

Event innovation in times of uncertainty

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387

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Abstract

Purpose – This study highlights areas of key importance for building event resilience and provides best-practice industry examples that foster innovative, adaptable and transformative event environments, which are areas of high academic and managerial relevance in times of uncertainty.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs a multicase study research design that draws on interviews with the leaders of four event organizations in Denmark and Norway: (1) the Steinkjer Festival, (2) Run Alone Denmark, (3) FC Midtjylland and (4) the Bergen International Festival.

Findings – The events demonstrated the critical necessity of understanding innovation and its contribution to resilience in the event sector, particularly in times of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These organizations achieved success by continuously fostering innovative environments before COVID-19 by being value-driven and customer-centric organizations. Digital technologies were not used as makeshift solutions but rather to enhance event attendees' experiential platforms and expand each event's business potential.

Practical implications – The paper answers the call for event and festival research during the COVID-19 pandemic to explore the importance of understanding failure, crisis, innovation and recovery.

Originality/value – The paper's contributions to event management research are (1) adding to the ongoing discussion about building a resilient event sector in times of uncertainty, (2) screening how event organizers achieve innovation in their organizations and (3) providing insights on future requirements for events in a post-COVID world.

Keywords Innovation, Resilience, Events, COVID-19, Uncertainty

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the experience economy. The [UN World Tourism Organization \(2021a\)](#) called 2020 the “worst year in tourism history”. With a 74% decrease in international tourist arrivals, dropping from 1.5 billion in 2019 to 381 million in 2020, and a loss of 1 trillion EUR in tourism exports ([UN World Tourism](#)

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Organization, 2021b), the tourism sector is collectively holding its breath, hoping for development opportunities. While domestic tourism and government interventions to protect jobs and businesses have helped reduce the pandemic’s impacts (OECD, 2020), the event industry has been forced to alter its structure to adhere to local or (inter)national restrictions. This is particularly egregious, as events and their facilities have assumed key roles within urban and regional development strategies (Moscardo, 2007), moving beyond the event industry’s traditional functions of increasing tourism and resident expenditures (Kwiatkowski and Oklevik, 2017) to provide a wide array of benefits. Specifically, the event industry has been able to justify public spending (Faulkner *et al.*, 2003) by generating positive image impacts (Dragin-Jensen and Kwiatkowski, 2018), developing social capital (Arcodia and Whitford, 2006), fostering political impacts and goodwill (Grieve and Sherry, 2012; Reid, 2006), increasing cities’ attractiveness and residents’ attraction (Dragin-Jensen *et al.*, 2016), and catalyzing urban regeneration and gentrification (García, 2004; Karadakis *et al.*, 2010) (see Table 1).

The global context of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility of events (Janiszewska *et al.*, 2021), as the very fabric of this unique “spatial-temporal phenomenon” (Getz, 2008, p. 404) has been contested. The most common event attendance motivations – of a physically social and location-specific nature (Dragin-Jensen *et al.*, 2018) – cannot be currently be activated due to prohibitions of mass gatherings and travel restrictions. Despite event organizers having implemented temporary solutions, mainly digital technologies

| Event | Sustaining innovation | Adaptive innovation | Transformative innovation |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Steinkjer festival | Live-streamed festival | Artists present on site for stream Festival food and beverage “packages” for sale, allowing audiences to create “mini-festivals” at home | Movie-quality production of streams as a marketing tool Closer integration with smaller venues in the community |
| Run alone Denmark | Created a virtual run during the longest period of lockdown | Online studio with hosts Collaborated with other running networks to create event | (New) community building: New website and booking platform App development for user cocreation |
| Drive-in football | Streamed a football match outdoors | Car caravan trip between club’s two cities for fans Giving back to the fans: global media attraction and brand building | Designed a new experience for football fans to (safely) experience together |
| Bergen international festival | Streamed festival | One-month transition from completely physical to digital festival in 2020 | Hybrid launch of event in 2021 Digital performances were designed and executed with cameras in mind New booking ticket system developed: Geographical market expanded Local audiences could book private performances in public areas Art sent to atypical locations around the city |

Table 1.
Event innovations

(i.e. streaming an event), broadcasting and traditional event experiences are seen as “two different experiences, not substitutes” (Mueser and Vlachos, 2018, p. 183).

This paper aims to identify areas of crucial importance for building event resilience that foster innovative, adaptable, and transformative event environments, areas of high academic and managerial relevance. The paper contributes to the ongoing discussion about building a resilient event sector in times of uncertainty, examines how event organizers achieve innovation in their organizations and provides insights into future requirements for events in a post-COVID world. This purpose corresponds to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) call for “supporting tourism businesses to adapt and survive” and “building more resilient, sustainable tourism” (OECD, 2020, p. 5). Moreover, Armbrrecht *et al.* (2020, p. 8) emphasize “the importance of understanding failure, crisis, innovation and recovery” of events during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper details four case studies that have successfully implemented diverse types of innovation during the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by a discussion on different facets of innovation, providing insights for a post-COVID event sector.

