

Contextualising the experiential quality of shopping centre entertainment events: A service drama approach

Introduction

Shopping centre entertainment such as school holiday events, catwalk shows, and market days are an experiential marketing strategy deployed by shopping centres on a seasonal and strategic basis to create an entertaining and lively atmosphere within their retail spaces (Sit, Merrilees, & Birch, 2003; Tsai, 2010). Such events, allow shopping centre managers to provide customers with another reason to visit the centre, to visit more often, to stay longer and, ultimately, to spend more within their retail spaces (Andreu, Bigne, Chumpitaz, & Swaen, 2006). Understanding the effectiveness of these entertainment events in evoking shoppers' participation and patronage behaviours is enhanced by an appreciation of the various dramaturgical elements (e.g. the actors, audience, setting and performance) as captured within the service drama framework. Moreover, such knowledge facilitates consideration of how those elements can be strategically used to design and deliver desired entertainment event experiences (cf. Minor, Wagner, Brewerton, & Hausman, 2004).

This study aims to contribute to retailing literature by verifying the application of the service drama framework (Grove & Fisk, 1992; Grove, Fisk, & Dorsch, 1998) within the context of shopping centre entertainment events. Extant studies of shopping centre entertainment events have primarily emphasised a non-dramaturgical approach to examining the link between entertainment events and customers' subsequent behaviours (Lotz, Eastlick, Mishra, & Shim, 2010; Parsons, 2003). This approach is parsimonious because it simply examines the presence or absence of an entertainment event and its effect on shoppers' subsequent behaviours. However, such a simplistic approach offers little insight into the various dramaturgical attributes identified by shoppers when assessing the overall experiential quality of a shopping centre entertainment event (see Lotz, et al., 2010; Parsons, 2003 for more details). Insight into these dramaturgical elements could be strategically and tactically applied to enhance the impact of entertainment events on shoppers' loyalty behaviours. Therefore, the objective of this study is twofold: i) identify relevant dramaturgical elements that define the experiential quality of shopping centre entertainment events; and ii) examine the interrelationship among those dramaturgical elements.

Literature review

Experiential quality refers to the perceived excellence or superiority of an experience (Holbrook & Corfman, 1985; Maklan & Klaus, 2011). When measuring the experiential quality of shopping centre entertainment events, the SERVQUAL framework would appear to be an obvious choice due to its wide citation and examination in the retail marketing literature (Anitsal & Paige, 2006; Long & McMellon, 2004; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1999). SERVQUAL comprises five dimensions: reliability; responsiveness; assurance; empathy; and tangibles (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). However, Minor et al. (2004) argue that SERVQUAL is inappropriate for measuring the experiential quality of hedonic events such as live music performances because it was primarily designed for utilitarian services such as banking, long-distance telephone service, securities brokerage, and credit card service.

Moreover, Minor et al. (2004) contend that SERVQUAL's five dimensions are challenging to apply to crowd-based events such as live music performances due to their collective consumption nature. Such events requires the presence of other individuals, and the co-creation, co-delivery, and co-processing of the experience (Ng, Russell-Bennett, & Dagger, 2007). To address this deficiency, Minor et al. (2004) propose the service drama framework as a more appropriate mechanism for measuring the experiential quality of events such as live music performances. This service drama framework was developed by Grove and Fisk (1992) and consists of four key dimensions: i) the actors or personnel performing or delivering the service drama; ii) the audience or the customer base or clientele; iii) the setting which comprises ambient conditions, spatial and layout quality, and other props associated with a service drama; and iv) the performance or outcome(s) derived from the interplay between the actors, audience and setting.

Based on the service drama framework, the four dimensions are contextualised to reflect the experiential quality of shopping centre entertainment events: i) the performer/(s); ii) the crowd; iii) the setting; and iv) the behavioural response. The performers (actors) deliver the shopping centre entertainment event (Minor, et al., 2004). The crowd (audience) are the participants or spectators at the event (Abbott & Geddie, 2001; Wickham & Kerstetter, 2001). An understanding of the "crowd" is critical for the design and delivery of a desired entertainment event experience because of its collective consumption nature (Ng, et al., 2007). The setting is the venue where an entertainment event is staged, including ambient quality, interactivity, compatibility, and convenience in terms of ease and time of access (Crompton, 2003; Minor, et al., 2004). The behavioural response (performance) measures consumers' shopping and participation responses to the entertainment event's performance (Michon, Yu, Smith, & Chebat, 2007, 2008). Previous studies typically opt for a cognitive or attitudinal measure of the performance (e.g. satisfaction) (Minor, et al., 2004), however, this study opts for a behavioural measure because entertainment events are generally staged to stimulate consumers to undertake patronage and spending activities at the shopping centre place. The behavioural response is hypothesised as a function of the performer, the crowd, and the setting. Therefore, the objective of this study is twofold: i) identify relevant dramaturgical elements that define the experiential quality of shopping centre entertainment events; ii) examine the interrelationship among those dramaturgical elements.

