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Exploring Micro-Weddings Concepts: A synergy of values for VFR Tourism in Malaysia and Indonesia

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Abstract

Micro-weddings have replaced large weddings during the Covid-19 pandemic. In a culture where weddings celebration is significant, the preceding VFR, music, traditional foods, and gifts are considered a massive sacrifice for both the host and guests. The pandemic has reduced the number of attendees, from only online participation to a micro wedding. This study analyses a celebrated event for Muslims in two Southeast Asian countries: Indonesia and Malaysia. It explores the guest experiences and value perceptions of a micro-wedding. A qualitative method utilising thematic analysis generated four themes: functional, social, emotional, and price values.

Keywords: Micro-wedding; pandemic; perceived value; guest experience

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1.0 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and its movement restrictions impacted the organisers and guests of all offline events, including sports, religion, and leisure activities. At an international level, are the postponement of the Tokyo Summer Olympics 2020 (Rich et al., 2020) and the mass gathering of Muslims worldwide in Mecca for the Hajj pilgrimage (Salem and Abu Ghaneyeh, 2022). For domestic and smaller social events, cancellation and postponement usually involve a much smaller number of guests than the mentioned events.

This study focuses on a popular religious and leisure event that was joyously celebrated before the pandemic, involving a few hundred and thousands of attendees, a Muslim wedding. A scenario in Malaysia and Indonesia is explored as sixty per cent of Malaysian are Muslims, while Indonesia has the most significant world Muslim population. The celebration of marriage is regarded as one of the important stages in human life (Sain & Armita, 2019). It is also considered a sacred event where announcement and publicising it is obligatory to avoid suspicion and trouble within the Muslim community (Jamaluddin, 2018). The event is a means of rekindling relationships among friends and relatives and fulfilling the requirement of religiosity (McGuire, 2008). Thus, it may be included in the visiting friends and relatives (VFR) type of tourism, being among the main drivers of domestic travel (Zatori et al., 2019).

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The advent of the pandemic witnessed a sudden halt in gatherings and celebrations, which led to the postponement of some wedding events. The movement restrictions and standard operating procedures, including social distancing, is a 180° turn from normal behaviours of handshaking, hugs, and kisses observed during the wedding. Initially, wedding solemnisation was conducted online to avoid any physical contact. This led to the frustration of many couples who looked forward to being reunited with friends and family; and parents who were generally eager to host the event.

Popular applications for online meetings in Indonesia and Malaysia are Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, Google Hangout, Microsoft Teams, GoToMeeting, Cisco Webex, Discord, Whereby, and Messenger Rooms (Jaafar, 2020). Later, when the restrictions were partially uplifted, only 15 members were allowed to assemble depending on the size of the home to allow for physical distancing (The New Straits Times, 2021). Gradually, the micro wedding was allowed, and the number of guests increased to 50, depending on the venue size, while still adhering to the standard operating procedure. With the sudden change in celebrating the event, this study explores guests' perceptions, expectations, satisfaction, and experiences during micro weddings held during the pandemic.

Although the perceived value of an event has been studied, little research has been done on the understanding of the overall perceived value of a wedding, where guests evaluate both the affective aspects of event experiences and the cognitive experience. Thus this study explores the guest experiences and value perceptions of a micro-wedding attended during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.0 Literature Review

Festivals and events have been shown to improve the quality of life through thick sociality and bonding (Jepson et al., 2019). In addition, attending events provide a memorable leisure experience, as the events offer unique opportunities to enhance social interactions and relationships. The positive vibes arising from organising and attending events have come to a jolt with the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic, which has caused an unprecedented global crisis and changed our daily lives drastically.

Initially, some events were cancelled and postponed. A time usually marked by joyous celebrations, possibly travelling with large family and community gatherings, suddenly ceased (Imber-Black, 2020). However, innovative ways of handling such events appeared under the "new normal" situation. Although digitalisation existed before the pandemic, its usage was emphasised for personal and professional aspects of life (Carillo et al., 2020), and a hybrid model of both physical and online was introduced. Regardless of the mode in which events are held, it has advantages and disadvantages.