2. Resilience and innovation: theoretical underpinnings

2.1 Resilience

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, innovation in the tourism, events and hospitality industries aimed to increase profits, beat competitors or both (Hjalager and Kwiatkowski, 2018). However, the global pandemic has caused many companies to set a new target for innovation: *resilience* (Sigala, 2020). Resilience represents a forward-looking concept that helps companies explore their business and policy options for dealing with uncertainty and change. Chandler and Coaffee (2017, p. 4) define resilience as “*a capacity to prepare for, respond to, or bounce back from problems or perturbations and disturbances*”. In a business context, resilience can be understood as an organization’s (whether a firm, branch, or sector) ability to adapt to its environment and any new circumstances to mitigate an incident’s effects (Supardi and Hadi, 2020).

Supardi and Hadi (2020) distinguish “proactive”, “absorptive/adaptive”, “reactive”, or “dynamic” resilience attributes. According to Dovers and Handmer (1992), the goal of “reactive resilience” is to maintain the status quo, and the quest is for constancy and stability, whereas “proactive resilience” is about accepting the inevitability of change and adapting to new conditions. Namely, “proactive” resilience can act as a catalyst for change and transformation for tourism and event industries, allowing those systems to reinvent themselves in a new post-pandemic reality (Miles, 2014).

The process of building event system resilience can be divided into phases corresponding to the level of advancement and involvement of the system. Twigger-Ross *et al.* (2011, 2014) distinguish resistance, bounce-back, adaptation and transformation stages. Resistance is linked to the event’s attempt to survive and is useful to prepare system elements for a specific threat and its effects, but it may not be as beneficial when the danger is not as expected. Bounce-back signifies the event system “returns” to normal. This approach promotes optimistic rhetoric but often lacks a realistic assessment of an upcoming change. While, adapting to a new situation and accepting changing context, transformation embraces internal changes to face future challenges with innovative solutions directly related to the necessity of the emergence and implementation of innovations. The occurrence of a disaster triggers adaptive resilience built through innovative solutions, and thereby innovation drives the process of transformation (Cutter *et al.*, 2008).

2.2 Innovation

Innovation can be conceptualized as an idea, thing, procedure or system that is new or perceived to be new by whoever is adapting it (Rogers *et al.*, 2009). OECD suggests that

innovation is a multifaceted phenomenon characterized primarily by (Roberts and Tönurist, 2018): (1) a degree of clarity of its intent/purpose (i.e. directed innovation), or a degree of discovery of and responsiveness to (proactive or reactive) externally generated change (i.e. undirected innovation), and (2) whether the innovation occurs in the context of exploring completely new grounds, operating predominantly in the unknown (uncertainty), or whether it is one where matters are relatively well understood (certainty). Using the above two factors (directed-undirected and certainty-uncertainty), the OECD proposes four innovation facets (i.e. mission-driven, anticipatory, adaptive and enhancement-oriented) that ultimately result in four types of change: “sustaining”, “transformative”, “disruptive” and “optimizing”.

The literature proposes various classifications and types of innovations. For example, Carlsen *et al.* (2010) argue event innovation can be analyzed in a different scope and with multiple references, such as: the festival management and processes, the festival outputs or program, services and experiences, market innovation, funding and the festival participants. These elements form a festival organization value chain enabling knowledge generation, transformation and application. Similarly, Carlsen *et al.* (2010) emphasize the simultaneous introduction of innovation and the occurrence of failures in event management that the organizer-managers have to deal with.

Schofield *et al.* (2018) indicate the importance of collaborative innovation as well as organizational innovation and creativity. Commitment is seen as a common element of various forms of collaborative innovation. Mackellar (2006) proposed a division of event innovations with examples based on Trott’s typology (2002). According to this typology, product innovation covers developing a new or improved product (e.g. new foods from food stalls, new themed area for music). Process innovation includes the development of a new or improved manufacturing process (e.g. a new audience ticketing process). Organizational innovation includes for example a new venture division, a new internal communication system and the introduction of a new accounting system (e.g. new event committee structure). An example of management innovation is a new risk management system. Production innovation practically comes down to a new event production system. Commercial or marketing innovation covers new financing of arrangements, new sales approach, direct marketing (e.g. new marketing techniques using direct marketing). New information services for audiences are an example of service innovation.

A completely different division of innovation in event activities was proposed by Dollinger *et al.* (2010) on the example of mega-events. Two main criteria were adopted – resources (shared, non-shared) and network firms (in and out). Crossing the criteria of authors obtained four categories of innovation: communal innovations (shared resources, in-network companies), ambush innovations (shared resources, out-of-network companies), donated innovations (non-shared resources, in-network companies) and private innovations (non-shared resources, out-of-network companies).

It is also essential how innovation is disseminated. Diffusion is how innovation is communicated through specific channels over time among the system members (Rogers *et al.*, 2009). Traditionally, innovation diffusion is a linear, dispersed process involving knowledge, persuasion, decision making, implementation and confirmation. Dillette and Ponting (2021) emphasize that due to the uniqueness of the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a cyclical model of disseminating innovation in the event industry has emerged. The time to implement new solutions has been shortened.

