

Experiencing the Flash Mob: *Meanings and Experiences in an Unplanned Event in Singapore*

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ABSTRACT

The flash mob phenomenon while capturing public interests and trending globally on social media, has not been comprehensively investigated conceptually. While this contemporary topic has been examined by authors in a small number of disciplines, its investigation and conceptualization within event studies has been limited. This study explores the phenomenon of flash mobs from an experiential and psychological perspective. Specifically, it investigates the dimensions of personal and social experiences and meanings within the context of flash mobs as unplanned and spontaneous events from an Asian perspective. Data for this study was gathered using the specific example of a flash mob created and performed by a group of 45 students at a mall in Singapore, themed around the Lunar New Year festivities. Qualitative interviews, semi-structured questionnaires, observation and post-activity focus group were employed to collect narratives from participants (flash mobbers) and audience in this exploratory study.

Keywords: Flash mobs; Unplanned events; Event experiences; Social meanings; personal meanings

INTRODUCTION

The flash mob, a fascinating contemporary event phenomenon of the 21st century, has been intriguing societies globally. Since 2003, commuters, shoppers, pedestrians, and politicians globally have been confronted unexpectedly and shocked, at times bemused by the flocking of seemingly unrelated people gathering in central urban public spaces globally. Spectators are confused and perplexed by the nonsensical actions, which may be in the form of shouting slogans or dancing in unison, in visibly timed sequence, and dispersing as quickly after the activity has taken place, without much communication with each other (Brejzek, 2010). Essentially, a flash mob is a semi-spontaneous, one-off event which occurs when a group of people, known or unknown to each other, come together to collectively perform an unusual or attention arresting activity, or creative scene in a public space according to predetermined instructions, and then randomly disperse (Duran, 2007; Salmond, 2010).

The flash mob phenomenon while capturing public interests and trending globally on social media in recent years across a wide variety of themes and locations, has not been comprehensively investigated conceptually. This contemporary topic has been previously examined by authors in a small number of disciplines, particularly in the social sciences and marketing; however, its investigation and conceptualization within event studies has been limited. This study explores the phenomenon of flash mobs from an experiential and psychological perspective. Specifically, it investigates the dimensions of personal and social experiences and meanings within the context of flash mobs as unplanned and spontaneous events from an Asian perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Flash mobs: A 20th Century Phenomena

Coined flash mobs by their founder Bill Wasik, Senior editor of Harper's Magazine in 2003, these participatory, temporary and ephemeral events are a form of cultural phenomenon and a physicalization of "viral culture" (Wasik, 2009). In their inception, flash mobs were essentially a simple social experiment. Wasik initiated the first flash mob and his intend was to design an event that was "short lived" and a sensation that would attract extraordinary attention (Wasik, 2009 p.6). Some hundred people gathered at Macy's, a department store in New York, and enquired about a \$10,000 love rug. They discussed among themselves and with the salespersons about purchasing the rug for their free-love commune and then after ten minutes dispersed. While disrupting the normal flow of activities, they created a scene, a stage and an event (Gore, 2010). While Wasik's first mob might be inexplicable, there was an element of planning, choreography and design. However, the flash mobs that followed Wasik's initial collective activity often demonstrated no intent, no strategy, no position (Brejzek, 2010). Improv Everywhere, a New York based group and an early innovator in the flash mob genre, has organized many popular international flash mob events. Its most famous flash mob was called the Frozen Grand Central where more than two hundred New Yorkers mysteriously froze in place in the main concourse of the Grand Central Terminal. The shocked and amazed crowd in the terminal paused, watched and experienced a multitude of emotions ranging from confusion, anxiety, amusement, wonder and irritation. However, after about five minutes of disruption, the frozen human bodies reanimated, and dissipated and faded into the crowd. The spectators applauded though they had no idea what had happened (Gore, 2010).

