

Research Paper

Perceived Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Entertainment Events in Malaysia

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of COVID-19 on Malaysian entertainment events by examining the risk assessments, responses and control measures taken by event organisers. Utilising a qualitative method, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven informants—organisers who actively organised entertainment events before the COVID-19 pandemic. From the coding analysis using the Atlas.ti software, four major themes emerged: event cancellation and postponement, financial loss, unemployment and unsatisfactory virtual events. However, there is a limitation in the context of previous literature, especially in the creative industry. The findings are relevant to event managers, who can use the insights as a reference for their business growth and consolidation.

Keywords: Entertainment events, impacts, COVID-19 pandemic, events management, crisis

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Introduction

Entertainment events encompass different types of events such as concerts, festivals, live performances, and shows. The live events industry is highly vital in attracting a massive number of local and international tourists to destinations. According to Drury et al. (2021), the industry plays a significant role in societal, economic, social, and psychological aspects as well. In Malaysia, the live events industry is expected to

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generate RM400 million per year (Yuen, 2021), with at least 200 major events staged between 2012 and 2017. The Arts, Live Festivals and Events Association (ALIFE) reported that live events are supported by Malaysia Major Events (MME) and have contributed RM3.13 billion to the local economy through tourist expenditure (Martin, 2019). The entertainment business, which comprises leisure activities as well as food and beverages, contributed 25% of the RM3.13 billion. This shows that entertainment events not only attract international tourists to Malaysia, but also stimulate tourist expenditure and employment creation among Malaysians.

However, the live events industry experienced a drastic disruption when the world was hit by the COVID-19 outbreak. The coronavirus disease is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which can be spread amongst humans in several ways. The virus is spread through infected bodily fluids which include droplets, aerosols, and particles in the air, particularly in poorly ventilated areas, and contaminated surfaces (WHO, 2020a). The first case of COVID-19 was detected in Malaysia on January 24, 2020 (WHO, 2020b). The World Health Organization (WHO) (2020c) cautioned that mass gatherings are events that could potentially amplify COVID-19 transmission between attendees. According to WHO (2020c), mass gatherings are defined as events distinguished by the concentration of people at a specific location over a set period of time. These mass gatherings can include one event or a combination of several events happening at different venues. In this context, a live event that gathers many people in one location for an extended length of time, is considered a mass gathering.

To contain the virus transmission, WHO announced a number of safety protocols including a ban on mass gatherings. As a result, the live events industry witnessed an enormous number of events being postponed or cancelled entirely. As of February 2020, at least 10 concerts that were supposed to take place in Malaysia in February and March 2020 were postponed or cancelled due to the pandemic (Chaw, 2020). The industry incurred an estimated RM250 million loss in 2020, and according to ALIFE President Rizal Kamal, about 80% of live event players became inactive in the industry because they had to undertake other businesses not related to live events in order to survive (Kamel, 2021). Rizal Kamal added that the live events industry has a significant impact on job creation and providing livelihoods for an entire ecosystem.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic afflicted various sectors in Malaysia, such as the creative industry, retail, travel and tourism, sport and fitness, agriculture and fisheries, and e-commerce industries since 2020, it is still not clear how affected individuals survived this pandemic. Apart from that, it is hard to predict when the pandemic will be truly over. According to Research for Social Advancement (REFSA) (2021), the cancellations and postponements of entertainment events have had a significant impact on not only the organisers, but also other related stakeholders such as venue providers, suppliers, and performers. For instance, 25% of theatres utilised for entertainment events permanently closed due to the pandemic. Therefore, this

study aims to explore the impact of COVID-19 faced by entertainment industry practitioners and how they coped with the pandemic.

Literature Review

Entertainment Events

According to Brent Ritchie (1984), special events are defined as “major one-time or recurring events of limited duration created primarily to increase awareness, appeal, and profitability of a tourism destination”. Events can be categorised by size and/or form. Events categorised by form can be divided into cultural events with sub-categories of arts and festivals, entertainment events, sports events, and business events (Bowdin et al., 2010).

