

Examining the Relationship between Service Quality and Attendees' Satisfaction at an Art Festival in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Service quality is an important part of the equation when it comes to the success of a festival or event, and it's a key factor in the overall experience of attendees. Community-based art festivals play a crucial role in promoting cultural tourism, supporting creative economy and maintaining the artistic heritage of the region in Malaysia. Although service quality is becoming more significant in the field of the arts, few studies have been carried out specifically on the components of service quality that influence guests' satisfaction in Malaysian art festivals. To bridge this disconnect, this conceptual paper helps to elucidate the relationship between guests' enjoyment and service quality during community-based art events within a paradigm. The framework is primarily adapted from the exhibition service quality model by Chen & Mo and enhanced with the integration of the latest literature on festival management and the event studies. The aspects of service quality such as activity content, booth structure and function, and exhibition and booth attractiveness are suggested to be important predictors of the satisfaction among the event attendees. A suggested empirical technique is also described in the paper to help validate the conceptual framework in the future. By extending the application of service quality theory to the understudied setting of Malaysian community-based art festivals, the suggested framework adds to the body of literature on event management. It provides practical tips for festival organizers to make their programs more interesting and engaging, enhance exhibition areas, and enhance the experience for attendees to promote the long-term development of art festivals in Malaysia.

Keywords: service quality, event attendees' satisfaction, art festival, event management

INTRODUCTION

Festivals are an essential element to destination attractiveness, cultural maintenance, community development and local economic growth in the global tourism industry and event sector, making them more valued than ever before (Getz & Page, 2016; Abu Talib et al., 2024). In addition, festivals also offer a social setting, a cultural experience and a memorable experience for visitors, all of which contribute to making a destination more competitive. With the number of cultural and creative festivals continuing to rise, the pressure is on the event organizers to provide high quality services that meet their visitors' expectations as well as motivate people to attend more often (Getz & Page, 2016; Na & Zakaria, 2024). Recent conceptual studies shown that festivals can serve as platforms for community development, social cohesion, and economic revitalization in the local context in Malaysia, and continuous innovation and better management must be pursued for the long-term sustainability of festivals (Abu Talib et al., 2024).

Art festivals have become significant channels to showcase local artists, to keep local culture alive and to stimulate the creative economy in Malaysia. The art festival has facilitated opportunities for artists, business owners, and the public to meet and exchange ideas through various events, including exhibitions, workshops, performances, and creative activities (KBS, 2024). These art festivals not only help develop the tourism industry but also increase community involvement and promote sustainability of Malaysia's creative industry.

In the tourism and event management literature, service quality has always been considered as one of the factors which influence visitor satisfaction. According to Parasuraman et. al. (1988) service quality has been defined as the overall assessment by customers that the service offered is better or worse compared to what they had expected. SERVQUAL is one of the commonly used models for the assessment of service quality, although there has been some debate about the suitability of its generic dimensions for describing the experiential nature of festivals and events. In the context of an event festival, the service quality is assessed based on the specific dimensions that are relevant to the experience of a festival event, such as programme quality, physical environment, staff performance, accessibility and event atmosphere. This is consistent with Abdul Gapor et. al. (2024) who reported that the tangible quality of the service (eg: infrastructure, facilities, and venue layout) and intangible quality of the service (eg: staff service, atmosphere, and visitors' interaction) were both found to have a significant influence on the visitor's satisfaction and loyalty at Borneo Cultural Festival, Sibul, Malaysia. The results show the need to use context-specific service quality dimensions in studying the experiences of the attendees in cultural and creative festivals. Hence, it is important to formulate a conceptual framework, which is specifically developed based on the Malaysian art festivals characteristics to understand how each service quality dimension contributes to the participants' satisfaction.