A few close relatives attend the wedding in person, whereas others join through a video-conferencing platform or social media, such as YouTube, Facebook Live, or Instagram Live. Some cities have set up drive-through weddings in Malaysia and Indonesia where newlyweds are seated outside a building. At the same time, guests slowly drove past their cars with the windows remaining rolled up and received a socially distant wave from the guests (BBC News, 2020). Micro weddings replaced the large weddings of several hundred or thousand guests. In countries and cultures where weddings involve two large extended families, the preceding of typically enormous celebrations, music, traditional foods, and gifts have been considered a massive sacrifice for both the host and guests (Walsh & Yee, 2020).

Thus, understanding guests' perceived value, expectations, satisfaction, and experiences will assist hosts in organising micro-wedding events in the future, mainly if it is being conducted by a private event organiser, for whom it was a profitable venture before the pandemic. Value perception is essential when assessing the consumption experience (Sanchez et al., 2006). The concept was developed in line with the construct configured in two parts: one was the benefits received (economic, social, and relationship) and the other was sacrifices made (price, time, effort, risk, and convenience) by the customer (Cronin et al., 2000; Callarisa et al., 2009). Zeithmal (1998) refers to perceived value as an overall concept of what is received and given.

3.0 Methodology

The qualitative investigation of this study centred on guests' perspectives regarding their experience of attending a Muslim wedding. Focusing on the Covid-19 wedding trend concerning the value perceptions of the overall process, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 20 informants. Informants who were interviewed were subsequently contacted via telephone post-attended event, with data being collected on the actual event. Recruits were mature adults (25–75 years) and were obtained using a combination of purposive sampling and the snowball technique (Gifford, 1996). Initial contact with subjects was initiated through known associates who eventually led to key informants. To qualify for the study, each individual had to have attended an event (Malaysian or Indonesian Muslim wedding) at least once during the pandemic.

Thematic analysis was chosen because it is a commonly used method for describing, analysing, and reporting themes and patterns in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data familiarisation occurred through transcription and reading and rereading the data while making notes about their initial interpretations. The initial codes were generated, and data were systematically collated into each code. Codes were collated into potential themes and reviewed by checking their logic with the extracts and the entire dataset. Finally, themes were defined and named. Interview questions and themes were based on existing literature to enable better comparison and complementarity with earlier studies.

4.0 Results

The interview sample consisted of ten Malaysian and ten Indonesian informants. Eight males and twelve females, with an average age of 45 years for males (range 29–75) and 30 years for females (range 25–65). Relationship-wise, informants included 13 relatives (parent, 258

grandparent, sibling, uncle, aunt and cousin) and seven friends (close friend and neighbour) (n=20). The thematic analysis for this study found four themes, with some having positive, negative, or both elements for the perceived overall value of micro weddings. These four dimensions are (i) functional value (which includes the function, practicality, safety, timing, and venue of the wedding), (ii) social value, (iii) emotional value, and (iv) price value (the benefits of cost saving).

Theme 1: Functional value

This theme included how the guests felt about the event's purpose, practicality, and safety. An older adult aged 75 years described how the functional value of the wedding was more important than the number of guests. The wedding serves its function – that is, to inform people that the couple is married. Solemnisation is the most critical aspect of a marriage. Coded as Informant 2, his views are as follows,

"What is more important is *Akad nikah* (solemnisation), which is *wajib* (mandatory) in Islam. Whether there are a thousand guests or ten guests does not matter. I am glad that my granddaughter was finally married amidst this pandemic. Do not make things difficult. Islam is easy; if there are *imams* (the religious leader who conducted the solemnisation), two qualified witnesses, a *mahr* (marriage gift from the groom to the bride), and consent from both parties, a wedding can take place."

For 29 years old man, the functional value of a wedding was reiterated using a different concept. He is not as concerned about the religious part of the solemnisation as he is about the practicality of a small wedding, which includes its timing, venue location, and, more importantly, safety. Informant 6 (Malaysia),

"I like it this way; I save my weekend for my private activities. It is less time-consuming because the venue is nearby, as our SOP only allows the function to be held within a certain vicinity. I do not have to worry about traffic or parking spaces. I saved money on accommodation since the wedding was initially planned to be held in *Pulau Perhentian*. People should not only think that the pandemic puts a lot of pressure only on the host but also on guests! We are also afraid of the possibility of infection with the disease. Although I trust that the host has adhered to the SOP, what about the other guests? What about food caterers? I developed distrust towards other people I do not know, but I swallow my anxiety because of my closest buddy."