2.3 Event innovation in times of uncertainty

The current study applies a framework inspired by the innovation model that the OECD Observatory for Public Sector Innovation (OPSI) has established. This framework provides a

critical theoretical lens for event innovation in times of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 see: [Figure 1](#).

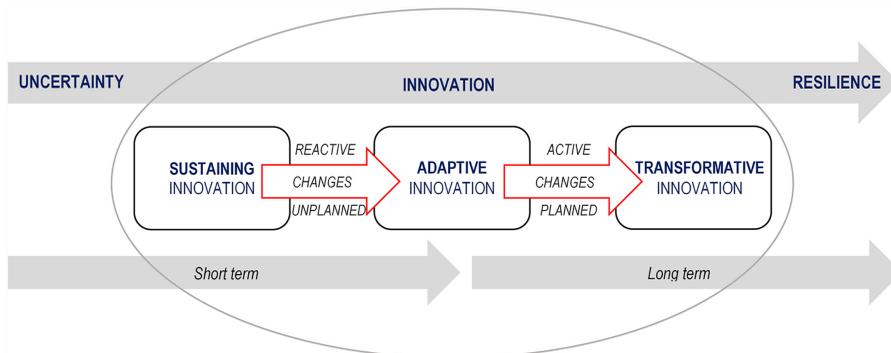
The framework assumes that innovation is decisive for the sector’s resilience in times of uncertainty. The premise is concurrent with previous studies of [Pinto and Noronha \(2016\)](#) and [Dillette and Ponting \(2021\)](#), to name but a few. Furthermore, it supports the previously presented consideration given by [Cutter et al. \(2008\)](#), who highlight the inherent capacity of systems. The crisis instigates a process of change. This process results in adaptive resilience built by adaptive and transformational activities. The transformation is based on the introduction of new solutions (innovations).

Following this consideration, the model contains a sequence of changes – innovations in the event industry arising from a crisis that ultimately should increase event sector resilience. The proposed elements of the model are placed on a timeline characterizing the times of uncertainty caused by a crisis, assuming that the changes in the event sector caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will be long-term, where the responses to a particular threat will be considered during different stages of a crisis.

Compared to the OECD’ OPSIs original model, the presented idea has been modified. The modification aimed to adjust the model to the sector’s characteristics on the one hand, and root it in the context of the crisis on the other hand. In its proposed form, the framework takes a new approach to the concept of innovation in the event industry in times of uncertainty.

The driving force for innovations and changes in daily business operations was deemed to be an externally driven “necessity”. Such an approach transformed innovation into one born from voluntary activities aimed at improvement, change or adaptation for a condition to survive, adapt and transform. In the model, three stages of changes were distinguished, resulting in innovation in the event industry. The stages follow one another and can also overlap.

In the first stage, changes are aimed at stabilizing an unstable situation. Ostensibly, these changes are considered reactive and unplanned, perhaps even of chaotic and forced natures. The second stage focuses on the process of adapting to the current situation. Here, planning appears necessary to achieve goals (even short-term goals). This stage reverberates around a situation where a concerted attempt is made to control the situation. Actions are both top-down (the need to adapt to new rules) and bottom-up (one’s own initiative to stay in the industry). The third stage concerns adapting to the crisis and taking long-term planned actions. Its main goal is to develop a different post-COVID perspective, broadening horizon, in which bottom-up activities based on creativity and the experience gained during the pandemic dominate.



Source(s): Elaborated by authors

Figure 1.
Event innovation in
times of uncertainty

The model considers the following three types of innovation:

- (1) *Sustaining innovations* – short-term, highly reactive responses to a shock (i.e. COVID-19) aim to rebalance the system after an incident. These innovations are driven by external situations and are devised out of necessity by nature. They are a product of the initial conditions and the first consequences of a “shock”.
- (2) *Adaptive innovations* – embrace reactions after the initial shock and aim to adapt the system to the current situation; they intend to reduce the risk of failure by ad hoc, reactive and systematic adjustments. Both internal and external factors drive these and are based on an awareness that matters are evolving and not always as expected.
- (3) *Transformative innovations* – activities showing the ability to cross thresholds into new development trajectories. These anticipatory actions have voluntary and bottom-up natures. In such cases, innovations involve recognizing what might work and what is possible in a given condition.

The quest for a resilient event sector implies that the notions of innovation and resilience need to be integrated into the event system thinking, thus collectively forming a solid theoretical basis for this paper and future research. The article provides the first attempt to meet this goal and offers a truly new and context-driven idea on how innovation functions in times of uncertainty. It sheds light on the new driving force of innovation which the pandemic changed from voluntary action into a critical necessity to survive.

3. Methods and materials

3.1 The case-study approach

This research adopts a case-study approach to explore the innovative behaviors of event organizers during the COVID-19 outbreak and the reasoning that guided their decisions. Yin (1984, p. 23) defines a case study as “*an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used*”. The case-study approach therefore seems apt, as the article aims at better understanding the interaction between a specific context and a phenomenon (Jacobsen, 2002), that is, the COVID-19 pandemic and event innovation.

