behavioural outcomes such as value creation, motivation, satisfaction and loyalty (Berry and Carbone, 2007; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Palmer, 2010; Walls, 2013).

Customer experience has been variously defined and conceptualised in the literature. Experiences can be seen as outcomes that are perceived phenomenologically by individuals and are subject to psychological factors such as their mood, prior experiences and culture (Schmitt, 2011; Wolfe et al., 2019). Pine and Gilmore (1998, p. 99) define experiences as “inherently personal, existing only in the mind of an individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level” later adding that experiences are the events that stimulate the recipient on a personal level (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). On the other hand, many authors consider the customer experience from the firm’s point of view (LaSalle and Britton, 2003; Shaw and Ivens, 2005; Stuart and Tax, 2004), where the organisation designs
and delivers an experience (Bolton, 2016). Meyer and Schwager (2007, p. 2) define the customer experience as “encompassing every aspect of a company’s offering—the quality of customer care, of course, but also advertising, packaging, product and service features, ease of use, and reliability.” This can encompass the brand (Brakus et al., 2009) as well as the customer’s interaction with communication platforms made available by the firm (McCarthy and Wright, 2004).

The customer experience can also be conceptualised as a relationship between the customer and a firm’s offerings. Lemon and Verhoef (2016, p.71) define it as “a multidimensional construct focusing on a customer’s cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial, and social responses to a firm’s offerings during the customer’s entire purchase journey.” Although an experience can be considered as happening during a particular moment in time (Tuan, 1977), several authors consider the cocreation of the customer experience as happening across every direct and indirect interaction between the individual and the organisation at various touchpoints, and not just during the purchase journey (Bolton et al., 2014; Chandler and Lusch, 2015; Gentile et al., 2007; Homburg et al., 2017). The customer journey, through all the value-creating services offered, is distinct from but influences the lifeworld of the customer and together they determine the value experienced (Helkkula et al, 2012).

As the total customer experience is an accumulation of multiple processes that involve restorative, introspective, transformative, and cognitive facets, defining it from a holistic point of view is appropriate as it incorporates the individual’s and organisation’s points of view (Schmitt, 2003; Schmitt et al., 2015; Packer and Ballantyne, 2016). Several scholars also acknowledge the role other customers or customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions play in the formation of the customer’s experience (Getz, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2020; Pandey and Kumar, 2020). Edvardsson et al., (2010) take this a step further by acknowledging not only the role of social interaction but also the growing importance of technology within the total customer experience, which can span across digital, physical and social realms (Bolton et al., 2018).

The festival customer experience
Several scholars propose that for certain industries, such as music, culture, travel, hotels, theatres and especially events, customers have higher expectations of customer experience than product or service performance (Ayob et al., 2013;
Edvardsson, 2005; Holbrook, 2006; Sandström et al., 2008). The literature on customer experience in these sectors differs from the business and marketing-focused customer experience literature due to their complexity as well as the involvement of individual and multiple stakeholders in the overall experience. (Carlson et al., 2016; De Geus et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2017; Walls et al., 2011). From a holistic perspective, events and festivals are considered to be dynamic temporary ecosystems within which the customer experience is affected by various components and how well they work together (Liu et al., 2017; Biaett and Richards, 2020). Liu et al. (2017) found that sensory experience, novelty, entertainment and fun, physical environment and human interaction have an impact on the customer experience. De Geus et al. (2015), on the other hand, propose the core of the customer experience at an event involves the personal expectations and motivations of the customer as well as the event environment which consists of the physical environment, the social environment and the service environment. The engagement, involvement and interaction between the customer and the event environment determines the event experienced by the customer. There have been numerous quantitative and qualitative studies on the customer experience at events however defining and conceptualising it still remains a challenge (Biaett and Richards, 2020).