A younger relative of 25 years old who understood the wedding event function was more appreciative of the frills that came with the small wedding. Under normal circumstances, depending on the financial budget of the host, each attendee is given a *Bunga telur* (door gift). Informant 5 (Malaysia),

"I am glad my cousin can still receive her wedding, and I am part of it. Of course, she was disappointed that she could not invite our friends; we planned to have a colour theme. Initially, the couple wanted to postpone their wedding, but as time passed, we realised we did not know when the pandemic would end. Finally, it was done with the flexibility given by the authority. The wedding is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and it must be special for the guests. For those who were not invited, we sent them a special card to explain, and the whole event was broadcast live using Facebook live. And our friends were such a sport that although they were not physically there, they wore pink gowns! It was a small event in terms of size, but meaningful and satisfying, and a good one in terms of quality."

A 48-year-old informant from Indonesia shared his thoughts about the functional value of weddings during the pandemic. To him, the most crucial aspect is that the marriage should remain sacred, albeit organised with different technologies. Informant 17 (Indonesia),

"I value that weddings remain sacred, conducted with care and strict health protocols. Nowadays, weddings also adapt to technology by video conference technology such as zoom or even live-streamed via YouTube. Although every attendee has a set time limit to give way for others to come in, I am fine with the shorter duration given to me and the rest."

The functional value of being solemnised and a comparatively small number of guests to inform others about the marriage is more appreciated by the elderly than the young guests. Nevertheless, an informant from Indonesia admitted that with some routines omitted, wedding events are becoming more straightforward, practical, and economical. At least a few compulsory events remain, such as the marriage contract or solemnisation, *sungkeman* or showing respect and gratitude to parents—a common tradition in Indonesia—and a short reception.

Theme 2: Social Value

The second theme highlights the social value of meeting friends and relatives. Almost all informants from both countries cited positive vibes in meeting their social circle of friends and relatives amidst a much smaller group. However, some informants were disappointed in being unable to meet more friends and relatives, as per the norm before the pandemic, when the wedding implied meeting friends and relatives. Informant 8 (Malaysia),

"I know it is not easy for the host to decide who to invite because of the SOP, but I cannot help from feel disappointed by not being able to meet more people. There was a time when I felt that if there were not many people, I might as well not be invited. What's more, I must adhere to the ridiculous standard operating procedure. What is the meaning of an event if there are only 30 people?"

Informant 12 (Indonesia),

"Yes, it is cost-saving since there are not many people to feed, so as a result, it is less memorable because I do not meet many friends and relatives. I am unable to keep in touch with them."

Nevertheless, a different perception of social experience value was also noticed in responses from younger informants from Indonesia. Informants 15 and 16 represented millennials in their early 30s from Indonesia,

"I feel that it is much better than the usual weddings; it feels more intimate", and "It feels nicer because you know the groom and the bride value you to pick you out of the many people they know. As guests, you feel very appreciative of this.", respectively.

Theme 3: Price Value

One of the financial benefits mentioned in the interviews was based on the fact that the wedding host (the bride, groom, and their parents) could enjoy a cost-saving event. As micro weddings involve a limited number of guests, the amount spent on the entire event would be reduced dramatically. Informant 7 (Malaysia),

"When it comes to cost, the burden is on the host and not much on the guests. Most of the time, it signals the host's social status. Nonetheless, for us whose salary is not that much, sometimes going to weddings which are far and require accommodation at a hotel, the cost affects our coffers. A distant location also implies a higher fuel and automotive maintenance cost. Blessing in disguise for weddings during this pandemic means that the venue is a domestic destination within a short distance from my house. In short, it is cost-saving for me."

An informant from Indonesia who was in her 30s said that looking back at her wedding a few years ago; she realised that it was expensive and developed a new perception after the pandemic that it was a waste of money. Informant 6 (Indonesia),

"I felt that I wasted a lot of money on the idea of having to live up to pride and prestige. We paid money for many unnecessary things just for 'image', which added to the stress of being a bride! Now, it's cheaper, and whatever you pay for feels like it's value for money because it's for people you want to be at the wedding."

During outbreak restrictions, many weddings provide only takeaway meals; therefore, this can save considerable costs. However, these takeaway meals have different shapes and sizes. Some standard boxes are relatively modest, but others use exclusive containers with three-course meals.