It is noteworthy that case-study approaches have received criticism, particularly with regards to the absence of control through lack of hypotheses, as well as predictability and generalizability (see: Abercrombie *et al.*, 1984; Campbell and Stanley, 1966), and therefore methodically is seen in low regard (see: Gerring, 2004). Yet prominent scholars such as Flyvbjerg has offered rebuttals for criticism of case-study research, particularly in social sciences, where its strength lies in producing context-dependent knowledge – of vital importance to understand and develop a nuanced view of reality (2006). Flyvbjerg even further addresses the misunderstanding of the value of case-studies, stating that “*predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete, context-dependent knowledge is, therefore, more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals*” (Flyvbjerg 2006, p. 224). Eysenck also noted the value of case studies, stating that “*sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases – not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something!*” (Eysenck, 1976, p. 9). The argument of learning is pertinent to this article at the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the focus is on exploring the “how” and “why” of the contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context (Leonard-Barton, 1990), rather than testing hypotheses for context-independent knowledge. Lastly, in line with Woodside’s (2010) arguments for the benefit of case studies, this paper aims not to generalize findings to a population but rather to

extend, generalize and prove theories. More specifically, to assess the model (Figure 1) whether specific event organizers have realized sustaining, adaptive and transformative innovations.

This research adopts a case study approach to disclose the innovative behaviors of event organizers during the COVID-19 outbreak and the reasoning that have guided their decisions.

3.2 Research site and description of cases

Due to the theoretical perspective of this paper, as well as the nature of the problem, a qualitative methodology was applied (Glinka and Hensel, 2012) to best study the possible emergence of event innovations in the contemporary phenomenon, COVID-19, and thus accordingly, this article draws on various sources of evidence. First, the study draws on in-depth interviews within the “inner circle” of four event organizations: (1) The Steinkjer Festival, (2) Run Alone Denmark, (3) FC Midtjylland and (4) Bergen International Festival (more information below). Second, the official event documents, media coverage and official websites and Facebook Fan pages were scrutinized to cross-check and enrich primary data. Moreover, a review of participants’ comments after each event was undertaken to identify and analyze the aim, scope and relevance of the implemented innovations.

The cases were selected in accordance with Flyvbjerg’s strategies for samples and case selection (2006). Specifically, by adhering to an information-oriented selection, cases were “selected on the basis of expectations about their information content” in order to “maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230). For sampling, the maximum variation case strategy was selected, signifying that the purpose was to obtain information about the significance of various circumstances for case process and outcome – that is, “three to four cases that are very different” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230) on certain dimensions – e.g. size, form, organization, location, budget. This meant that cases were selected based on two criteria, namely (1) having hosted their events successfully during the COVID-19 pandemic, and thereby setting expectations about their information content and (2) covering a wide range of dimensions based on event typologies (see: Dolasinski *et al.*, 2021). Dimensions such as passive or active event attendants, differing thematic components such as music/arts and culture/sporting, length of the event – from single day to multiple days, scalability and number of participants based on a local, regional and (inter)national scale (e.g. Dolasinski *et al.*, 2021; Getz, 2008; Getz and Page, 2015; Gibson *et al.*, 2018).

The semi-structured interviews were all conducted in June 2021 with the relevant officials. 10 questions were asked which were developed beforehand, but follow-up questions were possible, provided the officials mentioned something of relevance to the study. The interviews were conducted until the moment of saturation was reached (Glinka and Hensel, 2012). The shortest interview was 45 min, the longest 1 h 27 min. Upon completion of each interview, the authors convened to synthesize the information gathered, highlighting and identifying critical patterns with relevance to sustaining, adaptive and transformative innovations.

After each interview, an analysis was conducted of the event’s official documents, media coverage, as well as participant reviews and social media sites, allowing us to understand and synthesize the internal and external perceptions, ultimately to further strengthen the information gathered by the interviews. By drawing upon multiple sources (as the case-study approach demands), this permitted to discover central themes in accordance with the model (Figure 1), to then create central blocks of this paper’s text. The central themes were then instilled in the model with regards to the progression of innovations in times of uncertainty.

3.2.1 The Steinkjer Festival. The Steinkjer Festival (SF), held in a town of the same name in Norway, markets itself with the phrase “small village – great experiences” (Steinkjer Festival, 2021a). While attracting international artists, the 2-day music festival focuses on highlighting

Norwegian artists – with the goal of having 50% of the artists in the lineup from the local region. Held annually since 2006, SF has since expanded its portfolio of music concerts to include a variety of other programs; for example, a children’s program, a literature program, musical “clinics” for aspiring young musicians and festival network meetings for professionals who seek new skills and competences ([Steinkjer Festival, 2021b](#)). The 2-day festival sells on average 6.000 tickets per day. The festival gained national notoriety by being the first festival in Norway to fully stream its festival (for free) during the lockdown in 2020 ([Steinkjerfestivalen Stream, 2020](#)), resulting in 20,000 connections to the stream (where each connection could have many persons watching). The performing artists were brought to Steinkjer to lend authenticity to the event, and viewers were able to purchase an official “festival kit”, comprising food and drinks. The authors interviewed one of the leaders of SF (SF-1).