According to Yeoman et al. (2011), since the early 1990s, the global industry of festivals and events has evolved and grown substantially. The phenomenal growth, combined with increased consumer awareness and choice, necessitates the industry practitioners to manage the sector effectively and efficiently in order to ensure long-term development and growth. In recent years, there has been an unprecedented global interest in festivals and events at international and national levels, in cities and towns, villages and hamlets, and in rural and coastal areas. Everyone wants to celebrate and share their unique cultures, traditions, differences, or similarities with others. Additionally, festivals and events can help promote and attract tourists to a destination, and this can be viewed as a new type of tourism that can help anchor economic prosperity and development (Yeoman et al., 2011).

Apart from that, festivals also form a part of tourist motivation, in terms of consumer desires when choosing a travel destination (Mahika, 2011). For example, young people’s motivations when travelling are no longer limited to just relaxing and resting. This is well explained in the study by Mahika (2011), who stated that a desire to meet new people, have new experiences and discover new places is commonly found in young travellers as this is believed to stimulate them psychologically.

The Positive Impact of Entertainment Events

Adeboye (2012) contended that entertainment and recreational activities such as going to casinos, popular pubs, bars, discos, clubs, cinemas, and concerts are always at the top of the list for travellers. In the same study, Adeboye (2012) also mentioned that live entertainment has been a powerful tool attracting international tourists since the 1990s. Barnes Foundation’s exhibition, *A Century of Impressionism*, held at the Musee d’Orsay in Paris in 1993, was attended by around 1.1 million visitors (Holloway, 1999 as cited in Adeboye, 2012). On October 15, 2010, Helsinki featured a famous artist from the United States of America (USA). Two young Finnish girls (tourists) from western Finland travelled over 450 kilometres to Helsinki to see this

artist perform on stage. This kind of trip is regarded as domestic tourism (Adeboye, 2012).

In USA, the concert and live entertainment industry is a significant economic engine. Mariano and Sacks (2019) reported that in 2019, the concert and live entertainment industry's total national economic impact of \$132.6 billion supported a total of 913,000 jobs with an estimated labour income of \$42.2 billion. Besides that, in 2019, the industry also had a direct impact of \$55.2 billion, which included local operational spending by live event venues as well as off-site spending by out-of-town live event attendees. The survey also found that if an out-of-town attendee spends \$100.00 on a concert ticket, the local economy benefits from an additional \$334.92 in spending, which equals to a total spending impact of \$434.92. To summarise the finding, in 2019, the concerts and live entertainment industry generated a total fiscal impact of \$17.5 billion, which included nearly \$9.3 billion in federal tax revenues and \$8.3 billion in state and local tax revenues.

In 2015, it was reported that there were more than 2,000 live events taking place in Malaysia in conjunction with its Year of Festival 2015. The arts, festivals and events are examples of live creative content that were expected to contribute RM30 billion to Malaysia's economy by 2020. Malaysia is home to big acts ranging from Taylor Swift, The Script, Jennifer Lopez, Mamma Mia, Chicago to Georgetown Festival and Tropfest SEA. It also hosts world-class festivals, celebrations and events that have positioned Malaysia in a positive light in various foreign press and rankings. Malaysia is ranked 19th in Business Environment Rankings (2014), World Bank's 'Ease of Doing Business (2014), and is in Lonely Planet's Top 10 Travel Destinations for 2014; while Kuala Lumpur is ranked the 80th most liveable city on the EIU scale (2014) and 16th most liveable city for expats in Asia (2015) for live events (Razali, 2015).

COVID-19 Outbreak

COVID-19 drastically impacted global markets and various industries, despite the valiant efforts and endeavours of innovative minds and leaders in their respective fields in inventing new ways and adapting to survive. According to recent studies conducted around the world (Madray, 2020), the events industry suffered a total loss of more than \$666 million through April as a result of event cancellations worldwide, with 85.9 million jobs at stake. Event businesses suffered from a severe lack of capital to sustain themselves in the long run, despite the use of technology and measures such as live chat, webinars, online discussion shows, podcasts and so on. These measures could not replace the revenue generated by large-scale events in terms of money and people inducement. Daily wage workers in the industry, as well as small and medium event companies that lacked the platform or target customers to provide such services, significantly felt the brunt of the pandemic (Madray, 2020).