Theme 4: Emotional Value

The emotional aspects of immersion and fun and the hedonic aspects were integrated into an existing measure of cognitive evaluation of the experience, as suggested by Armbrecht (2020). Guests described their feelings according to their experiences throughout their micro-wedding attendance. Informant 1 (Malaysia),

"The wedding revived my spirit. I was quite down, stressed, and locked down. This pandemic is the source of my stress, which is not physically infected but spiritually. The wedding uplifted my spirit, and there was a strong sense of belonging. Although it was done for everyone attending the wedding, having my name on the mask with my favourite colour made me feel special. There is happiness and joy behind the mask, as simple as that! Despite adhering to the SOP, pictures were taken with masks, and I felt the warmth of those at the event. An emotion that is difficult to explain. I could not imagine this if I was not invited. In fact, I feel sad about those who have not been invited. I never thought I would like small-sized weddings; now I like it when most of the guests are my family members; there is a sense of family solidarity."

An informant from Indonesia also shows a similar sentiment; he said that attending a wedding during the pandemic can compensate for the need to socialise during this challenging time, Informant 11 (Indonesia),

"Coming to a wedding can cure the need to socialise during this very long and dull period. Pandemic, for which we do not know when it will end."

5.0 Discussion

This study found that functional, social, emotional, and price values were the dimensions of value perception that were most frequently mentioned as the source of satisfaction experienced by guests. More specifically, functional values involving objectivity, practicality, safety, timing, and venue of the wedding were the most mentioned values perceived by guests. These findings are supported by Armbrecht (2021), who found that functional value affects the overall perceived value of an event.

The current study found that older guests were most affected by the latest micro-wedding trend in terms of shrinking social benefits; however, they were satisfied with the functional value. This perspective is derived from earlier research suggesting that participants attend events for escape, novelty, uniqueness, family interaction, and socialisation purposes (Crompton & McKay, 1997; Nicholson & Pearce, 2001). Furthermore, this study offers a possible explanation for guests' disappointment owing to limited guests and restricted movement. It indicates that measuring guests' experiences must move beyond the evaluation of cognitive aspects (such as functional and social value) and include affective aspects (emotional value) (Emery et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2017; Wood & Kenyon, 2018). Both positive and negative emotions contribute to experiential outcomes in the wedding context.

This study points to other aspects associated with value perception that need careful consideration about hosting a wedding. The finding implicates that social and emotional values are a significant aspect that requires attention. To host a meaningful and memorable wedding, the socialisation associated with the emotional aspect should be the primary concern, including guest list, sitting arrangement, accommodation arrangement and photography session. In a theoretical sense, this study provides a new theoretical perspective on the study of VFR behaviour, which can be considered from the guest's perspective by considering their excitement-frustration level to judge their experience and value perceptions. It combines the Theory of Reasoned Action with an evolutionary micro-wedding concept to study the aspect of the guest's perceived value of an attended micro-wedding event.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the value perceptions of wedding guests based on their experience attending a micro-wedding in Malaysia and Indonesia. It is concluded that there are many benefits of this new trend, from a focus on who is in attendance to the overall vibe of the event, which can lend itself to being more personal and emotional, especially during such an uncertain time (Olson, 2021). Four value dimensions of micro-weddings were identified as the source of overall value: functional, social, emotional and price values. These results could help researchers and wedding planners build a more effective intervention designed to tackle these four value dimensions.

Looking into the aspect of practicality, the younger guests seem to welcome the micro-wedding concept. They recognised that the cost-saving element of micro-wedding and the planning time could be cut to a much shorter period. Some guests even suggested that the micro-wedding concept should be practised post-pandemic since it is affordable. However, wedding planners may think otherwise.

There are still some limitations to this study. Firstly, this study only discussed the value perceptions of wedding guests based on their experience of attending a micro wedding from two participants, Malaysian and Indonesian, without considering the possible influence of other participants, such as the Singaporeans (the neighbour country with similar culture). Future research could explore the value perceptions of multiple participants in weddings by constructing a multi-party event model. Secondly, this study is limited to one event, only a wedding, without fully considering other important life events. Future research could include value perceptions of other important life events and select informants of different ages to understand their behaviour and perceptions. only a wedding, without fully considering other important life events. Future research could include value perceptions of other important life events and select informants of different ages to understand their behaviour and perceptions. other important life events. Future research could include value perceptions of other important life events and select informants of different ages to understand their behaviour and perceptions.

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