

How to Portrait Event Experience: A Special Event as Experiential Marketing Tool

Tuba Sevil

Lecturer, Anadolu University, School of Physical Education and Sports, Iki Eylul Campus, (26470),
Eskisehir / Turkey

Muge Akyildiz

Research Assistant, Anadolu University, School of Physical Education and Sports, Iki Eylul Campus,
(26470), Eskisehir / Turkey

Metin Argan

Associate Professor, Anadolu University, School of Physical Education and Sports, Iki Eylul Campus,
(26470), Eskisehir / Turkey

Mehpare Tokay Argan

Assistant Professor, Bilecik University, Bozuyuk Vocational School, Bozuyuk-Bilecik / Turkey

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Mehpare Tokay Argan

Assistant Professor

Bozuyuk Vocational School, Bilecik University

ABSTRACT

The rise of experiential marketing during last decade shed some light on marketing literature. Nowadays, consumers are in search of experiences that “dazzle their senses”, “touch their hearts” and “stimulate their minds” and also marketers need to understand customer experience (Schmitt, 1999). Therefore, studies and researches on experiential features of products or services have appeared in the marketing literature. However, academic investigations on the measurement of event experiences are very limited. Thus, main aim of this study was to identify the underlying aspects of event experience and to examine events as an experiential marketing tool via a sample of 300 respondents who were participated in Kite Festival, an annual event held in Eskisehir. Results revealed three aspects, which are “emotional experience”, “escapist and relaxing experience” and “social and nostalgic experience”. The study has significant implications as to how well marketing practitioners and recreationist implement experiential marketing and experiential dimensions of the events.

Keywords: Event, marketing, experiential marketing, event management

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE

The rise of experiential marketing during last decade (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999, 2003) has turned the understanding of consumption experiences into a hot topic for market researchers (Caru and Cova, 2008). Experiential marketing has become a cornerstone of many recent advances in areas such as retailing, branding and events marketing, and it is crossing over to the service sector, from hotels to restaurants to airlines (Smith and Wheeler, 2002) with enthusiasts reported in all sectors of the global economy from consumer products to health care providers (Williams, 2006). Therefore, understanding consumption experience has become a prime goal of today’s marketers, especially with the rise of experiential marketing approaches (Caru and Cova, 2008) that seek to capture customers’ whole minds, to evoke positive emotions and to render them captivated (Shaw, 2005).

In this fast growing experience economy, consumers' desires and needs have also changed, they look for affective memories which combine to create a holistic and long-lasting personal experience (Hosany and Witham, 2009) that enable them to realize their dreams and achieve their desired lifestyle (Smith and Wheeler, 2002). Therefore, nowadays, traditional marketing approaches that view customers as rational decision makers and focus on functional product attributes, benefits of products and quality are inadequate (Hosany and Witham, 2009). Instead, consumers are less interested in maximizing their benefits and functional features (Caru and Cova, 2008), they are in search of experiences that dazzle their senses', engage them personally, touch their hearts, and stimulate their minds (Schmitt, 1999; Hosany and Witham, 2009). These experiences are achieved through experience providers applying to experiential marketing. Because, experiential marketing approaches view consumers as emotional beings and focuses on achieving pleasurable experiences (Williams, 2006).

The emergence of the experience economy has spawned a plethora of studies dedicated to the understanding of consumer experience (Hosany and Witham, 2009). More recently, developments and applications have surfaced in leisure research (Yoshioka, Nilson and Simpson, 2002; Madrigal, 2003; Sumino and Harada; 2004; Barnett; 2005; Tsaur, Chiu and Wang, 2006; Maccarthy, O'Neill and Williams, 2006; Breejen, 2007; Kao, Huang and Wu, 2008). Still, with few exceptions, academic research on the conceptualization and measurement of leisure experiences of the specific events remains sparse.

The observance of and participation in festivals or broadly term celebratory events, is an increasingly significant aspect of customer experience. Because, participants of the events seek an enjoyable and memorable experiences through social interactions and performances as they find themselves in a different space and time (Picard and Robinson, 2006). However, leisure marketing literature provides very little guidance on event experience and how event marketers and managers could increase their customers' satisfaction with an experiential event. In this sense, the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of participants of Kite Festival which was chosen as a research field.