According to the Malaysian Association of Convention and Exhibition Organisers and Suppliers (MACEOS), more than 1,250 business events in Malaysia were postponed or cancelled, resulting in an unprecedented economic loss of more than RM1.75 billion, with many members and industry players earning nothing since the beginning of the year (2020). Besides that, several major Malaysian sports events scheduled in 2020 were either cancelled or postponed to a later date due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Loheswar, 2020) (Table 1).

Table 1. Status of Malaysia major sports events in 2020 due to COVID-19

Event	Status
FINA Diving GP Malaysia Leg	Cancelled
Malaysia Open in May (Diving)	Cancelled
Malaysia International Age-Group Championships (Diving)	Cancelled
Sea Age-Group Championships (Diving)	Cancelled
Malaysia Open (Badminton)	Cancelled
2020 Malaysia Games (Sukma)	Postponed
Shell Malaysia Motorcycle Grand Prix	Cancelled
Malaysian Superbike Championship (MSBK)	Cancelled

Source: Loheswar (2020)

Tan and Au (2020) also reported that a few major entertainment events in Malaysia were postponed or cancelled due to the COVID-19 outbreak, which caused substantial financial loss (Table 2).

Table 2. Status of Malaysia major entertainment events in 2020 due to COVID-19

Event	Status
“Keep Spinning” World Tour 2020 – GOT7 (South Korean Boy Group)	Cancelled
Kenny G Live Concert in Genting Highlands	Cancelled
Raveena’s Asia World Tour in Malaysia	Postponed
Stormzy’s Asia shows in Malaysia	Postponed
‘Free Time World Tour’ Concert - Ruel	Postponed
Panggung Riu (one of Kuala Lumpur’s biggest creative events)	Postponed
Malaysian Superbike Championship (MSBK)	Cancelled

Source: Tan and Au (2020)

Methodology

The qualitative approach was deemed the most appropriate research design for this study since it explores the impact of COVID-19 on entertainment events and how affected individuals cope with these issues. Apart from that, this method may allow informants to provide in-depth knowledge about the subject addressed. Due to the challenges faced during the pandemic, qualitative research, which is closely associated with the constructivist paradigm, will allow researchers to comprehend the world of human experiences (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Initially, the researchers planned to collect data through semi-structured interviews with event organisers selected randomly. However, owing to the pandemic, most event companies were closed, and many did not reply the email invitation. Therefore, purposive sampling was used to select the sample based on the personal contact between the researchers and potential informants.

In the end, seven event organisers who actively organised entertainment events prior to the COVID-19 pandemic agreed to be interviewed. Because of this particularity, the researchers followed the advice of Bryman (2008), who stated that the number of representatives in qualitative research is less significant compared to quantitative research. Additionally, taking into account the availability and challenges faced by the organisers, the interviews were conducted a year after the first case of COVID-19 was detected in Malaysia on January 25, 2020 (Elengoe, 2020). The informants were given a consent letter with a research guide prior to the interview. The interviews were done virtually using the Zoom platform, and the informants were permitted to deviate from the researchers' queries. Data on the impact of COVID-19 were manually coded and categorised based on their pattern and similarity. The Atlas.ti software was used for this qualitative analysis.

Findings

To protect the informants' identities, excerpts from the interview transcripts were selected and associated with the pseudonyms given to the informants.

Table 3. Informants' profile

Pseudonym	Gender	Position	Event size
P1	Male	Founder	Large
P2	Male	Founder	Large
P3	Female	Co-founder	Medium
P4	Male	Manager	Large
P5	Female	Manager	Medium
C2	Female	Executive	Medium
C3	Male	Executive	Small

The interview session consisted of three sections. The first section asked about the organiser's experiences in organising entertainment events before COVID-19. The next section contained questions related to the issues and challenges faced by the organiser since COVID-19 hit Malaysia in January 2020. The issues and challenges mentioned here are related to three categories of impact, which are economic, social, and community. This part is related directly to the main objective of the study, which aims to explore the impact of COVID-19 on Malaysian entertainment events. The final section contained questions on how the organisers coped with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. These questions looked at their risk assessments, risk responses and risk controls. Four major themes emerged from the analysis: event cancellations and postponements, financial loss, unemployment and unsatisfactory virtual events, which will be discussed next.