3.2.2 Run alone Denmark [1]. Run Alone Denmark (RAD) was a 3-day running event held in May 2020, created by KrixRun (a company specializing in arranging running events) in collaboration with an amateur running organization, Runners DK. RAD was a virtual run – a race where participants can run when and where they want, choosing between different lengths, ranging from 5 km to a full marathon. The objective was not beating other participants but rather completing the challenge (receiving a medal in the process, upon submission of proof of completion – pictures and a recorded time that it took to complete the distance). Participants could also navigate to an online studio where motivational hosts were present. The mission of the race was “to stand together” by running alone during the longest stretch of the COVID-19 lockdown in Denmark. 2.500 runners participated in the event. Although not the largest of virtual runs in Denmark during the lockdown in 2020 ([Vestesen, 2020](#)), KrixRun, which arranges competitive “traditional” runs, was one of the first organizers of virtual runs (since 2017) in Denmark, and RAD was one of the first virtual runs to be launched during the lockdown. The authors interviewed the founder and owner of KrixRun (RAD-1).

3.2.3 Drive-in football by FC Midtjylland. FC Midtjylland (FCM) is a professional football club based in Herning and Ikast in Denmark and has been crowned the Danish champion in 2 of the last 4 seasons. Formed through the merger of two clubs in 1999, FCM has had a reputation for being innovative in all sporting and business-related manners within an otherwise conservative industry ([Lund, 2019](#)) and made international headlines during the lockdown by pioneering a drive-in football event ([Dvinge, 2020](#)). As fans were not allowed to enter the stadium during matches, the club arranged a one-off event in May 2020, where fans drove their own cars (2000 of them) in unison from the club’s training grounds in Ikast to the stadium’s parking lot in the city of Herning to watch the game on large screens (similar to a drive-in cinema). Fans were encouraged to decorate their cars with club colors and logos – merchandise was available for purchase in the parking lot. Prizes and competitions were held throughout the match, in addition to joint activities (e.g. honking in unison when players stepped out onto the field). The authors interviewed one of the event managers responsible for the drive-in (FCM-1).

3.2.4 Bergen International Festival. The Bergen International Festival (BIF) is a multifaceted annual arts festival in Norway operating within the realms of music, theatre, dance, opera and visual art. Held since 1953, BIF is the largest of its kind in Nordic countries, where over 400 events are staged over 15 days in over 70 different venues ([Bergen International Festival, 2021a](#)). The festival receives over 100,000 visitors annually (pre-COVID-19) and is partly financed by regional and national government funding, as well as corporate sponsorships. When the Norwegian government announced in March 2020 that events and festivals could not be held in physical spaces, BIF cancelled its festival. However, within one month, BIF had reimagined itself as a digital festival, eventually launching 60 digital events, all streamed for free on its website, social media, and traditional outlets, such as public service broadcaster NRK and local newspaper BT.no, with stream counts reaching

more than 1 million (Bergen International Festival, 2020). The 2021 iteration of BIF has been a hybrid version, a combination of physical and digital events, where 30 of the 76 events have been filmed and made available digitally. The authors interviewed one of the leaders of BIF (BIF-1).

4. Sustained, adaptive and transformative innovations: insights

The four events received positive reviews from the media (e.g. Dvinge, 2020; Østerås, 2020; Sandvik, 2020; Vestesen, 2020), and despite the events' typologies being vastly different – ranging from active to passive participants (e.g. Gibson *et al.*, 2018) and comprising different fields of events (e.g. Dolasinski *et al.*, 2021) – there were commonalities in their internal and external perspectives with regard to identifying innovative and resilient factors. This chapter highlights the identified common patterns, synthesizing insights of academic and managerial relevance. An overview of the types of innovations provided by the four events can be found in Table 1.

4.1 User-driven innovation: customer and organization values at the forefront

When prompted as to why the (modified) versions of their events were held in such times of uncertainty, all event organizers provided analogous answers that centered around two reflective questions each organization asked in the context of the pandemic and newly imposed government restrictions. Specifically, the organizers critically reflected on “*Why are we here? (as an organization)*”, and “*What do our customers need?*”. As SF-1 aptly notes:

When the government restrictions in March (2020) came out, we immediately knew we had to cancel our festival. But then we sat down together and asked ourselves – why are we here? We host festivals, not because we “just” want money; we do it because we love festivals and we love music. We are not only personally motivated in this, but we also have a responsibility to our community.

BIF-1 also highlighted the responsibility the organization had to all of its staff in ensuring that they kept their jobs. Knowing that the industry was suffering due to COVID-19, BIF-1 stated that “*it was not an alternative to cancel – that thought did not even cross my mind. I thought instead, what can we do together?*”. FCM-1 and RAD-1 were also immediately driven by the needs of their customers (and customer communities). FCM-1 stated that “*we wanted to give something back to all of our fans, who had shown us incredible support throughout the season*”, and RAD-1 noted that “*people were getting restless, cooped up at home. They needed to get off the couch and feel like they were part of something bigger and more exciting than “just going for a run”. They needed something unique and different*”.