The Kite Festival is an annual event celebrating the coming of the spring, held in Eskisehir, a western city in Turkey. This event is organized by Anadolu University-Physical Education and Sport Faculty. It is an enjoyable event of children, families or students who from morning to late evening gather together to celebrate the coming of the spring through flying a kite to the sky and through the performance of traditional dances and songs. It is a unique event among others and it is a celebration on a regional scale attracting participants of all ages. The festival ground is large enough to support a stage for concerts and shows, food areas and several sponsor attractions. During the two-day, open-air festival provides a massive platform to gather some music groups and their fans, and food court, kite service, kite flying area, drink and food stands are also set up on the festival grounds.

METHOD

Research and Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire of this study included three parts. In the first part of the questionnaire, event experiences of the participants were measured. Because there are not much studies or approach to measure and analyze event experience in the literature, this led researchers to develop a new survey questionnaire in order to examine event experience aspects of the participants of Kite Festival. In developing survey questionnaire, items that consisted of the domain of leisure experiences emerging during the festival were adapted from a certain number of studies. Bent Richard' (2005) study on experiences of volunteers with a multi-sport

special event and Sumino and Harada's (2004) study on affective experience at the stadium and intention to attend an event were among these studies. Also, Pine and Gilmore's book on the Experience Economy (1999) and Schmitt's book titled as Customer Experience Management were thoroughly scrutinized before preparation of the survey. In order to develop questions regarding leisure experience evolved in the events as a leisure activity, items were adapted from Borrie (1995); Chao (2003); Cotte (1998); Kao, Huang and Wu (2008); Manfredo and Driver (1996) and Tsaur, Chiu and Wang (2006) with some modifications and wording revisions to fit our empirical case. Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale, "5 = strongly agree" to "1 = strongly disagree".

The second part of the questionnaire included attendance patterns and behavioral tendencies of the respondents who participated in the Kite Festival. The respondents were also asked to indicate their gender, age, education status, occupation, income status and marital status at the last part of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was pre-tested on a group of 47 dance festival participants who were judged to be representative of the target population. After some procedures of exploratory factor analysis, a scale of 16 items was proposed.

Sample

The sample is comprised of people participating in the Kite Festival 2009. The data were collected during the Festival day. The questionnaires were answered by respondents in the researchers' presence. For groups of respondents who needed further explanations in filling out the questionnaires, the researcher helped the respondents to fill out the questionnaire. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed, 300 of which were completely answered, resulting in a return rate of 85.7 percent.

RESULTS

Characteristics of Sample

A total of 300 questionnaires were achieved after the effort of data collection. Gender of the respondents was almost evenly distributed with 49.7 per cent male and 50.3 per cent female and most of the respondents were single (60%); 39% of the participants were within 21-30 age brackets and 51.3% of the participants were students. The majority of the respondents (34.7%) reported a monthly household income of \$330 and below. Respondents who are bachelor degree occupy half of the sample (53.3%) (see Table 1).

Attendance Patterns of the Participants

Participants were asked about their attendance patterns to the Kite Festival. Of the sample, 39% of the respondents reported that they participated in Festival with their families and 37% of them with their friends. Whereas 61.3% of respondents were first-time participants to Kite Festival, 21% of the respondents participated for the second time and 17.7% of them participated three times or more. Moreover, brochure, advertisement and catalogue were reported as the most benefitted source of information about the festival (39.3%), it was followed by friends' recommendation (38.3%) and written and visual media (22.3%) (see Table 2).

