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Sophie Unson

The University of Southern Mississippi, sophie.unson@gmail.com

Wei Wang Dr.

The University of Southern Mississippi

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Exploring Stakeholders' Perceptions Toward Event Innovations

Sophie Unson

The University of Southern Mississippi

Wei Wang

The University of Southern Mississippi

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Arguably, the tourism industry has experienced some of the highest economic risk due to the pandemic. International tourism was predicted to experience a downfall of around \$1.2 trillion and job loss of around 130 million (Forbes, 2020). In attempts to remain profitable enough to survive the pandemic, businesses have had to develop creative strategies to maintain their customers. The purpose of this study is to explore what these innovations were and what it meant for customers. The first part of the project involves qualitatively exploring new strategies that businesses developed and then, the second part is to quantitatively examine the way in which customers perceive and react to those changes. The conclusions of this study will contribute to hospitality and tourism research as a resource for business strategies after a global disaster. In terms of theory, the ideas from this paper will add onto the existing theory and potentially create a new theory specific to the events industry.

Innovation was first conceptualized by Rogers as “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by individual or another unit of adoption” (1995, p.5). Meaning that something new has been created to either substitute for something previous or to fulfill a gap in a field. In the 1960's, Rogers developed The Diffusion of Innovation Theory which explains the way in which individuals adopt a new practice behaviorally and socially. The process begins with information passing from one member of social system to another (Agarwal, 1998). There are five factors that influence an individual's perception of the innovation and contribute to their decision to adopt or reject.

The Diffusion of Innovation Theory has been translated from the marketing industry and applied to various others including peer-to-peer accommodation and services (as with Airbnb and Uber as an example of social acceptance), mobile banking (as an example of compatibility with lifestyle), and healthcare marketing (as with diabetes care as an example of social marketing and networking) (Al-Jabri, 2012; Lien & Jiang, 2016). In regard to the event industry, there is a pressing need of knowledge and understanding of the role events play in economic and societal issues (Jaimangal, 2018). Using The Diffusion of Innovation Theory as a general concept applied to events will allow for this concern to be examined.

The multimethod approach is best suited for this study because it allows for a thorough investigation of the research gaps (Creswell, 1999). The qualitative portion was conducted through interviews with event industry professionals. They answered several semi-structured

questions inquiring the timeline of events during COVID-19, their changes and observed changes from other businesses, feedback from customers, and hopes and implications for the future. With the results of the qualitative study, a survey will be developed to be distributed to students at the local university as a pilot study. Their responses to the items listed in the survey will undergo multivariate analysis. The final findings and implications drawn from this study will serve as an aid to academia and practice.

Currently, six themes have been pulled from qualitative data results. The themes are core product, service environment, technology innovations, process innovations, marketing innovations, and social innovations. For core product innovations, we include items such as “this event has an attractive theme.” Service environment innovation includes items such as “this event venue has an easily accessible parking lot.” Items listed under technology innovations include “this event makes it easy to register online.” For process innovations, items include “this event has a seamless payment process.” Marketing innovations have items like “this event makes information available through multiple channels.” Finally, items under socialization innovations include “this event has more networking opportunities than others.” The initial survey consists of 45 items spread amongst the six categories. The survey was validated by multiple panels and then distributed for quantitative data collection.

Keywords: *Diffusion of Innovation; Event innovation; Mixed method; COVID-19; Pandemic.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sophie Unson is a senior undergraduate student at the University of Southern Mississippi. She is currently studying for a bachelor's degree in hospitality and tourism management with a minor in

music. Currently, she is working on completing her honors thesis research project focused on the above topic. After graduation, she will continue for her master's degree at the University of Southern Mississippi where she will continue to develop the research topic.

Wei Wang is an Associate Professor in School of Marketing in the College of Business and Economic Development at the University of Southern Mississippi. She received her doctoral degree from Indiana University at Bloomington. Dr. Wang's research focuses on destination marketing, new product development, and innovation. Her research has been disseminated in leading tourism and marketing journals, including *Tourism Management*, *Journal of Travel Research*, *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management*, *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, among others.