Whereas many events were cancelled, these organizers rallied after the initial shock of the pandemic's restrictions and displayed both sustaining and adapting innovations. Understanding the role of their events in their societies, as well as the current needs of their customers, allowed them to react positively to a critical, rapid (and unexpected) change in society. All organizers were keen on delivering the “festival moment”; that is, a “*momentum born of dramaturgical excellence and high quality content, a powerful experience bring together audience, performers and organizers*” (Silvanto and Hellmann, 2005, p. 6). This value-driven mindset (Conti *et al.*, 2003) allowed the organizers to rally around a “mantra” and implement changes in real-life contexts, as opposed to just defining innovations (Gehman *et al.*, 2013, cited in Askeland *et al.*, 2020). This response was clearly reflected in their organizational structures and the work environments that the organizations (and their leaders) fostered, which are explained in further detail in section 4.2.

The responses from the communities and customers reflected the event organizers' values. FCM's drive-in event sold out in less than an hour (FC Midtjylland, 2020), and RAD's

participants left thousands of positive comments on its Facebook page (Run Alone Denmark, 2020), often including a map of a run, pictures/videos of notable sights along a route and a runner with a medal upon completion, as well as text detailing the route, with words of motivation and praise for the event organizers.

SF's community ties were also reflected; as local venues were used for streaming live events, locals greatly supported the supplementary kits that could be purchased (Adresseavisen, 2020a), and sales in local stores for high-quality TVs increased by 50% when it was announced that the festival would be streamed for free (Adresseavisen, 2020b). Finally, BIF's free 2020 event cost 862.000 EUR (Bergens Tidende, 2020) to organize yet resulted in an increased focus on Norwegian artists (Sandvik, 2020) and over a million streams from 122 countries (Bergen International Festival, 2020).

4.2 Fostering innovative environments

The innovative solutions provided by the four case organizations were based on a mindset of understanding an organization's values and *raison d'être*, as well as its customers' needs, as detailed in section 4.1. However, the ability to reach such solutions (rapidly) stemmed from the organizations' well-tended innovative and organizational environments. The study of organizational impact on creativity and innovation has been thoroughly researched (see: Anderson *et al.*, 2014). This is understandable, as organizations "*recognize that innovation contributes to creating a competitive advantage in a more competitive, challenging and changing labor market*" (Palazzeschi *et al.*, 2018, p. 1).

Decentralized decision-making organizational structures tend to increase innovation, reducing the probability of errors of omission; that is, the rejections of good suggestions (Lee *et al.*, 2016). While this also increases the probability of commission errors (accepting bad suggestions), the tradeoff can be viewed as worthwhile for an organization's innovative capabilities (*ibidem*). This was very much the case for SF and FCM, with both claiming to have very flat and horizontal organizational structures, where not only opinions and ideas were frequently discussed in plenum but also major decisions were reached in plenum. As FCM-1 pertinently commented on their innovative environment:

We are FC Midtjylland. There are expectations of us to be innovative – how we play football, how we recruit players – so why not how we interact with our fans and design our events? Football is a traditional industry, and we want to break that mold. I am always able to call in the team to discuss any idea (even if it seems crazy), and if we want to go with it, I know the director of the club is right down the hall, where I can easily knock on his door.

(Inter)national media praised the innovative event (see: Dvinge, 2020), and the club has been dubbed one of the most innovative in the world (Jones, 2020; Kristensen, 2020; The New York Times, 2020). SF-1 also pointed out that the success of the streamed SF resulted from the culture of the organization, a team-focused organization (Østerås, 2020) where all team members have a collective "festival-fever", and the desire to host and organize the festival greatly outweighed the advantages of simply cancelling the event. This also signified a willingness to adapt:

"We quickly learned that everything we had done in the past 13 years did not apply! We had to build the festival from "ground-zero" again".

KrixRun is a one-person entrepreneurial company, so RAD was born from certain interorganizational collaborative partnerships that have been shown to foster innovation (Klein and Spychalska-Wojtkiewicz, 2020), and other festivals and events (Larson, 2009). KrixRun's daily operations are run from a serviced office space – where other entrepreneurs also work – allowing for cross-sectoral activities, particularly with regard to technological developments (see more in section 4.3), as RAD-1 noted:

“I’m a one-person company, so that means in order to achieve my goals and stay ahead of competition, I need to be agile, and I need to be able cooperate with others – to draw on resources and competences that I do not have. The world of (virtual) running is moving fast, and what worked last year may not work next year”.

This also inherently signifies that risk-taking is necessary, particularly to facilitate adaptive and transformative innovations. This was apparent for the launch of BIF’s 2020 event – a major event, redesigned in one month to be an entirely digital festival, as BIF-1 commented:

Thankfully, we have a very innovative board of directors who are very supportive of being disruptive. They knew there were tremendous risks involved in completely transforming our festival (and organization), yet they told us: proceed, use the funds set aside for the festival, make mistakes, and learn.