Table 1. Demographic Information Regarding Participants' Characteristics

	Frequency	%		Frequency	%
<u>Gender</u>			<u>Age</u>		
Female	151	50.3	20 and <	73	24.3
Male	149	49.7	21-30	117	39.0
			31-40	68	22.7
<u>Occupation</u>			41 and >	42	14.0
Student	154	51.3	<u>Marital Status</u>		
Public Official	38	12.7	Single	180	60.0
Laborer	33	11.0	Married	120	40.0
Self employed	20	6.7	<u>Income Status</u>		
Out of employ	15	5.0	330 USD and <	104	34.7
Faculty Member	15	5.0	331-661 USD	75	25.0
Retired	13	4.3	662-991 USD	43	14.3
Tradesman	12	4.0	992-1322 USD	36	12.0
<u>Education Level</u>			1323 USD and >	42	14.0
Primary School	31	10.7			
Secondary School	66	22.0			
Bachelor Degree	160	53.3			
Post Graduate	42	14.0			

n=300

Table 2. Information Regarding Attendance Patterns of the Participants

	Frequency	%
<u>Attendance patterns</u>		
On my own	36	12.0
With an organized group	36	12.0
With my friends	111	37.0
With my family	117	39.0
<u>Attendance frequency</u>		
First participation	185	61.3
Second participation	63	21.0
Third participation or more	53	17.7
<u>Source of information</u>		
Written and visual media (newspaper, radio, TV, internet)	67	22.3
Friends' recommendation	115	38.3
Brochure, advertisement or catalogue	118	39.3

Event Experience Dimensions

There was a total of 16 scale items that could influence or determine dimensions related to event experiences; thus principal component factor analysis was used to sort out and classify these variables as well as to convert them into main factors. To apply factor analysis on items underlying the experiences of participants, it is necessary to test the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (Odabasi and Argan, 2009; Zhang et al., 2003). For the experience variables, Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) was 0.891 indicating that the sample was adequate for factor analysis (Odabasi and Argan, 2009; Kaiser, 1974). The Bartlett Test for Sphericity (BTS) was 1.669 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the hypothesis variance and covariance matrix of variables as an identity matrix were rejected; therefore, factor analysis was appropriate.

According to principal axis analysis, three factors had an eigenvalue greater than 1.0, explaining a total of 54.555 percent of the variance. The findings indicate the emergence of

three factors regarding to event experience. These factors were labeled as “*emotional experiences*”, “*escapist and relaxing experiences*” and “*social and nostalgic experiences*”.

In the factor analysis, the percentage of the variance explained by each factor indicates the relative significance of the factors. Accordingly, the first factor, labeled emotional experiences, explained a large part (% 38.582) of the total variance, having a greater significance than the other two factors. The items of emotional experiences factor were related to the participants’ inner feelings, emotions and thoughts that engage participants emotionally and creatively. This factor contained seven items. The second factor, labeled escapist and relaxing experiences explained 8.394 percent of the variance. Escapist and relaxing experiences factor contained five items, all relating to physically and mentally relaxation, getting away with the monotony of life and escaping from boredom. It showed high loadings for the items. Lastly, the third factor, labeled social and nostalgic experiences, explained 7.579 percent of the variance. The items of this factor were related to meeting and communicating new people, past memories and nostalgia. This factor consisted of four items.

All three constructs met the criterion that a factor loading should be equal to or greater than 0.48. The Cronbach alphas were equal to or greater than 0.70 and the total of scale reliability was 0.89. Factors, [emotional experiences (0.81), escapist and relaxing experiences (0.80), social and nostalgic experiences (0.70)] had higher scores than the recommended level of 0.70 (Kim et al., 2003; Nunnally, 1978; Odabasi and Argan, 2009) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Factors and Items on Event Experience