The customer experience from an event perspective has been defined as “an interaction between an individual and the event environment (both physical and social), modified by the level of engagement or involvement, involving multiple experiential elements and outputs (such as satisfaction, emotions, behaviours, cognition, memories and learning), that can happen at any point in the event journey.” (De Geus et al., 2015, p. 277). Incorporating the digital realm into this definition would extend the phenomenological experience of the contemporary live event. Additionally, the increasing integration of technology and digital interaction within events as well as conceptualisations such as smart event experiences, live-streaming theatre and the ‘phygital’ world also warrant inclusion (Bustard et al., 2019; Gyimóthy and Larson, 2015; Hammelburg, 2021; Mele et al., 2021; Mueser and Vlachos, 2018; Ryan et al., 2020). The advancement in digital devices coupled with the experience of Covid-19 has resulted in social media, digital technologies and the virtual space as a whole to grow in relevance and be crucial to the event customer experience (Ballantyne and Nilsson, 2017; Davies, 2021; Koetsier, 2020; Stileman and Nyren, 2020; Leeuwen et
The customer experience has now moved beyond the physical boundaries of the event and into the online digital environment wherein the experience can have even more of an impact on customer outcomes than the actual experience itself (Benoit et al., 2017; Sands et al., 2011; Wood and Kenyon, 2018); therefore the digital environment needs to be included in the contemporary festival customer experience.

**Brand experience at festivals**

Organisations recognise the potential of the customer experience at festivals to form strong brand relationships which lead to positive brand attitudes and brand loyalty amongst attendees (Ballouli et al. 2018; Chen et al., 2011; Shin et al., 2018). By understanding and managing the key aspects that form the customer experience at festivals, event managers can provide the optimal conditions for brands to form stronger relationships with their target audience (Manthiou et al., 2014; Rivera et al., 2015). Brand experiences are contextually embedded (Tafesse, 2016) so brands must be carefully placed within festival settings to evoke the best brand experience with prospective and existing customers.

**Conceptual Framework**

We follow Jaakkola’s (2020) advice in adopting a research design which provides a systematic approach to fulfil the objectives of our conceptual paper: 1. to propose a conceptualisation of festival customer experience and 2. to draw on this conceptualisation to provide insights into how festivals can better manage customer experiences. We have selected the theory adaptation research design (Jaakkola, 2020) since we intend to adapt an existing theory of customer experience to the specific context of festivals. First, we begin with Bolton et al.’s (2018) conceptualisation of the customer experience within the digital, physical and social realms developed for business-to-business and business-to-consumer markets. The literature suggests that festivals may be different than traditional marketing contexts due to their complexity, stakeholder involvement and customers’ higher expectations (see previous section on Festival Customer Experience). Therefore is a need to adapt this theory for festivals. Second, we conduct a literature review on customer experience and experiential marketing relating to the leisure, tourism and events industries between 2000-2021 using Scopus, the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature (Elsevier, 2021). It was not the aim of our paper to conduct a systematic literature
review, rather to gain an overview of the main areas of literature which can support our conceptual framework for festival customer experience. We conducted searches using keywords such as “customer”, “attendee”, “experience”, “experiential”, “marketing”, “events” and “festivals” which were variously combined and entered into Scopus to get the initial articles which all had at least one of the keywords present in the title, abstract, or keywords. Third we refined our initial key word searches by selecting articles which included any of Bolton et al.’s (2018) three realms of customer experience: digital, physical or social realms. During this phase, it became apparent from reviewing the literature that for events and festivals, the physical realm was encompassed within the larger concept of event design. Event design has a larger conceptual scope as it includes aspects of the physical realm but also other aspects that are beyond the physical environment such as the design of programmes and connecting attendees’ values with the event’s experiential initiatives (Björner and Berg, 2012; Morgan, 2008; Pearce and Zare, 2017; Wong et al., 2014). Therefore, we replaced the physical realm with event design in our conceptualisation of the festival customer experience.

Our review of the literature clearly identified three dominant, recurring and interrelated concepts which are integral to the festival customer experience: event design, social environment and digital environment (see Figure 1) along with the relevant literature supporting them (listed in Table 1). Table 1 shows that existing studies which provide insights into the event customer experience generally focus on one or two of these concepts but not all three. Therefore, there is a gap for a conceptualisation of festival customer experience which includes all three concepts. The literature reviewed shows event design, social environment and digital environment to be dominant concepts underpinning the festival customer experience. However, in order to manage customer experience successfully, we need to understand the interrelationships between these concepts (Bolton et al., 2018). Therefore we analysed the literature selected to find the bases for interrelationships between the concepts of event design, social environment and digital environment. We found five bases for interrelationships which we present in the Findings section, drawing on relevant literature which offers insights into the management of the festival customer experience. We then discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of these interrelationships in the context of festival customer experience and brand experiences at festivals.