Flash mobs are now a global phenomenon, created in places as diverse as Teheran, Caracas, Singapore, Hong Kong and Paris. Their sheer numbers and variety have challenged the generalization of flash mobs. Salmond (2010) defines a flash mob as a semi-spontaneous community that forms in a public space for the purpose of performance. Brevity defines the flash mob. The term flash denotes a sudden, overwhelming and unpredictable movement and thus flash mobs are by the definition abrupt and ephemeral (Muse, 2010). The concept of a mob symbolizes mobile, nimble and active crowd that move with puzzling swiftness (Su, 2005). Thus, flash mobs are in principle outbreaks of precisely coordinated chaos, a form of group behavior that departs from the expected public norms (Muse, 2010). The group convenes for a relatively specific goal or purpose and the participants often do not share familiarity (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996). The events are open to anyone within reach of a social network (Gore, 2010). Examples include pillow fighting, freezing on the spot, staring at a blank wall, (Gardiner, 2003), and gathering to dance to music playing on their iPods. Being technologically-driven, flash mob instructions of the location, time and performance information are often distributed via digital communication and social networks (Grant, Bal, & Parent, 2012). Moreover, flash mobbers often film or photograph themselves, paying special attention to capture the reactions from the astonished spectators and later distributing the videos or photos on social media.

The guiding rules of flash mobs are that they should be in short duration (about five minutes), be harmless, peaceful and involve an element of silliness or fun. Johnson (2003) advocated that good flash mobs should avoid places of business, are apolitical, do not disrupt traffic or alarm public and avoid violence. Basically, the purpose of the flash mob is to challenge status quo and use the public space in a unique and memorable manner (Salmond, 2010). The attraction and motivation of the event is the intrinsic shock value and surprise element. While many characterize flash mobs as outbursts of joy, these strange appearances in the crowd gain much of their appeal from their strange aura: unsettling associations of sudden appearance and quick disappearance (Muse, 2010). Flash mobs have the fascinating potential to create liminal and mysterious experiences for its participants and audience. Although there is no intention to distress the crowd,

flash mobs often generate considerable unease and momentarily affect people's sense of stability (Muse, 2010).

Flash mobs as unplanned events

There is substantial research and discussion in academic literature on planned events. Widespread attention in broadcast media is given to planned events such as entertainment and sports, political events, conferences/exhibitions, and private events.

“Planned event are live, social events created to achieve specific outcomes, including those related to business, the economy, culture, society and environment. Event planning involves the design and implementation of themes, setting, consumables, services and programs that suggest, facilitate or constrain experiences for participants, guests, spectators and other stakeholders. (Getz, 2012 p.40).

The above suggests that planned events are characterized by explicit goals and outcomes that are specified by the event producers and are influenced by key stakeholders. Planned events involve detailed planning and scheduling to create explicit experiences for the participants and audience. As producers and event managers are formally held accountable for the outcomes of the events, there are controls being imposed by the various stakeholders.

However, unplanned events, in contrast are categorically different from planned events that have been the focus of event management studies, although the distinction is sometimes blurred (Getz, 2012). Although public authorities show less tolerance for such forms of social phenomena, there has been an increase in spontaneous mass celebrations, marketing activities and social protests that reflect the nature of unplanned events. An unplanned event's purpose is self-defined and the intentions of the participants might be unclear, diverse and event contradictory. There is no clear programming and the activities are spontaneous, and the actions may become rather unpredictable. Normally self-authored by individuals, there is no organizational involvement or legal entity held accountable, resulting in the lack of controls and management systems. In the context of flash mobs, although, a successful flash mob requires a certain period of preparation and planning, by definition, the event must appear spontaneous. Planned spontaneity refers to an environment from which accidental occurrences can arise (Vuksanovic, 2003). Whereas there are certain aspects of a flash mob that planned, the execution, potential audience and responses are completely spontaneous and unplanned (Grant et al., 2012).