Methodology

Based on the literature review and preliminary investigations (in-depth interviews with eight shopping centre managers and focus group discussions with four distinct groups of entertainment-event participants), a list of eighteen (18) items was developed to measure Experiential Quality ((Andreu, et al., 2006; Minor, et al., 2004; Wickham & Kerstetter, 2001). Face-validity testing was conducted on the items with 34 randomly-selected shoppers at a school holiday event to check for semantic or phrasing issues. The validated items were embedded into a questionnaire and measured on a 5-point Likert-type agreement scale. The questionnaire also captured demographic characteristics including gender, age and household status. The questionnaire was administered to 280 participants at two different family-oriented entertainment events (Family Week Festival and Let's Dance) at two different shopping centres located in South East Queensland (Australia). Family-oriented mall entertainment events were chosen as a starting point for investigation because family consumers represent a major market segment of shopping centres (Evans, Christiansen, & Gill, 1996; Roy, 1994;

Talpade & Haynes, 1997). Systematic random sampling strategy was used wherein a field researcher attended each of the events and invited every third participant encountered to complete the questionnaire.

Results

The majority of respondents were females (75%), aged between 26 and 50 years (64%), and family shoppers with school-aged children below 12 years old (49%), as would be expected given the family-focused entertainment events included in this study. Almost two-thirds of the respondents (64%) reported that they did not visit the mall exclusively for the entertainment events but also for other reasons such as shopping for fashion (30%), window shopping (25%), shopping for food (21%), and meeting family or friends (13%), supporting that a shopping centre offers a broad range of utilitarian and hedonic activities (Martin & Turley, 2004; Roy, 1994). On the whole, the respondents were interested in the shopping centre entertainment events, with interest levels ranging from ‘some’ interest (23%), ‘moderate’ (30%), ‘quite a lot’ (20%), to ‘a great deal’ of interest (9%).

Principal components analysis (PCA) with a varimax rotation was conducted (Table 1). The PCA presented four factors (eigenvalue greater than 1) that accounted for 67.12 percent of the total variance explained, indicating a well-explained factor solution (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). The loading items, percentage of the variance explained, Cronbach’s alpha, and descriptive statistics of these four factors are presented in Table 1. All four factors achieved very robust reliability (Cronbach’s alpha over 0.70) (Kline, 1998). These four factors were labelled as “setting,” “crowd,” “behavioural response,” and “performer.” These factors were then converted into summated factors to enable regression analysis whereby “behavioural response” is hypothesized as a function of “performer,” “crowd,” and “setting” (Table 2).

“Setting” refers to the ambient quality of an entertainment event, which achieved the highest variance explained (40.0%) and the most favourable rating ($\bar{x}=4.03$, $SD=0.55$). Consistent with the extant retail literature (Grewal, Baker, Levy, & Voss, 2003; Michon, et al., 2008), this finding reinforces the importance of atmospherics in creating and delivering retail customer experience. “Performer” relates to the artistes that deliver an entertainment event. Although it scored the lowest variance explained (7.0%), it had a fairly favourable rating ($\bar{x}=3.45$, $SD=0.83$), and thus denotes its experiential prominence within the context of shopping centre entertainment events. “Crowd” is about the crowd condition at an entertainment event and the extent to which it contributes to the experience. Its variance explained was the second highest (11.8%) and its descriptive statistic was moderately favourable ($\bar{x}=3.42$, $SD=0.82$). “Behavioural response” focuses on consumers’ subsequent patronage and participation activities evoked by an entertainment event. It accounted for a moderate percentage of variance explained (8.3%) and achieved fairly favourable rating ($\bar{x}=3.61$, $SD=0.67$). “