This corroborates [García-Granero et al.’s \(2014\)](#) research, where managerial risk-taking is positively related to a risk-taking climate which is important for enhancing innovation. However, taking risks also means that increasing the chances of failure – and learning from innovation failures – is of the utmost importance for organizational innovation (see: [Carneli and Schaubroeck, 2008](#); [Rhaiem and Amara, 2021](#)). Learning from failures was also understood as part of the culture at FCM: “*Sometimes we have instances where we fall flat on our face. But how do we ever move forward if we are never willing to try something new?*”

Finally, BIF-1, FCM-1 and SF-1 all noted that they were more willing to take risks and venture into uncertain territories due to having war chests; that is, having funds from previous years saved for when periods of frugality or uncertainty would arrive.

4.3 Digital technologies: an innovative strategy to enhance the experience platform and to redefine the event space

All four case studies relied heavily on digital technologies to make their events possible, yet all agreed that entirely digital versions of their events were not substitute products, corroborating with [Mueser and Vlachos’ \(2018\)](#) research, but rather the means to enhance their experience platforms. However, it was in this category where they all commented on developing several transformative innovations, thereby enhancing and expanding their businesses.

The most significant overlying transformation that using digital technologies wrought was the redefining of what an event space is. As per the definition in the introduction ([Getz, 2008](#)), events are spatial-temporal phenomena, signifying that they are traditionally bound to physical locations. However, BIF had event attendees tuning in from 122 different countries; RAD had participants running all across Denmark (wherever they wanted); FCM had fans traveling in their own cars between two cities and then sitting in the stadium parking lot to watch a screen; and SF had attendants creating “mini-festivals” in their backyards to tune into the event. RAD-1 originally organized traditional running events and was fascinated by the digital world of running:

I’m an avid runner myself, and I always loved traveling to a place where I had to line up against other runners, wear the number tag and cross the same finish line. Turns out, there are lots of runners who do not want that and love the idea of choosing routes they like, to run when it best suits them (and with who they want), so they can challenge themselves, all the while tapping into an online community of like-minded people.

RAD helped spur a transformative action in KrixRun’s business model that harnessed the potential of virtual running beyond the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic. RAD-1, together with a web developer developed a new platform for virtual runs [2], which not only allows for the registration of participants and their run times (bypassing third-party website fees) but also has created a community (and database) of over 10,000 users, who currently have

completed over 100,000 virtual run challenges. The website has also allowed for better partnership integration with charity organizations and, as of 2021, the site has helped to raise over 135,000 EUR. The immediate success of the website has spurred KrixRun and the same developer to cocreate an app where the community can create their own virtual runs, further allowing runners to generate their own content and thereby increasing consumer engagement; a positive trait that influences their purchase behavior (Malthouse *et al.*, 2016). RAD-1 has also considered arranging hybrid runs in the future.

BIF, however, transformed its 2021 festival into a hybrid model, fully embracing the digital enhancement of the festival. While the 2020 version had been free of charge, the 2021 edition consisted of 76 events, where 30 were high-quality cinematic productions that visitors could virtually attend, for a price. To cope with this new type of festival, a completely new digital ticket system has been developed in collaboration with TicketCo., another Norwegian company. This digital content was sold for 40,000 EUR. BIF has also redefined the event space by “democratizing art” – bringing art pieces to atypical locations such as care homes, addiction centers, nurseries, hospitals, psychiatric wards, asylum centers, crisis centers, prisons, day centers for adults with learning difficulties and schools for children with learning difficulties. BIF has also incorporated a concept invented by the Helsinki Festival known as “Art Gift”, where audiences can book micro performances (5 min) at suitable places in Bergen (Bergen International Festival, 2021b). While by no means supplanting the original ethos of the festival, BIF-1 firmly believed that the digital elements of the festival had the potential to be a gamechanger, allowing the festival to expand into larger (geographical) markets:

We discovered this year that there is a willingness to pay for digital streams of our productions. But, anyone can stream a production – there is nothing unique or experiential about this. To make this work, you need to make it a world-class, movie-quality production: bring the viewer into areas they would never be able to access if they were there present; design the entire performance with the camera in mind.

SF also provided film-quality productions of its festival streams in 2020. While this was not repeated for the 2021 edition, SF-1 noted the value the streams provided by generating awareness and that future video productions related to the festival could serve as an integral marketing tool for upcoming endeavors. SF’s event space was also redefined in 2020, in that smaller, local venues were needed to host its concerts due to governmental restrictions; an amendment the organizers plan to keep, as this further cements its local community ties, remaining as the “*festival that changed the town*” (Østerås, 2020).

4.4 Government assistance: a catalyst or crutch in times of uncertainty?

Government assistance, both at the local and national levels, was discussed by the events’ organizers. The Danish cases (FCM, RAD) had not received government assistance and had not given this any thought when conceptualizing their events, reiterating how their focus had been on what the fans/average runners needed during the lockdown. BIF had received government assistance three days prior to its 2020 launch, following several rounds of dialog with the Arts Council Norway [3], and SF had received government assistance a year after the festival was held, which had also followed several applications to the council (Leknes, 2021). The Norwegian event organizations voiced their frustrations at the process of obtaining government assistance, as noted by BIF-1:

They (Arts Council) were overworked and put in a near-impossible situation, but I was unsatisfied when I learned that they did not understand the sector. They did not understand the arts and the value – beyond the monetary – that festivals bring to society. What we needed was a better dialog, rather than simply looking at a ledger.