Factors	Factor Loadings (β)	Mean	S.D.	Eigenvalues (% of variance)	Alpha (α)
Factor 1: Emotional Experience					
It made me feel free.	.629	4.43	0.78	6.173 (38.582)	.81
It developed a sense of ability and skill.	.833	4.32	0.83		
It helped to get an exciting experience.	.514	4.31	0.83		
It gave a sense of achievement.	.538	4.29	0.76		
It helped to get a sense of self-confidence.	.541	4.26	0.85		
It developed a creative imagination.	.585	4.17	0.89		
It provided to get an exploration experience.	.677	4.11	0.93		
Factor 2: Escapist and Relaxing Experience					
It allowed getting away from stress of daily life.				1.343 (8.394)	.80
It allowed getting away from boredom.	.758	4.51	0.79		
It allowed to get away from monotony and allowed me to enjoy life.	.594	4.46	0.76		
It provided mental relaxation.	.777	4.41	0.81		
It provided physical relaxation.	.653	4.40	0.78		
	.602	4.25	0.88		
Factor 3: Social and Nostalgic Experience					
It provided an opportunity to communicate with people having same interest.	.734	4.32	0.84	1.213 (7.579)	.70
It made me lose track of time.	.515	4.30	0.92		
It reminded me past memories.	.483	4.15	1.03		
It provided an opportunity to meet new people.	.764	4.14	0.99		
Cumulative % of variance				54.555	
Internal consistency of the scale (16 items)					.89
S.D. Standard Deviation					
1= strongly disagree 5=strongly agree					

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper shows how important it is to pay attention to new arising tendencies in leisure towards customers' experiences and identifies how to plan leisure events to create holistic experiences as part of an effective marketing strategy. The main objectives of this study were i) to identify the underlying aspects of event experience of the leisure participants and ii) to investigate the attendance patterns and demographic characteristics of participants. Overall, our findings advance our understanding of the experience economy concepts in event marketing and leads to a new source of knowledge to measure event experience.

This study developed a 16-item survey instrument to evaluate dimensions related to event experience. The scale exhibited ideal internal consistency and met rigorous conceptual and empirical criteria for validity. The results indicated that event participants' experiences can be conceptualized and represented in terms of three dimensions. Data analyses showed that the three realms of experience demonstrate adequate reliability and validity. Dimensions related to event experience comprise "emotional experience", "escapist and relaxing experience" and "social and nostalgic experience".

These aspects could demonstrate that events are not only at the heart of the entertainment but also have many experiential dimensions. Therefore, this means that event experiences do not rely exclusively on entertainment; entertainment is only one part of an event experience. Rather, this study indicated that event experience can build escapist and relaxing, social and nostalgic and even emotional experiences by providing participants to be free with the kites in the air rather than playing the passive role which involve much greater immersion than entertainment experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

Moreover, findings of this research indicate that to some extent, results may allow managers to have a better understanding of the importance of the experiential features of the events and how well they implement experiential marketing. Furthermore, they would have more specific ideas about how to design and plan their leisure events with "experience" concept to improve their success. In this regard, these results may enable organizers or managers to design appropriate marketing and promotional strategies with distinctive brand position to differentiate themselves from competitors.

Overall, the results of the current study are of interest to marketers and practitioners. In general, the information obtained, while preliminary, can be considered as a first attempt in terms of evaluation of event experience dimensions employed consciously in Turkey. The study further provides some useful insights for managerial applications. First, marketers can apply their marketing-mix decisions according to these findings. Second, event organizers can use experiential qualities and they can provide to create holistic experiences for leisure participants.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As with all research, this study is not free of some limitations, and it suggests avenues for future research consideration. The current study focused specifically on a limited number of people. Future research on event experience could be extended to include a wider demographic base, both geographically and internationally, to further explore the extent to which the findings are generalizable.

The respondents in the study were limited to those who live in Eskisehir - a single Turkish city. Furthermore, the focus on Turkish people places the research in a particular cultural context. Consequently, the results may not adequately represent the total population in Turkey. Although the sample was appropriate for a survey on event experience, the results may differ if other people participating in different events are studied. In future studies, many

events or festivals providing leisure opportunities should be examined to compare consumers' experiences in leisure.

Further researches may apply our conceptual framework to major or hallmark events, such as Rio Carnival, Olympics, some sport championships etc., in which experience plays a crucial role for customers' or participants' future intentions and satisfaction to examine whether this consequence varies according to scope or size of the events. This effort would provide a great helpful insight to clarify experiential features of different events.

The next interesting area that should be investigated is the dimensions of event experience in different countries. Different countries have different cultural and social implications and different habits regarding leisure events. Therefore, a different assortment of experience aspects can provide interesting results and new insights into event experience, which should be studied in future research. A future study that compares different samples of countries with special traditional events can shed light on this issue.

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