AN EXPLORATION OF THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH EASING THE ANXITIES OF EVENT ATTENDEES DUE TO COVID-19, AN IRISH PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The Irish event management industry was instructed to close over 18 months ago due to the worldwide coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. As a result, Irish eventgoers have been starved of entertainment as they were directed to stay at home. Now 18 months into the pandemic, the event industry is slowly staring to reopen with caution. The purpose of this study is to understand how event organisers can better prepare for those attendees who can exhibit anxiety when attending events during and post pandemic. This paper assesses the current situation of the event management industry in Ireland with particular reference to the duty of care event organisers have towards event attendees. An integrative review was conducted to gather information from journal articles, government publications and policies, as well as blogs written by event professionals. The results of the research convey the importance of communication in helping to mitigate worries of event attendees. The study also puts emphasis on event organisers understanding the anxieties which attendees may exhibit. Finally, this research highlights deficits in the literature where more research will assess better understanding of the anxieties of event attendees.

Keywords: event management; COVID-19; anxiety; communication; security.

1. Introduction

The world is currently living through the reality of COVID-19 and the implications it has had, and will have, on society. Due to the nature of the virus, and its novelty amongst virologists, everyone is learning more information about it each day. With the threat that events bring to the spread of the virus, the event management industry has been severely hit with most events cancelled or changed to an online or virtual (hybrid) setting. Few researchers in academia have addressed the anticipated challenges of getting attendees back to events and this research contends that this challenge of is particular significance given that the event sector in Ireland is currently at a standstill (Leahy, 2021). Our knowledge of COVID-19 in the context of the event industry is largely based on limited data, especially in Ireland. However, many industry professionals have expressed such concerns and is the primary focus of the ensuing literature review.

The World Health Organisation (hereafter WHO) defines COVID-19 as a virus that is "transmitted from person to person through respiratory droplets and contact with contaminated surfaces, and the risk of transmission appears to be proportional to the closeness (less than 1 metre) and frequency of the interaction between an infected individual and an individual who is not infected" (WHO, 2020a). On 29th May 2020, the WHO (2020b) published a document titled "Key planning recommendations for mass gatherings in the context of COVID-19" where they declared that events could magnify the transmission of the virus, which could potentially obstruct the countries response capabilities

The intention of this paper is to discuss the current state of the Irish event industry as a result of the impact of the global pandemic and will specifically explore the factors associated with easing the anxieties that event attendees may have as the industry begins to slowly reopen.

2. An Irish Context

According to Event Industry Ireland (hereafter EII) (2021), the Irish event industry generates an estimated €3.5 billion towards the Irish economy on an annual basis. Furthermore, the industry creates €850 million towards the Irish export market, while employing an estimated 45,000 workers. In recent years, Ireland's entertainment scene has dramatically grown to be one of the most vibrant in Europe, being recognised increasingly by top artists. On 12th March 2020, the Irish event sector was mandated to close due to the COVID-19 crises and is yet to fully reopen. In Ireland, a new organisation was formed called Event Industry Ireland, to help those affected in the industry by COVID-19 (Burne, 2020). The organisation stressed that the sector faces a long and uncertain period as operations begin to resume in accordance with Government guidelines. Research conducted by EII conveys those organisers are fearful to whether the sector will ever return to pre-Covid-19 levels, with 44% of professionals reporting that 80% of their business has already been cancelled and only a fifth of them has business rescheduled for 2021 (Traynor, 2020).

In June 2020, the EII issued an open letter to the Government of Ireland calling for support for the Irish event industry. In section 5.6 of the letter the group called for *"A cultural change amongst event attendees is necessary, as an industry we will promote the adoption of standardised messaging with regard to new rules that have been implemented for attendee's protection along with offering transparency regarding new safety and sanitary practices"* (Event Industry Alliance, 2020).

In a new world of learning to live with the virus, many potential attendees fear partaking in events, and most are likely to expect higher health and safety measures and standards. With the recent announcement of one of Ireland's largest festivals Electric Picnic refused a licence for their 2021 festival, attendees are left pondering as to whether events are safe to attend. How do event organisers get attendees back to events while also keeping them safe in a world where assurance is shaken, and peace of mind is threated? As a large part of the event organiser's role is building and establishing a sense of trust with attendees and in understanding how attendees can trust again, the concept of security is of relevance.

2.1 Security

It is apparent from literature that it is challenging to give an exact definition of security. Manunta (1999), describes the exhausting debate on its nature and scope due to the broad understanding of its connotation. Baldwin (1997), depicts how Wolfers commonly characterises all aspects of security as the absence of threats, as it summarises the fundamental idea of security. In event management, Silvers (2008) believes security to be the ability of upholding a safe and secure setting, while protecting both individuals and property.

Traditionally, security was purely considered a military concept which emerged from practices after the First World War. It was not until after the end of the Cold War in 1991 that the 'traditional' concept of security was re-envisioned. Rothschild (1995), suggests that this period brought a new way of thinking about the term security to include social, environmental and human threats which all are important to this research. In the event management industry, the perception of security radically changed in the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001 attacks in New York. Event organisers saw an increase in security costs as part of budgets and also a change in stakeholder expectations. Event professionals had to learn how to compromise and balance between security and enjoyment for attendees (Taylor and Toohey, 2005).