Event Cancellations and Postponements

During the early stage of the pandemic in Malaysia, most event organisers constantly monitored the status and progress of the virus and disease. They liaised with their clients who requested for cancellation of physical events. The main reason given was that the virus spreads quickly in mass gatherings and is unpredictable. If even one of the event attendees tested positive for the virus, it would negatively affect the organiser. Many businesses rely on the projected income from these events and may lose long-term clientele or potential clients if the pandemic lasts indefinitely. As of September 2021, the number of daily cases reported in Malaysia was still above 15,000.

The main implications for organisers since the pandemic was first declared was event cancellations and postponements. Informant P2 admitted that:

We were not allowed to organise the event because of this pandemic. Yes, we should follow the government instructions, and at the same time, we must also consider the health and safety of our attendees and employees.

Event cancellation is not new in the events industry because as highlighted by Lamb (2015), organisers should have a contingency plan if a particular situation forces them to cancel the event. The organisers were asked the implications of an event cancellation. The responses were as expected, in particular to refunds, where some of the clients insisted that their money be returned after the cancellation. Fortunately, this is good for the organisers who use a deposit-refund system for their events, as mentioned by Martinho et al. (2017). Further, clients are bound by the terms and conditions stated in their agreements prior to the events being held.

Despite the cancellations, there were also organisers who managed to negotiate with their clients to have the events postponed to an indefinite time in the future

where the creative or entertainment industry would be allowed to operate again with strict Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs). Informant C3 commented:

We have a good relationship with our client. The network was built over ten years. So, we can negotiate with the client to postpone the event when the pandemic is over. Or at least when the government allows us to do so. Luckily, our client understood this situation and agreed to postpone the event.

Financial Loss

The global economy suffered greatly as a result of the pandemic with many industries being forced to close. The activities of the entertainment events industry were also restricted or banned, which cost many businesses and employees financially. During the interviews, the informants revealed that if one event company lowered their price, other event companies will follow suit in order to compete with their competitors. This was what happened in order to survive during the pandemic. Consequently, a price war amongst event organisers led to the risk of losing market share and profits during this difficult time.

It is true that major financial loss negatively impacted the well-being of the event businesses (Kettlewell et al., 2020). However, organising an event during a pandemic also posed numerous risks and raised a slew of difficulties. Prices must be adjusted in order to adapt to the present economic situation, resulting in a drop in revenue generated. This not only affected event organisers but also affected other businesses and individuals as well. Informant P4 admitted this:

Production firms are one of the stakeholders that have suffered severely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the absence of events, production houses cannot make use of their lighting, staging, and audio equipment. Our employees are also financially harmed by the lack of opportunities and employment. Therefore, we are unable to organize the events as requested by our clients due to pandemic.

There were also a few informants who admitted that their company was heading towards bankruptcy because they were unable to pay their current debts, and their available assets were used to pay the outstanding amount or a portion of their liabilities. Not to mention, the financial loss faced by organisers produced the largest negative impact on the client (Kettlewell et al., 2020). Some confessed that their businesses had gone bankrupt after facing huge losses that were impossible to recover from. Undoubtedly, COVID-19 dealt a heavy blow to businesses all over the world and affected many event businesses.

According to P1, his company had taken on significant losses that will take a long time to recover from. At the same time, the pandemic had forced them to

make budget cuts in order to keep operations running. Although many other businesses were equally affected, others had not been fortunate, as their company financial review revealed that they only have enough cash to cover a month's worth of costs without any further income. Further, as most event organisers may be reliant on bank loans, and with no new income, they were unable to pay off the loans. Informant P1 explained further on the subject of refunds:

It is the client's right to request for a refund if it is formally stated in the agreement. Umm, in my case... I advised my team that although they have the right to do so but, they should try to not refund them... Try to tell and convince them the event requested can be postponed. I am not sure if you think I'm bad. Haha.. But, I need to, because if not, we will face bankruptcy.