The findings of the previous studies consistently show that visitors' pleasure, behavioral intention to return, and recommendation of the event to others are all greatly influenced by their perception of outstanding service quality (Abdul Gapor et. al. 2024). The quality of the programme content, the beautiful settings of festival, the control of the visitors and the design of the exhibition areas have a positive influence on the experiences of visitors and the success of the event. The results highlight the ongoing significance of service quality as a key competitive tool for festival organizers looking to enhance the experiences for festival visitors and ensure successful long-term festival operations. Although there has been an increasing number of articles discussing about festival management, there are still few empirical studies that address service quality in Malaysian art festivals. Previous studies were more centered on music festivals, food festivals and cultural festivals, while fewer studies have investigated art festivals as a fusion of art exhibitions, creative activities, and an interactive visitor experience (Abu Talib et al., 2024). In addition, previous Malaysian research has focused on the perception of festival quality and revisit intention, but there has been limited research on the impact of service quality dimensions; content of activities, booth layout and function and exhibition and booth attractiveness on the satisfaction of the visitors at an art festival. Hence, this study is set to investigate the relationship between service quality and the event participants' satisfaction at the Art Festival in Malaysia. In particular, the study examines four aspects of service quality; 1) content of activities, 2) booth layout and function, 3) exhibition and booth attractiveness and their connections with the satisfaction of the event attendees. The results will be useful to enrich the existing literature of event management, by broadening the service quality research into the neglected domain of Malaysian art festivals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service Quality

It is now established that service quality is one of the most important factors that shape customer satisfaction and loyalty in the field of tourism, hospitality and event management literature. It represents visitors' overall evaluation of the services received, expectations for the event and their experience while they are at the event (Parasuraman et al., 1988). While the SERVQUAL model is among the influential theories used to measure service quality, researchers have pointed out that the event and festival context demands additional dimensions as experiences are experiential, interactive, and environment dependent, and as such do not fit the typical service context (Jung, 2005; Abdul Gapor et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2016). In festival and exhibition contexts, there are various other scopes of service quality besides traditional customer service, such as programme quality,

organizing events, accessibility to venues, management of the booth, physical surrounding and attractiveness of the exhibition. Visitors compare both tangible aspects like the facilities, the signage and the layout of the exhibition and intangible aspects like staff interaction, the atmosphere, entertainment value and emotional experiences. Thus, service quality is considered to be a multidimensional variable which can have a significant effect on visitors' perception of the success of the event and their overall satisfaction (Jung, 2005; Wu et al., 2016). The extended view is further confirmed by a recent study by Abdul Gapor et al. (2024) that reveals that “hard” (tangible infrastructure, facilities, layout) and “soft” (staff service, atmosphere, interaction) aspects of service quality are significant drivers of visitors' satisfaction and destination loyalty at the Borneo Cultural Festival, Sibiu.

Recent research has shown that service quality is still one of the most influential determinant factors for visitor satisfaction, revisit intention, loyalty and positive word of mouth in festivals and exhibitions. According to the study by Pai et al. (2021), the perceived festival quality significantly affects the perceived value, the festival visit satisfaction and the intention to return to the festival. Meanwhile, Na and Zakaria (2024) stated that all the dimensions of festival quality have positive influence on the intention to return to festivals in Malaysia among the visitors of generation Z. Likewise, recent exhibition study highlights the need to enhance the service process at all stages of the visitor's experience in order to make their event experience memorable and provide a competitive advantage for the organizer (Cole & Illum, 2006; Chen & Mo, 2012). Thus, knowledge of the different dimensions of quality service is importance to an event organizer to enhance the satisfaction of the visitors and ensure a sustainable event.

Content of Activities

Content of activities is one of the most important elements of service quality in festivals and exhibitions because it will influence the visitors' experience during the festival. The typical program of festivals consists of exhibitions, performances, demonstrations, workshops, competitions, networking, and interactive activities, which are geared towards engaging the visitors with various interests and motivations. The variety, appropriateness, innovativeness and effectiveness of these activities are central to visitors' sense of whether the event is worthwhile and satisfying (Jung, 2005; Cole & Chancellor, 2009). Existing research indicates visitors want to get involved in more experiences as opposed to passive viewing. Interactive programmes can capture more visitors' attention and participation, evoke their emotions, and create memorable experiences, leading to improved satisfaction and loyalty among visitors (Pai et al., 2021; Tanford, 2017).