Flash Mobbing: Antecedents, Meanings and Experiences

Interestingly, the formal aesthetic dimensions of a flash mob as an event are not of primary significance and focus on the spectators or the participants (Gore, 2010). Choreography and design of the activity is either a straightforward collective routine, requiring no professional technical expertise and permitting the spectator to enter and participate in the activity. This does not mean that the event is not visually appealing but it does not play on the pleasure of the visual in the traditional sense. While the aims of the flash mob are important to the participants, the reasons for the event are not significant to the audience. Unlike other events where the relationship between the form, function and meaning creates the impacts, in flash mobs the effects lie elsewhere. The profound ambiguity of the event and the resulting spontaneous reactions, emotions and behaviors of the participants and audience defines the outcomes of the flash mobs (Muse, 2010). As discussed earlier, the purposes of flash mobs are to create confusion, surprise, shock and disrupt the status quo of routines. Through its intrusion of collective and individual routines, disruption of schedules and programs and slowing down the urban rush, flash mobs impose a cognitive shift in the audience and create distinct experiential zones of interaction. In addition, flash mobs momentarily mark out space and time (Gore, 2010). They give public space a new form, function and meaning. The urban, modern cities today breed disengagement and lack of place, through the relentless

mobility of pedestrians, physical architecture and crowding (de Certeau, 1994), encouraging urban individual trajectories (Brejzek, 2010). Modern cities exemplify vast expanses of empty (but ordered) space devoid of life (Kaulingfreks & Warren, 2010) and have become sites for communal isolation (Muse, 2010). These conditions, reflecting the urbanity of cities, facilitate the formation of flash mobs, creating bonding in solitude. Flash mobs present to their audience and participants a form of *communitas* (Getz, 2012) and the shared lived experience wherein individuals swarm to engage in a collective social action, inhabit an urban space and anonymously disperse.

The traditional assumption and concept of the audience is challenged in flash mobs. Flash mobs create many competing audiences which include the surprised strangers and passers-by, the anxious authorities they defy, the conventional media whom they entertain, the online community they excite, and the participants themselves who convene to watch themselves and later observe the spectators online (Muse, 2010). Fundamentally, there are three categories of audience in flash mobs: surprised passers-by, mobbers themselves and the online community. Passers-by are transformed into a community of spectators, into members of an audience (Brejzek, 2010). The live audience initially does not gather to see something and may also not realize that a performance is taking place. However, they take centre stage in the event. The crowd who turns up becomes its own event. The audience who witness the activity without their awareness and consent become unsuspecting performers who complete and authenticate the event (Muse, 2010). In the example of the Frozen Grand Central, the mob stands still and the audience performs around the mob. Wasik (2009) describes the participating audience as *spect-actors* because the flash mob audience's participation becomes the purpose and reward. Although initially the passers-by congregate to observe the mob, while engaging in the event, its' individual members observe themselves and each other as well as the event. Interestingly, the flash mobbers themselves become both participants and audience. Flash mobs create performances where the actors resemble an audience that performs for itself (Muse, 2010). While participating, they observe the surprised, confused reactions of the passers-by, who in turn become the participants in the eyes of the flash mobbers. In the Frozen Grand Central example, the participants of the flash mob convened at the scheduled time without a full knowledge as to what will unfold (resembling a typical audience), are curious and bemused by the crowd's behavior.

METHOD

The Flash Mob Event

While there has been research conducted on flash mobs in a small number of disciplines such as marketing, theatre and psychology, there has been no research focusing on event studies. To acquire an exploratory understanding on the experiences and meanings felt by the participants and spectators of unplanned events, a field experiment (flash mob) was designed and conducted by 45 students (from an events management class) at the main atrium of a mall (adjacent to the institution's campus) in Singapore. In flash mobs, instructions on the specific time of the activity, location and behavior should be communicated prior to the event. The instructions to the students were communicated during class a week prior to the activity. Students were advised that participation was voluntary and they could decline with no negative consequences. As nonmaleficence is an important consideration, flash mobs should not negatively impact the public or businesses. Therefore, public areas or common spaces would be more appropriate for the activity.