SF-1 also added the need for a more constructive dialog:

“They truly did not understand festivals and how they are organized – there is so much more work around them than just the artists performing on stage. The rules kept changing, and decisions kept being delayed. What we needed from them was a more constructive dialog of how to make this work, and predictability – that things would not change once a rule had been laid out, so we could plan accordingly”.

Both BIF-1 and SF-1 noted the need for having someone at the council with both operational and managerial experience in events and festivals who could understand the inner workings of hosting events; not accountants balancing spread sheets. However, the notion of receiving government assistance was also viewed as a double-edged sword by all four organizations, as SF-1 remarked:

“I was disappointed that many festivals received compensation just to cover their costs and then cancelled their events. I would have preferred to have seen festivals getting compensation packages to “stimulate” the event organizers to get them up and running”.

There was considerable uncertainty from all four organizers as to whether providing government assistance has instigated a scramble for organizers to pause events and wait until the pandemic has receded or if it has helped spur creative and innovative ways to (re) launch events during times of uncertainty. What was voiced in agreement was that if government assistance is provided to an organizer, then there should be a clear incitement to use the funds to actually host their event, and not just to cover their losses caused by cancelling the event. There was an understanding that this would undeniably facilitate a very complex process of determining which events would be “deserving” of assistance and how much assistance would be given to these qualifying events.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The quest for a resilient event sector implies that the notions of innovation and resilience need to be integrated into the event system thinking, thus collectively forming a solid theoretical basis for this paper and future research. The interplay of resilience and innovation becomes a clear-cut necessity in the event and festival industry. In this context, innovation is necessary for the industry’s resilience, but only a resilient event industry can create the conditions for innovation. The paper offers a genuinely new and context-driven framework of how innovation functions in times of uncertainty. It sheds light on the new driving force of innovation in the event and festival sector, which changed from “voluntary action” into a critical “necessity” to survive. Compared to the OECD’ OPSIs original model, the presented idea has been modified to adjust the model to the sector’s characteristics on the one hand and root it in the context of the crisis on the other hand. In its proposed form, the framework takes a new approach to the concept of innovation in the event industry in times of uncertainty.

Bearing in mind the empirical dimension, the four events demonstrated the critical necessity of understanding innovation and its contribution to resilience in the event sector, particularly in times of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Being innovative means much more than simply (live)streaming an event, as the insights in the previous chapter highlighted. These organizations succeeded by continuously fostering innovative environments before the outbreak of COVID-19, by being value-driven and customer-centric. It is therefore understandable that digital technologies were not used as a makeshift solution but rather as the means to enhance experiential platforms for event attendees and, moreover, as a way to expand an event’s business potential. Equally important, the use of (new) digital technologies has allowed these event organizations to crucially redefine the

traditional notion of an event space, shedding new light on event venues and typologies. Finally, in times of uncertainty, government assistance has helped sustain many events and festivals but has also sparked debate on whether this restricts the organizers' abilities to provide innovative ways of hosting events (and thereby becoming resilient).

The four organizations have shown an ability to conceptualize and incorporate sustained, adaptive and transformative innovations, thereby lending credibility to our model (Figure 1). All organizers initially reacted to the uncertain time thrust upon them by the COVID-19 pandemic by harnessing sustainable innovations, proactively engaging with the situation and providing adaptive innovations to thrive in the current environment. Finally, the organizations have reframed their businesses through transformative innovations, expanding their organizations' business potential (and resilience) beyond the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Jaimangal-Jones *et al.*'s (2018, p. 124) editorial for event futures, they call for papers that assess "the future form, function, and purpose of event experiences" and "the way that those employed and active within the performance and production of events may alter as technological advances offer opportunities and threats". This paper has revealed areas of rich opportunity for both academics and event organizers to investigate how we can (re)define an event space, particularly as digital technologies open up new fields for interactions and geographical markets. Future research should explore both the physical and digital possibilities for expanding event spaces, as well as the opportunities and threats that this expansion may present.

While there is a growing focus on public support for innovation, much of the support has been geared toward R&D activities, sectoral support of emerging technologies (e.g. renewable energies) and university-industry-government collaborations (see: Jugend *et al.*, 2020). More attention should be paid not only to the event industry but also to the experience economy as a whole, as Pine and Gilmore (2014) aptly summarize: "innovation to create high-quality experiences that customers will pay for is even more important than goods or services innovation" (p. 27). Due to the abrupt and sudden outbreak of COVID-19, it was an intuitive government reaction to provide assistance where possible to industries that were completely shut down. However, to ensure that the event industry can build toward a resilient future, collaborations and research should investigate how event organizations can be best tailored to adapt and innovate their businesses as health experts warn that this is not our last global pandemic (see: Gill, 2020). While most will agree not to adopt a "survival-of-the-fittest" approach regarding which event receives government assistance and which does not, it is clearly in the government's, event sector's and society's interest that assistance should be provided so that organizers can carry out events during times of uncertainty and not simply remain fiscally solvent until business can return to usual.

Notes

1. *Løb Alene Danmark* (Danish).
2. <https://virtualkrixrun.com/>
3. Kulturrådet (Norwegian).

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