The literature argues that absolute security is unattainable as it difficult to mitigate all existing threats, especially when it is based only on knowledge of pre-existing threats to one's security. Staisiunas (2015) believes the only instance where which attendees would not be at risk is to not hold the event. Zender (2009), prompted a new concept where attention should be focused to the mind of a person, as he believes that security is a subjective condition that is all in the mind.

The Event Management Body of Knowledge (EMBOK, 2006) recognised the risk management of events as one of the five knowledge fields necessary for the correct management. In the planning of an event, the literature indicates that planning should begin with a risk assessment taking into account an examination of the venue and the potential harms that can occur if they are not addressed.

Risk assessments serve as a blueprint for the number of security officers that may be needed. It will also lay the groundwork for other resources that security may require to have a successful and protected event.

With the event industry flourishing in recent years, it has also brought the need for security in many different forms. It can be argued that for live events, the most important type of security is physical. In the context of events specifically, security can be defined as a service that gives event organisers the peace of mind, they need to enhance the attendee's experience, without compromising the safety of event participants or the veracity of critical assets. The amount and type of security is dependent on the type of event, but event organisers agree that they have a duty of care to their attendees (Noggin, 2021).

2.2 Duty of Care

In the event sector, the phrase "duty of care" is a common law that describes the actions that event organisers take to ensure the prevention of any foreseeable risks to any individuals who are affected by and involved in an event. These individuals include the audience, staff, performers, suppliers and event staff (Dublin City Council Events Unit, 2012).

Hinds (2019), states that Irish Tort Law here comes into place as a fundamental legal principal which is applied to all events. This involves taking reasonable care to avoid risks that may injure any individuals associated with the event.

For event organisers to comply by the duty of care law there are some important proactive actions that can be taken. These obligations include the event organisers to perform proper due diligence when obtaining an appropriately permitted location and venue, that meets all public safety requirements (Reid and Ritchie, 2011). A thorough risk assessment should be conducted to take factors such as the weather, location, fire risks and child protection into consideration and the best contingency plan to have in place for the risk. The development of emergency procedures for the event with evacuation, security and law enforcement plans should also be put in place (Event Duty of Care, 2019).

It is important for event managers and law enforcement agencies to manage both the space within the venue, as well as the surrounding streetscape, in order to ensure the safe movement of people in, out and around the venue. Event organisers have a duty of care to provide a safe and enjoyable environment for attendees and staff alike (IRFU, 2019). As such, it is vital for organisers to undertake a complete risk assessment of the event, starting with the risk register. It is paramount for organisers to be aware of exactly what they should be protecting themselves against, and at the heart of any event's resilience to threats is its risk register. The risk register is a key risk management tool that helps identify and plan for the risks it may face and the best ways to counteract them.

In Section 4.1 of the 'Guidelines for the Safe Presentation of Festivals and Live Events' (2021), factors of consideration pertaining to the risk of COVID-19 transmission are outlined as followed.

• The length of an activity.
• The numbers involved in an activity.
• Whether direct contact is part of an activity.
• Whether close proximity is part of an activity.
• Contact-group characteristics (e.g. family group, same households, pods).
• The environment in which an activity occurs (e.g. outdoors versus indoors).
• Event or work takes place in poorly ventilated spaces.
• Any audience involvement considering sing along or call and response type audience engagement

In recognition that potential attendees have potentially heighten awareness of such concerns, this study contends that communication is a key influence in managing and alleviating such anxieties and worries of attendees.

2.3 Communication

The importance of communication with attendees is significant in the context of event management. Harcastle-Geedes (2020) of PCMA blog, reported the importance of event organisers to be pro-active and consistent with communication to attendees during this time of uncertainty, and more importantly as the industry begins to reopen. Harcastle-Geedes (2020) in her analysis expressed the need from attendees to access all the information they can gather about an event, and the importance of organisers communicating the truth to them by communicating the realistic risk of attending events while the virus is still spreading.

The authors of the Eventbrite Blog (2020) drew similarities by discussing transparent communication between organisers and attendees where they stress the importance of honest and consistent communication which in turn can increase customer loyalty. They also noted the importance of organisers being sensitive to the anxieties and anticipated queries of attendees. Interestingly, in both discussions the authors pointed out that if organisers stay silent at this time of uncertainty, it can fuel anxieties amongst attendees and be the cause of rumours spreading. Therefore, both blogs concluded that communication at a time where government guidelines are lacking and sometimes unclear, it is the responsibility and previously discussed duty of care of the organisers to be clear with their communication. Similarly, in Croke Park, Ireland's state of the art sport and event venue draw similarities with the previously discussed. Organisers in the venue understand that some attendees may be slightly reluctant and even uncertain about attending an event. Croke Park have stated that events should be organised with these attendees in mind, while going one step further to ensure security measures which may help in mitigating any anxieties which attendees may experience. The most important part of their statement is that they believe these extra measures should be clearly communicated, with the opportunity for attendees to voice concerns or clarification before the event (Croke Park, 2021). The Arts Council and Fáilte Ireland produced a document in 2021 titled 'Guidelines for the Safe Presentation of Festivals and Live Events', where they too stress the importance of communication with attendees. However, in contrast to the Eventbrite Blog and Croke Park, the authors describe those attendees should be informed prior to the event that responsibility for managing risks associated with the virus lies with themselves. While communicative with attendees effectively is crucial, literature also indicates that even before communicating with customers, a basic understanding of possible anxieties is required.