*Insert Table I here*
Findings

Embedding design in planning and controlling the customer experience

Using an event design perspective in planning can ensure a holistic view of the event ecosystem within which the event experience is embedded. Event experience designers recognise a potential gap between the event experience organisers would like to deliver and the actual event experienced by the customer (Berridge, 2012). The event experience design framework, proposed by Berridge (2020), calls for more design awareness by organisers during the planning and managing of the event so that design forms the basis of all the actions taken in planning the experience. Festival organisers can benefit from tools such as the visitor journey method, blueprinting, journey mapping and the experience design board to help create emotionally appealing customer experiences and bring about real design changes to enhance the event experience (Halvorsrud et al., 2016; Lim and Kim, 2018; Petermans et al., 2013; Peperkamp et al., 2015; Stienmetz et al., 2021). Design elements, when employed the right way, facilitate the positive creation of experiences and emotional connection for attendees (Nelson, 2009). When they are effectively used for experiential sponsorship activations within events, design principles can overcome the unpredictable nature of sponsorship (Gillooly et al., 2017).

The social environment within which customers operate is where experiences are co-created and collective consumption takes place (Närvänen et al., 2014; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015a; Verhoef et al., 2009). In addition to interactions between festival customers which happen organically or due to a shared kinship by a subgroup of attendees, festival organisers can design staged customer-to-customer (C2C) encounters which positively affect the customer experience (Wei et al., 2017b). Event design elements should not be limited to the event location but most also involve the digital environment (Richards et al., 2014). Developments in technology now allow the evaluation of customers’ experiences in real-time which in turn facilitates the application of event design principles to affect customer behaviour in real-time as well (Brown and Hutton, 2013). Using a design perspective in event planning allows for more of the experience to be designed to satisfy pre-determined outcomes and less of the experience to be unpredictable.
Involving stakeholders in co-creating value and avoiding value destruction

Orefice (2018) suggests that events practitioners should push their thinking on event design past problem solving and towards the active involvement of stakeholders as co-designers of value, and synchronise the resources involved in the event. If the design elements are not unified and coordinated or if customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions are not well designed and managed, this could lead to the co-destruction of value and negative customer experiences (Grove et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2017). Designing festivals that connect with values shared by the audience, such as green initiatives and waste management increases the perceived value of the experience and can result in increased spending (Morgan, 2008; Pearce and Zare, 2017; Wong et al., 2014).

Experiential events can facilitate the co-creation of brand value and experience by providing avenues to develop customer generated content that is disseminated using online platforms such as Instagram (Koivisto and Mattila, 2018; Roncha and Radclyffe-Thomas, 2016). Brands and sponsors can build strong relationships with customers when positive festival experiences are combined with active online engagement (Hudson et al., 2015; MacKay et al., 2017). Online platforms and technology at events should be designed to contribute to the attendees’ experience and memories rather than interfere with them (Winkle et al., 2019). Social media platforms can be used to engage with attendees on inputs for event activities (e.g. crowdsourcing) or create communities amongst the event attendees for a better experience before, during and after the event (Carlson et al., 2016; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015b). Disengaged customers may not fully enjoy the event experience so organisations need to incorporate creative experiential offerings to strengthen the customer experience (Nardini et al., 2019). For example, the Boomtown festival offers coach services from popular cities such as London to the festival location which adds to the overall festival experience through providing stress-free transport with onboard entertainment and opportunity for social interaction (Boomtown, 2022).