Table 1: Factor and reliability analyses

Factor solution and items	Item loading	Variance explained	Cronbach’s alpha	Mean (SD)*
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Setting				
It suits the age of the audience	0.82	40.0%	0.87	4.09 (0.68)
It is held at a convenient time	0.81			4.04 (0.67)
It is presented professionally	0.77			4.05 (0.70)
It is held at a convenient venue within the centre	0.75			4.18 (0.64)
It is interactive with the audience	0.68			3.85 (0.83)
The sound system is of good quality	0.61			3.95 (0.78)
Crowd				
The crowd creates a pleasant experience	0.86	11.8%	0.90	3.47 (0.88)
The crowd adds to the experience	0.83			3.44 (0.91)
I enjoy the crowd	0.83			3.35 (0.92)
Behavioural Response				
I have bought food items that I do not plan to	0.82	8.3%	0.83	3.31 (1.03)
I have bought non-food items that I do not plan to	0.79			3.10 (1.03)
I have stayed at the centre longer than planned	0.64			3.87 (0.84)
I would like to receive invitation to a similar event in the future	0.59			3.45 (1.07)
I would like to come back to a similar event in the future	0.50			3.45 (1.07)
I would say good things about the event today to other people	0.40			3.90 (0.84)
Performer				
It has performer(s) that I recognise	0.91	7.0%	0.84	3.14 (1.24)
It has well-known performer(s)	0.82			3.10 (1.13)
The costuming of the performer(s) is of high quality	0.67			3.55 (0.98)
<i>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy=0.88; Barlett's test, p-value=.00 (chi-square=2850.61, degree of freedom=153); total variance explained=67.12%.</i>				
<i>* Items measured on a five point agreement scale with 5 being strongly agree and 1 being strongly disagree.</i>				

Table 2: Inter-correlations and regression analysis of summated experiential quality dimensions

	Mean (SD)	Behavioural Response (DV)	Performer (IV)	Crowd (IV)	Setting (IV)
Behavioural Response	3.61 (0.67)				
Performer	3.45 (0.83)	0.56**			
Crowd	3.42 (0.82)	0.52**	0.58**		
Setting	4.03 (0.55)	0.48**	0.46**	0.46**	
Performer→Behavioural Response	$\beta=0.33, t=5.67^{**}$				
Crowd→Behavioural Response	$\beta=0.22, t=3.68^{**}$				
Setting→Behavioural Response	$\beta=0.23, t=4.18^{**}$				
R ² =0.40, F=63.38**					
Notes:**p-value<0.00; DV=dependent variable; IV=independent variable; SD=standard deviation, β =standardised beta value, t=t value.					

Discussion and Implications

Based on the service drama framework, four dimensions are identified to be meaningful for explaining the experiential quality of shopping centre entertainment events, namely, “performer,” “crowd,” “setting,” and “behavioural response.” These four dimensions are structurally and positively related and, more specifically, “performer” exerts the highest positive effect on “behavioural response,” followed by “setting,” and “crowd.” These findings suggest that the hosting of famous and recognisable performer(s) at an entertainment event will effectively conjure people’s recognition of and instil their confidence in the event, and thus trigger participation and behavioural responses to the event. Consistent with extant literature (Minor, et al., 2004), these findings verify the significance of ambient conditions and ease of spatial and temporal access in creating and delivering a hedonic event experience. Nevertheless, this study expands the setting concept proposed by the service drama framework by identifying other attributes relevant for a shopping centre entertainment event such as the event’s interactivity and age compatibility. This study extends the retail marketing literature by illuminating the potential positive role of human crowd in delivering collective hedonic events staged by retailers such as shopping centre entertainment events. Extant retail marketing studies (Eroglu & Harrell, 1986; Eroglu & Machleit, 1990) have typically emphasised the negative effects of human crowd on retail experiences. On the contrary, this study suggests that a socially dynamic experience is desired by the participants or spectators of an entertainment event. Hence, when staging a collective hedonic event, retailers should seek to strategically entice, amass, and manage people that are conducive to create and deliver socially dynamic experience at the event (Grove & Fisk, 1997).

The findings of this study are not conclusive and thus require further validation and development. To strengthen validity and reliability, future research may consider testing the proposed list of dramaturgical quality items with another or a larger sample of family-oriented entertainment events, as well as with other types of entertainment events (e.g. fashion shows and market days). Advanced analysis techniques (e.g. structural equation modelling) can be applied to examine the interrelationship amongst the four dramaturgical factors identified in this study more holistically.

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