The two-storey main atrium of the mall was selected as it had a second storey walkway visible from the main atrium, which housed retail, commercial and food and beverage outlets. The activity was organized during the busy lunch hour. The group gathered five minutes before the activity in the back service area of the mall, giving them time to put on their prepared masks, turn on the pre-selected music on their mobile phones (both in line with the Lunar New Year theme) and walk to the location on the mall's second storey walkway. All participants had dressed in red, and the group

had also brought with them mandarin oranges as props to create a Lunar New Year organic art display. Once ready, the group swarmed into the mall area, donning their masks and simultaneously playing the Lunar New Year song on their phones. They then gathered at the centre of the second-storey walkway, where some members of the group danced to the music, while others set up the organic art display. After five minutes, the group circled around the second-storey walkway en masse and rode the escalator in the centre of the atrium before leaving the same way they entered.

Research Methods

The environmental manipulation method (conducting the flash mob) was used to study flash mobs as a social phenomenon. Qualitative interviews, questionnaires and observation were employed to understand the experiences and meanings attributed to the event by the participants and audience. Three sets of data were collected. Firstly, the students who participated completed a post-activity questionnaire with open ended questions that were used to evaluate (1) participants' motivations for joining the flash mob, (2) what they liked best and least about participating in the activity, (3) their personal experiences while participating in the flash mob, (4) their perceptions of spectators' reactions towards them and the flash mob and (5) if they would participate in flash mobs in the future and the reason(s) for their response. Secondly, during the flash mob, brief semi-structured interviews were also conducted on-site with the audience (the public) where they were asked (1) what their first reaction was when they saw the unexpected performance and (2) what they liked best and least about the spontaneous performance. Lastly, two observers, who were senior academics, participated as observers of the flash mob. The purpose of the observation was to record audience and participant behaviors to the flash mob activity. The event was video-recorded, photographed and later coded. The recordings were intended to capture the flash mob as an unplanned event, as well as audience and participants reactions. Qualitative data collected from these interviews and observations were then coded for themes.

As little research has been undertaken on the effects of flash mobs on emotional response and behavior of audience, a qualitative method was adopted in this exploratory study. In addition, the spontaneous and unexpected nature of an unplanned event such as a flash mob would have challenged a traditional control experiment (Grant et al., 2012). Questionnaires were distributed to the students to gather their post-event reflections, experiences and meanings constructed as a result of the activity. Through the discussions, information was gathered about the antecedents for participating in the unplanned event and their liminal experience.

RESULTS

Participant Experiences: Reflections of a Flash Mobber

The findings were categorized into three major themes: (1) the participant experiences and meanings, (2) audience reactions and experiences, and (3) the researchers' observations of the flash mob as a social phenomenon. In the post-activity reflection questions, majority of the students agreed that they experienced a sense of novelty and "*doing something new*" while performing the flash mob and it was a fun and interesting experience. As it was the festive Lunar New Year period, some students felt the "*excitement of the festivity*" and "*wearing of red outfits*" added to the merriment. One student expressed the event was interesting as they were "*able to attract the attention of the public*". Some students mentioned that they participated in the flash mob out of curiosity and the need to try something different. There was indication that some of the students enjoyed participating in an event that was unplanned with minimum or "*no restrictions*" and control. These responses reflected antecedent and experiential dimensions found in other studies (Getz, 2012), wherein cognitive, affective and conative engagements were articulated in event experiences. Similarly, notions of novelty-seeking, amusement and desire for escapism were

acknowledged as motivations for participation.