2.4 Understanding Anxiety

The event industry throughout the world is beginning, albeit in many different forms and sizes, to slowly open its doors to attendees. For example, in the United Kingdom the Formula 1 British Grand Prix went ahead with over 140,000 attendees track side (Richards, 2021). Furthermore, American football events have been given the go ahead in the United States with almost full attendance (Johnson, Galvan and Skretta, 2020). In Ireland however, the industry is still holding pilot events in order to gather information before fully opening its doors to attendees. With this reopening of society, brings anxious feelings from people who have spent close to 18 months being instructed to stay at home to protect themselves. The notion of collectiveness was changed, as the world was told to stay together, we must first stay apart.

As a result of these changes, making attendees feel comfortable at events has become somewhat of a challenge for event organisers. Although not necessarily true for all individuals who have been starved of live entertainment, event organisers need to be aware of those who may feel uncomfortable and anxious when dropped back in a crowded event setting. In order to do so, event professionals must first understand what causes anxiety amongst attendees, which in most instances is impossible as everyone has a different perception of what causes risk to them. Event professional, Tracy Ring (2021) explained how being transparent with COVID-19 procedures can instil trust in attendees, as they can become acquainted with protocols event before attending the event. Event professionals also suggest the importance of event evaluation and allowing attendees to give their opinions and feedback regarding their experience at the event. This feedback is crucial to event organisers because it is first-hand information as to what is making their attendees feel anxious. Analysing this feedback can allow the managers to implement procedures at the next event to help mitigate these feelings experienced by attendees.

3. Method

This Integrative review was conducted on past theoretical literature to allow for a comprehensive understanding of a specific phenomenon (Broome 1993), it this case COVID-19 and the event management industry. This paper encompasses research gathered from primary research studies as well as other documents such as blogs and government policies. Irish government publications as well as blogs written by event professionals were also utilised for this paper.

4. Results

The aim of this paper is to discuss the current state of the Irish event industry as a result of the global pandemic. Currently as of August 2021, the Irish event industry effectively remains closed apart from pilot events held in conjunction with the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. This has resulted in many event professionals lobbying the government for a roadmap on reopening the industry.

As well as that, the study aimed to explore the factors associated with easing the anxieties of event attendees now that the event industry. After conducting an integrative review of current literature, it became evident that communication is an importance factor for event professionals to consider when organising events. However as stated previously, the communication needs to be transparent and very clear to build trust with the attendees. Moreover, event professionals understanding the anxieties and concerns that these attendees experience is also a crucial factor is getting attendees back to events both during and post pandemic situations.

5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

This research topic is reflective of significant societal issues today and is a global concern if the ever-changing situation across the globe indicate. It is anticipated that this study will extend our theoretical understanding of the relationship between event security and an event organisers duty of care by building on the literature in this field of study, as well as understanding the important factors to consider when trying to persuade attendees back to events. Furthermore, exploring this research topic will provide practical assistance for event organisers in terms of informing event security provision and marketing strategies. As such, this study helps contribute to problem identification within the event sector.

In the current situation that the world is in, our world leaders are sending the message that 'to be together, we need to stay apart'. It is hoped that the findings from this research will help to establish the ways in which event organisers can help to mitigate these worries. This research evaluated possible factors associated when event organisers are considering plans to help ease attendees back to events, without comprising the enjoyment of the attendee's event experience.

To conclude, in a world where we are learning to live with the COVID-19 virus, anxiety is very prevalent in society, which is especially true in the events industry. As the Irish event industry is slower to reopen that the rest of Europe, Irish event professionals have the time to consider which factors may contribute to helping attendees feel more at ease when at events. There is no event that is exempt from risk, nor can event organisers wholly mitigate risks. Event organisers have a duty of care to their attendees, which includes keeping them safe. Following this review of the literature this study concludes that communication with attendees and event organisers is significant in furthering our understanding of causes of attendee's anxiety. While it is important to note that not all attendees will suffer from anxious emotions when at events, it is imperative to consider what can be done to help those that may have a harder time reintroducing themselves to crowded settings.

Finally, primary research needs to be conducted to identify the specific anxieties experienced by attendees, which could be included in event evaluations as discussed earlier. In addition, assessing the relationship between event security and marketing strategies could be effective for event professionals, especially during these unprecedented times. The final recommendation for further research would be the importance of an event organisers duty of care, as there was an evident dearth of knowledge in current literature regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and how the event professions duty of care has changed, if at all, as a result.

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