In addition, recent literature suggests that programme innovation and entertainment value are emerging competitive advantages for festivals to attract and retain their customers in an increasingly competitive festival landscape (Pai et al., 2021; Huang, 2024). This is supported by empirical data where the festival literature revealed that activities including festival programme, entertainment, music, and thematic content were one of the most consistent factors associated with festival satisfaction and loyalty (Tanford, 2017). The statement in line with study conducted at local festivals in South Korea, where the “content of activity” is found to be a significant factor in determining levels of visitor satisfaction, revisit intentions, and word of mouth recommendations. In the context of exhibitions, Jung (2005) stated that one of the most crucial aspects of exhibition service quality is content. This suggests that visitors highly value the number of exhibitors, the quality of the exhibits, seminars, demonstrations and support programmes. Recent research continues to demonstrate the importance of program quality for festival visitors to have an engagement and encouraging future involvement (Na & Zakaria, 2024; Darvishmotevali et al., 2022). Research related to cultural festivals has shown that the improving perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions is significantly influenced by how well educational and interactive activity content aligns with visitors' motives (Darvishmotevali et al., 2022; Huang, 2024).

Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Content of activities has a significant positive relationship with attendees' satisfaction.

Booth Layout and Function

The layout and functionality of the booths are also critical factors in the quality of the service delivered in exhibition and festival settings, affecting the ease with which they can be accessed, navigated, and enjoyed by visitors and how they can communicate with exhibitors. Exhibitions are different from the “traditional” retail setting where the space is not permanent and the visitors are constantly moving from one booth to the other, interacting with exhibitors and taking part in organized events. In other words, the success of the booth's layout and management can have a significant impact on visitors' overall event experiences (Jung, 2005).

Previous studies have consistently shown that well-planned exhibition layouts facilitate visitor movement, ease traffic, and encourage greater interaction between exhibitors and event attendees (Bitner, 1992; Jung, 2005). Bitner (1992) stated, the physical environment affects a consumer's thinking and feeling, which then influences his or her actions. In the context of exhibitions, spatial arrangement, signage, access and flow of visitors play an important part in how visitors perceive service quality. This was supported by Kim et al. (2024), which found that the structure type of the booth, such as corner or end, and block structures, has a significant impact on the satisfaction of visitors to the booth, where open and interactive structures being rated more highly than those that are restrictive. In addition to the physical layout, the management of operations is also a vital factor in how visitors respond to the layout.

The registration process is streamlined, signage is clear and easy to follow, staff are helpful, information is available, security management and crowd control are effective. Lee and Min (2013) argue that exhibition visitors must judge the service quality not only from the physical aspects of the venue but also the professionalism and the responsiveness of the organizers throughout their visit. The modern trend in the event management field is on how seamless processes like wayfinding, information points and staff availability will help to improve the perceived competence of the organization and will have a positive impact on the overall satisfaction of the guests (Pai et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the research results on festival spatial design suggest that the negative impact of restricted movement of the festival object due to spatial design can lessen the satisfaction of the visitors while the positive impact of the lively atmosphere of the festival can increase the satisfaction of the visitors when it is managed well (Kim & Lee, 2015). Therefore, the design of a booth should not only be considered physically, but also as a management strategy that manages capacity, flow, and interaction to ensure the best service to the people and the best experience for the guests.

Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Booth layout and function have a significant positive relationship with attendees' satisfaction.

Exhibition and Booth Attractiveness

The visual aspect of service quality that leads to visitors' initial impressions and their interest in an event is the presentation of exhibition and booth attractiveness. For art festivals, which focus on creativity and aesthetics, attractive exhibition spaces are not only information stations, but experiential spaces that can attract people's attention and evoke their emotions (Jung, 2005; Wu et al., 2016). Mehrabian and Russell (1974) propose that positive emotional, perceptual and behavioral responses to an attractive physical setting are proposed by environmental psychology. Likewise, Bitner (1992) reported that people's assessment of service experiences could be affected by environmental cues, like light, colors, decoration, thematic consistency, and aesthetic design (Bitner, 1992). In the festival environment, attractiveness of a booth is not only a function of the decoration, but also of creative displays, innovative product presentation, the artistic identity, interactive installations and thematic consistency. According to contemporary exhibition design literature, open plan layouts, captivating graphics, and immersive visual features will encourage visitors to spend more time examining booths and improve perceived event quality.