A couple of students enjoyed taking photos and “*selfies*” of themselves while one expressed that he/she was “*avoiding the cameras*”. A small number of the students indicated a sense of embarrassment and insecurity to perform an event that was unplanned, ambiguous and with few instructions given. Students comments included “*I didn’t know what to do*”, “*it was confusing*”, “*chaotic*” and “*it was disorganized*”. Several students expressed the feeling of being “*lost and uncertain*”, “*fearful and shy*” and “*felt awkward as I didn’t know what to do*” and it was “*difficult to step out of the comfort zone initially*”. One student commented in the focus group that she was nervous thinking about “*what is going to happen next*”. A few indicated that wearing the masks helped to hide their fear and embarrassment and they felt more secure. One student mentioned that “*I was covered behind a mask and thus not shy to do whatever I wanted to do*” and another felt that doing the event was easy due to the “*anonymity from wearing the mask and less self-conscious*”. Situational norms frequently guide social behavior, and an individual may adhere to conventional social norms unconsciously primed by their environment or surroundings. These rules of social behavior enable individuals to gauge others’ or society’s expectations about actions or behavior within different social settings (DeBono, Shmueli, & Muraven, 2011). People as social beings are constantly engaged in social influence processes and behaviors of one form or another, which affects the way one communicates and interacts with others. Individuals may exhibit both functional and dysfunctional social behaviors, depending on social situations, contexts and role perceptions (Pandey & Singh, 2005). Such behavior is also often framed within the social-cultural structures and social reality of particular communities and scenarios. Nonetheless, the majority of the students felt that the purpose of doing the event was to come together as a class and experience “*class spirit*”, “*togetherness*”, and “*sense of bonding*”. Some indicated that they participated as “*everybody in the class was doing it*”, “*for the sake of the class*”, “*want to have fun with classmates*” and to experience *communitas* with the class. Getz (2012) had described such unstructured togetherness within the notions of existential *communitas*, where the transient personal experience of spontaneous celebration constructed shared meanings and belongingness.

Generally students felt a high level of anxiety and “*anticipation*” when they were waiting for the activity to begin. The anxiety was attributed to expectation of being perceived as deviant by performing an act that is not conforming to social norms and being rejected by the passers-by (representing the larger society). Students felt self-conscious of “*being judged*”, “*laughed at*” and “*getting stares from strangers*”. When asked to share they thought the audience was thinking of them, participants felt that observers of the flash mob could have thought that they were “*crazy*”, “*stupid*”, “*a joke*” and performing a flash mob as they were “*stressed with school*”. Students felt that the audience was “*confused*”, “*curious*”, “*shocked*”, “*surprised*” and “*puzzled*”. Some thought that the audience would have been “*amused*” and that the event was “*interesting*”, “*funny*” and “*novel*”. As discussed, normative behaviors and social motives originate from and are controlled by one’s beliefs, values and social environment. Thus, there is a need to consider the influences of collective, society and group orientation variables, social norms, roles and expectations (Feather, 2005; Pandey & Singh, 2005) when examining behavior and attitudes people might have towards particular social actions, expressions or conduct.

Student feedback reflected the experience of the “*spotlight effect*” (Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999) where each thought that the audience was watching them perform the activity, when in reality the audience may not be watching the participants individually. Students also expressed that it was not easy to perform the activity initially but once everyone was participating, it became easy to follow the group. Students mentioned that “*I felt safe together as a class*”, “*less self-conscious as everyone was doing it*” and “*it was easy as I was together with my friends*”. This indicates crowd behavior whereby a group forms its own norms and the members of the group conforms to it (Aguire, Quarantelli, & Mendoza, 1988) and also *deindividuation*, where members of a group experience a decreased sense of individuality and self-awareness. Students preferred to wait with

the others prior to the activity. This reflected previous studies by Bell (1978) whereby people experiencing anxiety in expectations of a future event prefer affiliating themselves to those who will be experiencing a similar emotion. Most students agreed that they would not perform this activity on their own, reflecting group and public compliance (Festinger, 1953). Despite the initial experiences of embarrassment and anxiety, most students felt that the flash mob activity was worthwhile, useful to learning beyond the classroom, and enjoyable. Students expressed that it was a great learning experience as *“these cannot be covered in class”*, and they were *“learning beyond the theory”*. Many felt that given the opportunity, they would participate in a flash mob activity again. Students said that the event was fun and that they enjoyed watching audience expressions and reactions. One student summarized the feeling: *“wow, I did something that I did not expect myself to do”* and another mentioned a sense of accomplishment in doing something out of the norm by saying *“I felt proud of myself”*.

Observations and Spectator Reactions: Amusement, Curiosity or Disturbance?