Providing opportunities for customer-to-customer engagement and interaction

Customer-to-customer (C2C) experiences and interactions have been found to positively influence future behavioural intentions (Kharouf et al., 2020). Interactions amongst customers play a major role in the experience of the individual so parts of the event, such as programmes and services, should be designed to create positive
experiences associated with the interactions (Nordvall et al., 2014). Designing interactive event programmes can lead to positive co-creation of participant experience and turn passive audiences into active participants (Björner and Berg, 2012). Festival organisers should consider three major opportunities for social interactions which involve customers: socialising with groups or people they know; socialising with new people they meet; and interacting with the entire audience as a whole (Nordvall et al., 2014). The different ways in which customers connect with each other can affect the overall experience differently. Designing group experiences needs to take into account that the number of people sharing the experience can positively or negatively affect the individual experience as it may be crowded for some but lonely for others (Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003). Customers tend to socialise with people they know even if meeting new people may bring them pleasure or benefits (Wei et al., 2017a). The customer’s social level of comfort must be correctly predicted to facilitate the right amount of C2C interaction (Levy, 2010). When social spaces within an event are provided to facilitate interaction and a positive experience, they can facilitate positive emotions (Doyle et al., 2016). The level of excitement amongst customers in a group setting can also have an impact on the event and, to a certain extent, on their behaviour as well (Kim et al., 2019).

Knowledge exchange and social-emotional support influence the customer experience and group identity; with social-emotional support having greater significance (Wei et al., 2017a). Due to the advancement of digital devices, customers can move beyond physical boundaries and cultivate a social presence online (Benoit et al., 2017; Sands et al., 2011). C2C interactions can positively or negatively affect customer expectations, and in turn their experience, or the organisation’s objectives through word of mouth and online reviews (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011). Furthermore, online competitions that engage fans and facilitate interaction can bring about positive emotions and relationships that enhance customer experiences (Doyle et al., 2016). For customers who experience events online, the content engagement, communication and C2C interaction are factors that affect the online experience as well as current and future behavioural intentions (Kharouf et al., 2020).

**Personalising festival experiences for different customer segments and needs**
Customer experience may differ depending on the status of the attendee within a group or subculture and their level of knowledge about the product or service therefore, marketing and design initiatives should be tailored towards different types of customers within an event (Koch and Sauerbronn, 2018). Social media can be used to satisfy different functional, social and emotional needs of attendees (Wei et al., 2017c). Digital technologies allow for the personalization of content and immersive experiences for customers (Parise et al., 2016). This advancement does, however, lead to higher customer expectations and demand for changes in experience delivery by organizations to meet customer needs on an instant basis (Lemon, 2016; Parise et al., 2016). Online engagement and digital device use vary from customer to customer due to various factors such as performance expectancy, pleasure derived from using digital devices, habit and age. Understanding these variations amongst customers and using online platforms as well as technology in line with the variations can enhance the customer experience (Winkle et al., 2019). For example, for older customers, events have been found to be more significant than online tools in building brand relationships and experiences; digital technologies may complement face-to-face interactions but not replace them (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). However, for younger customers, digital marketing strategies and festival integrated marketing communications that positively communicate the brand and provide customer service through social media can strengthen brand experience, brand image transfer and brand relationship quality, (Strand and Robertson, 2020).

Online communities provide a good starting point to initiate C2C interactions from which customer information and expectations can be gathered to help provide a more satisfying tailored experience (Torres and Orlowski, 2016). Websites such as Meet Up can be used to foster such relationships as they provide online spaces for communities of people with common interests to be formed (Meetup, 2020). Shared customer experiences at brand community events can enhance the brand’s image as well as the relationships amongst brand community members (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010).

**Enabling customers to design their own experience**

Digital technologies allow for the personalization of content and immersive experiences for customers (Parise et al., 2016). Digital tools such as applications on mobile devices as well as big data analytical software allow customers to map their customer journey
through various formats that can range from pictures to locations which in turn allows for the evaluation of the touchpoints within and facilitates thorough journey mapping. (Stickdorn et al., 2014; Stienmetz and Fesenmaier, 2019; Stienmetz et al., 2021).

Mobile applications that are customer focused enhance experiences of festivals if they provide a functional requirement such as scheduling as well as personalization of content delivery pre, during and post event (Luxford and Dickinson, 2015). Boomtown’s festival app allows for the personalisation of programme timetables to be created within the app as well as features to chat, locate people physically and socialise with other attendees thus enhancing the overall festival experience (Boomtown, 2019).

Depending on the complexity of the content to be shared, the online platforms can be utilised with or without moderators to enhance the customer experience whilst being cost effective for the organization (Malek et al., 2018). These online platforms for events provoke as well moderate online word-of-mouth and, depending on the relationship built, influence customers’ emotions, attachment and experience (Hudson et al., 2015). Designing opportunities to create and share memories of the experience online can have more of an impact on customer attitude and behaviour than the actual experience (Wood and Kenyon, 2018).