Unemployment

One of the informants claimed that fortunately, no permanent employees were let go. However, they had been given the freedom to do other freelance jobs as the management understood it might be difficult to make ends meet during the pandemic. Nonetheless, wage cuts and layoffs were unavoidable for many businesses during the pandemic because most could no longer afford to pay their employee wages. Informant C3 clarified that:

Since our salaries have been cut by management, in a positive way, they have allowed us to do freelance work. I have also heard from my friend who said that her company finds work for their staff and paves the way for the employees to receive more income.

The informant's concern about unemployment is also related to Blustein et al.'s (2020) study, which claimed that some of the people who lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic had to find alternative jobs to support their family. Informant P2 explained further:

"I have not had any business since April 2020 until now (April 2021). It has been a year... So, can you imagine how I survived? I have a wife and kids. So, I need to do other work. I am working as a Food Panda rider to survive".

Unsatisfactory Virtual Events

Around July 2020, when the COVID-19 situation in Malaysia was improving, the government created Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for various industries, including the events industry to follow during social events. One of our informants

worked closely with the government to monitor the SOP measures for their physical events. Nevertheless, it was impossible to proceed with the physical events because of the uncertainty of the pandemic. Therefore, many organisers decided to change their physical events to virtual ones by using various platforms such as Zoom, Youtube and Facebook. Unfortunately, as confessed by some of the informants, the outcome of the virtual events was not as successful as they had expected. An excerpt from one of the confessions is shown below:

Although virtual events can achieve a wider audience, there were a lot of challenges that we faced when organizing virtual events. Some of the challenges include the time zones of our potential attendees. The other challenge is that the attendees may be less inclined to engage. Other than that, the bandwidth and speed of the platform may lead to potential risks during the event, such as the website crashing, connection errors or live streams buffering.

However, some organisers successfully conducted their entertainment events virtually and obtained positive feedback from the attendees. At the same time, some organisers claimed that they preferred to wait for the government's clearance for entertainment events to be organised physically because they believe the attendees would prefer to experience live events compared to virtual events. This finding is aligned to Getz (2002) who found that attendee dissatisfaction can form a negative perception from other stakeholders due to factors such as low-quality program and low-quality service.

Discussion and Conclusion

The interviews sparked a healthy debate between the researchers and the informants since we can now comprehend the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as its challenges and difficulties, faced by the organisers. The coding of the interview data revealed four themes which are event cancellation and postponement, financial loss, unemployment and unsatisfactory virtual events.

The findings demonstrate that the organisers of entertainment events faced numerous challenges and difficulties during the pandemic, forcing them to cancel and postpone events. Due to these event cancellations and postponements, the business underwent financial losses and many lost their jobs or suffered from salary cuts. Many organisers converted their physical events to virtual ones in order to survive. However, other issues related to dissatisfaction with virtual events also arose. The then Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob had stated that the creative industry will reopen in September 2021. He had hoped that relaxing the SOPs for the creative industry can revitalise the industry, which was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Povera & Yusof, 2021).

Unfortunately, most of the organisers were unsure on the concept of the event they should organise since the SOPs prepared by the government changed from time to time. This also made it difficult to organise events as the authorities did not specify standard terms and regulations. This can be related to the SOP that had to be adhered to by an entertainment programme in Malaysia called *Gegar Vaganza* on December 2021, where only four people were allowed to be on the stage at any one time. This particular SOP left many organisers frustrated since for entertainment events, bands consist of six people minimum (including the singer).

In conclusion, undoubtedly entertainment events are significant contributors to the economy. However, the COVID-19 pandemic left a devastating impact on the majority of Malaysian businesses, especially those related to entertainment events. Events were cancelled or postponed as public gatherings is a key factor for the rapid spread of the virus, leading to financial loss and layoffs/salary cuts. While some events were converted to virtual ones, to circumvent bans on events, dissatisfaction with the latter emerged as an issue faced by organisers.

Future studies should concentrate on the action taken by entertainment event organisers after the pandemic. This is because only a few entertainment events were allowed with strict adherence to SOPs.

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