During the event, brief on-site interviews with open ended questions focusing on audience reactions and experiences were conducted with the spectators gathered at the venue. A total of 25 responses were obtained. Many of the spectators were *“surprised”*, *“shocked”*, *“curious”* *“taken aback”* and *“confused”*. Some expressed that the event was *“unusual”*, *“awesome”*, *“funny”*, *“random but interesting”* *“cute”* and *“cool”*. The spectator reactions mirrored that of other similar studies in which flash mobs, as spontaneous outbreaks of coordinated chaos, imposed on the public a form of group behavior that departs from expected social norms; with the purpose of challenging status quo in a unique and memorable manner (Muse, 2010; Salmond, 2010). Reflecting on what they liked best in the flash mobs, the spectators mentioned the music, dance, outfits and masks and the *“synchronized movements”*. One spectator commented that the students were *“brave to do the dance in public”*, *“were sporting”* and *“creative”*. Some enjoyed the parading and joyful mood that the event generated during the festive period. When asked on what they disliked about the flash mob, the spectators commented that it was *“noisy”*, the *“music was too soft”*, *“boring”*, flash mobbers *“did nothing”* much, audience was *“not being involved”* and *“didn’t like the dance”*. One spectator expressed that he/she *“wanted to join in”*. The varied responses reflected the experience continuum, in which some spectators had equated the performance to entertainment or passive aesthetic expressions, while others had embraced a more active and participatory mindset of engagement, co-creation and liberation; and were tempted to join in the spontaneous revelry even through they had no idea what was happening (Getz, 2012; Gore, 2010).

The two observers’ purpose was to observe spectator and participant reactions and experiences during the event. Observers noticed that initially there were no apparent reactions from the public. However, as the flash mobbers moved around the atrium walkway and intruded into the public space, some people stopped what they were doing to observe the event. Spectators were seen taking photos and videos, giggling and smiling, and waving at the flash mobbers. A few people stopped the flash mobbers, interacted with the flash mobbers and a few mimicked the movements. Some people in the venue momentarily stopped, looked at the flash mobbers, expressed a bemused look and continued with their tasks. The participants were observed to be a little hesitant and uncertain at the beginning of the activity. Individually, they appeared uncertain and unsure as to what they should be doing. However, as a few members initiated the dance movements, the rest followed and moved on confidently as a group. The observations emphasized the situational nature of social norms, stigma and perceptions of identity threat; and the corresponding individual and group responses (DeBono et al., 2011; Major & O’Brien, 2005). As a socially constructed phenomenon, a person’s responses to stigma-related situations are influenced by cues from the immediate situation, cultural perceptions, social pressures, individual characteristics and collective representations. In order to protect against threats to one’s social identity and/or stressors imposed by social-cultural demands, individuals are more likely to infringe prescriptive norms when personal accountability

and censure are low, and anonymity is ensured. In the case of this flash mob, as the music was soft initially, and there was no audience reaction, the group was conscious and had moved cautiously and consciously. As more people stopped to observe them and acknowledged the flash mobbers, the latter moved with a more confident demeanor, waved at the audience and performed some impromptu movements along the way.

CONCLUSION

As the contemporary social phenomenon of flash mobs continues to increase in popularity, stakeholders will become interested in understanding such events. Flash mobs have not been substantially researched in academia as their objectives are rarely considered sociologically sufficiently “serious” and “significant” despite their widespread popularity (Molnar, 2012, p45). This study was an exploratory contribution to the growing literature and study on flash mobs and had attempted to explore the social phenomenon within the connotations of event experiences and meanings from an events perspective. Although playful in nature, flash mobbers, through their social networks, collectively take over public spaces and create new modes of spectatorship into urban spaces. Essentially, a learning outcome from flash mobs is that across time, across cultures, across nations, humans are social beings (Duran, 2007). As members of societies, people attach personalized meanings to every facet of their social life; and are considerably influenced by social norms and constructs, in which meanings, experiences and behavior are entrenched within social-cultural norms and conformity. Flash mobs emphasize playfulness, creativity, pointlessness and togetherness as principal meanings (Molnar, 2012). Within any given event, participants and audience may formulate and attach diverse personal and social meanings that are cognitively significant and representative of how individuals understand the world around them (Getz, 2012). Understanding the constructs of social and personal meanings derived from event experiences constitute a core phenomenon in event studies.

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