

Events: Mirror to the past self and beacon for the future self?

Faith Ong^{a,b}

^aUQ Business School, The University of Queensland, QLD, Australia

^bCenter for Tourism Research, Wakayama University, Japan

Abstract

Planned events are generally designed to achieve particular objectives and are typically considered reflective of changes in societal tastes and popular culture. The study of event attendance has often been positioned in terms of decision-making, with relevant theories such as the theory of planned behaviour being central in the exploration of what drives attendees to events, with outcomes relating to enhancing attendee experiences and increasing revisit intentions or visitor numbers for the future. Adapting Foucault's politics of the self to the individual, attending events can be further explored as part of the archaeology of the self as well as the cultivation of the self as a subject. Research questions are proposed in this direction, utilising the historical self as impetus influencing decisions to attend events, while imbuing agency into the forward-looking perspective of attending events as an expression of the self.

Keywords

Events
Politics of self
Functions
Decision-making
Attendance

Introduction

Events provide time and space beyond our everyday to carve out an occasion of meaning and celebration (Gibson & Connell, 2016). Events are herein defined as planned occasions with the objective of congregation (Bladen, Kennell, Abson, & Wilde, 2012), in contrast to the more generic understanding as happenings and incidents in everyday life. Planned events are generally designed to achieve objectives — economic and social — and are considered reflective of changes in societal tastes and popular culture (Getz & Page, 2019; Mair, 2019). The study of event attendance has often been positioned in terms of decision-making, with relevant theories such as the theory of planned behaviour being central in the exploration of what drives attendees to events, with outcomes relating to enhancing attendee experiences and increasing revisit intentions or visitor numbers for the future (Getz & Page, 2019; Reysen et al., 2018). This perspective is useful particularly for the event industry because it has provided insight into the reasons people attend events and how these can be best leveraged and magnified to increase attendance at events vis-à-vis attractive programming and marketing. However, the decision to attend events can be influenced much more than motivation, and to focus on motivations is to restrict our view of the role events can play in individuals' lives.

The study of events has typically focused on the collective — collective outcomes, economic impact, and contributions to society (Getz & Page, 2019; Quinn, 2018). While there is increasing work into the significance of events to the communities that host them (Finkel, 2010; Mair, 2019), there is a relative paucity of literature and its impacts on the individual. Recent work has slowly started filling this gap, with work into positive psychology and influences on wellbeing from attending events (Filep et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2022). The nascent growth in this area has fuelled interest in what events mean in people's lives and the functions they can fulfil, beyond the business-driven understandings of event attendance.

Events and the politics of the self

As event studies develop and mature as a field of study, it behoves those of us who study events to broaden its exploration. Adapting Foucault's politics of the self to the individual, attending events can be further explored as part of the archaeology of the self as well as the cultivation of the self as a subject (Hanna et al., 2015). Like how Foucault positions norms and power structures as fundamental to the self, the many facets of each individual exert influence on their daily choices through conscious and subconscious means (Allen, 2011), a historical account of the self that leads up to its present form. And in concert with Foucault's later work, wherein the critical self-transformation alludes to autonomy and agency (Allen, 2011), a forward-looking perspective. This provides an engagement of two key perspectives in studying the role of events in the lives of individuals — the historical push that culminates in a choice to attend events, as well as the deliberation that constitutes self-transformation and expression. It is theoretically ambiguous where either of these perspectives ends or starts in the journey of choice, but that does not preclude the use of these perspectives from opening up the events field of study.

In exploring the historical self as a determinant of event attendance, there are multiple facets of the self that can be explored in silo and in combination to understand their influences on event attendance. These can include perceptions, ideas, and attitudes toward myriad matters, such as social issues, environmental protection, and political inclinations. These explorations open up the psychological understanding of how much those which have shaped the current self also shape the self's choice to attend, spectate or participate in an event.

The historical view of the self cannot be considered a complete exploration of an individual as it neglects autonomy of the self. Beyond studying the outcomes of events in a monetary and community legacy sense, the individual exploration of events in the life of individuals must also consider the objectives and outcomes that individuals hope to achieve through attending these events. Pertinent questions in

this respect include understanding what individuals hope their attendance will bring to their lives. Will attending this event present a facet of their identity that has been hitherto hidden, such as in the case of coming out at pride events? Does attending the event broadcast a part of one's personality to a community they desire membership in, such as in the case of a new hobbyist? Or is attending events a reflection of personal values, such as in the case of climate change protest events and environmentalism?

Conclusion

Given the myriad of perspectives that can be employed to study event attendance and its role in individuals' lives, the aim of this research note is to provide impetus towards providing insight into the archaeology of the self and to understand the use of event attendance as part of the critical self-transformation that individuals are capable of. Through this dual perspective, we can enhance the richness of how events are regarded in our lives and lend credence to its study beyond marketing. This perspective also lends itself to understanding the role events can play in the overall well-being of individuals, understanding its role both as signals of who we are and aspirational targets for the development of the self. In much the same way as activities are undertaken to develop skills and networks, events' potential to function in the same way through conscious choice and subconscious influences on event attendance is a potentially rich field of knowledge that remains to be explored.

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Faith Ong is Lecturer at The University of Queensland. Her research interests lie in the role of tourism and events as tools of social change. In particular, she focuses on inclusivity for marginalised communities in events and tourism. Her belief in the social contributions of tourism formed the basis of her doctoral thesis on volunteer tourism, researching the potential of volunteer tourists to become keen contributors in their own community on return, exemplifying the ideals of global citizenship. Faith is currently undertaking research on inclusivity at events relating to mobilities and LGBTIQ+ communities, exploring the signals of inclusion and exclusion at occasions that are meant to bring communities together.