Implications for the Festival Customer Experience

Theoretical contributions

We propose a new conceptualisation of the Festival Customer Experience adapted from Bolton et al.’s (2018) depiction of the customer experience within the digital, physical and social realms. Our review of the literature found that in the context of festival customer experience, event design encompasses the physical realm but also other aspects such as the values which connect attendees with the event’s experiential activities. Therefore, we conceptualise the festival customer experience as based on three interrelated concepts: event design, social environmental and digital environment. Based on evidence from the literature, we consider each concept to be core to the festival customer experience and propose that it is crucial to recognise the interrelationships between them as they offer further insights into the management of festival customer experience. Previous studies from the leisure, tourism and events industries have focused on one or two of these concepts as the basis for customer experience but not all three together. Focusing on all three aspects provides a more holistic understanding of the contemporary festival
customer experience as well as its intersections and how they can be managed to improve the overall experience. We have identified five areas within the festival customer experience based on the interrelationships between event design, social environment and digital environment: embedding design in planning and controlling the customer experience; involving stakeholders in co-creating value and avoiding value destruction; providing opportunities for customer-to-customer engagement and interaction; personalising festival experiences for different customer segments and needs; and enabling customers to design their own experience.

Our discussion of these five areas based on our conceptual framework provides a starting point for researchers to build understanding of how interrelationships between event design, social environment and digital environment can be managed to create effective festival customer experiences. As brands are contextually embedded within festivals, the customer experience provides a unique opportunity to form a connection between the festival and brand. As this area has been underresearched (Getz et al., 2010; Mair and Weber, 2019), we propose further research needs to be conducted to refine these interrelationships, examine how they are related and so further develop our understanding of the festival customer experience concept.

Managerial Implications

Managing the event design, social environment, digital environment and their interrelationships is key to successfully managing festival customer experience and brand experiences at festivals. We have identified five interrelated areas of the festival customer experience based on our conceptual framework which offer managerial implications for festival organisers and guidance on improving the management of brand experiences at festivals.

First, building event design into the event planning process can ensure that there is more control over the event experience so pre-determined outcomes are more likely to be achieved. The brand experience needs to be built into this process of design planning to achieve the brand’s and festival’s objectives. Second, brands are a key stakeholder in co-creating value and avoiding value destruction in the festival experience therefore customer value needs to be considered when designing sponsorship or promotional activities for brands at festivals so as to enhance the
festival experience and form a connection with a specific brand. Third, brands can place a key role in enhancing customer engagement and interaction. The example of Youtube Shorts at Wireless Festival shows how brands can encourage engagement through offering customers something of value. Youtube shorts offered fans prizes such as artist meet and greets, upgrading to VIP tickets or tickets for the following year’s festival for attendees who created online content on Youtube Shorts of themselves or their friends with the tag #Wireless (Courtney, 2022).

Fourth, festival organisers and brand managers need to acquire a deep understanding of customer segments and their needs in order to personalise their experiential marketing strategies based on customer preferences. It is important not to adopt a “one size fits all” approach since experiential marketing may not always yield positive results when associated with brands depending on the customer profile and subculture. Fifth, enabling customers to design their own experiences, requires knowledge of customer behaviour as well as the skills and resources to manage and coordinate festival and brand communications and digital technologies so the festival customer experience appears seamless. This can be a challenge as the timeline of the festival customer experience has been extended due to the ubiquitous digital environment which enables customers to co-create their festival experience in their own time through their preferred channels.

**Conclusion**

Our paper contributes to the customer experience and event experience literature by extending our conceptual understanding of the festival customer experience based on the interrelationships between event design, social environment and digital environment. By managing these interrelationships, marketers can take advantage of the positive effects of the festival customer experience and create stronger relationships with customers for sponsoring brands. Festival organisers and brand managers can coordinate and harmonise the event design, social environment and digital environment to provide an optimal festival customer experience. This paper conceptualises a framework for festival customer experiences and provides a basis for further research in this emerging and promising area.
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Figure 1. Conceptual framework: the Festival Customer Experience
### Table 1: Supporting literature for the festival customer experience conceptualisation

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