Previous studies indicate that visual attractive booth may encourage people to stay longer in exhibitions that lead

to engagement with other exhibitors and form stronger perceptions of event quality (Jung, 2005; Wu et al., 2016). Furthermore, research about cultural and creative festivals has shown that the atmosphere, aesthetic and environmental quality of the festival have a significant impact on the satisfaction of visitors and the image of the destination (Na & Zakaria, 2024; Chen et al., 2022). According to Zhang & Li, (2026), the use of cohesive brand visual environmental graphic design, which involves a comprehensive signage, color scheme and thematic installations, significantly improve visitors' experiences and their attachment to the place. Furthermore, good aesthetics, clear visual hierarchy, intuitive navigation and thematic coherence will enhance visitor satisfaction and the impression of professionalism of the event (EUDL, 2024). In art festivals, people tend to correlate the exhibition with how good the exhibits are that reflects the professionalism among the exhibitors and organizers. Hence, the combination of creative booth design, attractive exhibition layouts, appealing visual merchandising and immersive environments helps to improve the satisfaction of the attendees.

Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Exhibition and booth attractiveness have a significant positive relationship with attendees' satisfaction.

Attendees' Satisfaction

Visitors' satisfaction considered as the subjective assessment of the festival's experience in the eyes of the visitors based on pre-event expectation ratings and what they actually experienced during the festival (Oliver, 1980). In the field of event management, satisfaction is considered among the most crucial factors for the success of an event, as the positive word of mouth is generated, the visitor will be more likely to return to the event and recommend it to others (Cole & Illum, 2006; Pai et al., 2021). Oliver (1980) argues that the Expectation Confirmation Theory states that visitors' satisfaction is dependent upon whether their expectations are met or exceeded by perceived performance. In a festival context, people are constantly assessing a range of service delivery issues, such as programme quality, venue facilities, staff performance, accessibility, venue physical environment and event atmosphere. All these evaluations in a positive manner add to the higher level of satisfaction.

Affective engagement and experiencing novelty were identified as key factors that significantly affect tourist satisfaction from the recent study done by Krongyut (2025), therefore, providing tourists with activities that are immersive and emotionally engaging is essential to improve tourist satisfaction. In line with this, a similar study found that satisfaction and knowledge acquisition mediate festival quality and visitor loyalty, highlighting the importance of meaningful experiences in fostering satisfaction and repeat visits (Rivetti, 2024).

Most recent event management literature agree that one of the most important factors influencing visitor satisfaction is quality service (Hansen, 2010, p. 34). Pai et al. (2021) in their study discovered that festival quality perception significantly impacts visitors' satisfaction and adds to the increase of destination loyalty and revisit intention. Similarly, Na and Zakaria (2024) reported that visitors' perception of high festival quality resulted in the likelihood of re-visiting Malaysian festivals and recommending it to others. The results are also consistent with the study conducted by Abdul Gapor et al. (2024) which found that the measures of service quality is significantly affect the satisfaction and loyalty of the visitors. Overall, these finding highlight the necessity to continue improving quality of services to keep maintaining the satisfaction of visitors and to ensure long term event sustainability.

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

The quantitative correlational research approach is proposed in this paper to aid in the future empirical testing of the proposed conceptual framework to examine the relationship between service quality and the community-based art festival attendees' satisfaction in Malaysia. The use of statistical tools and empirical evidence to test the hypothesis are provided in the study make the quantitative approach appropriate. The proposed service quality model for exhibitions is the service quality model developed by Chen and Mo (2012), in which the three dimensions of service quality are independent variables: attractiveness of the exhibition and the booth, layout and functions of the booth, and the content of the activity. The dependent variable, which represents visitors'

overall assessment of their festival experience, is suggested to be event attendees' satisfaction. This suggested research design has become an effective methodical approach for further empirical studies to confirm the conceptual framework and examine the service quality factors' effect on participants' satisfaction in the Malaysian community-based art festivals.

The sample of the study is an individual who attended the art festivals in Malaysia and convenience sampling technique will be used to select the respondents. Primary data will be gathered using a structured questionnaire among the festival participants in selected art festivals in Malaysia (Creswell, 2014). Data collected will be analyzed with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics will be used for summarizing respondents' demographic characteristics and reliability analysis will be carried out to test the internal consistency of the measurement scales (Salkind, 2017). Pearson correlation analysis will be conducted to determine the relationships between the dimensions of service quality and attendees' satisfaction while multiple regression analysis will be performed to determine the contributions of each service quality dimension in predicting the satisfaction of the attendees.

Data will be collected using structured questionnaires from attendees of art festivals. The questionnaire will feature structured questions that will use a 5-point likert-scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Items on the instrument will be based on scales from existing studies and will measure the independent variables and dependent variable. Data gathered will be analyzed using statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations will be used to summarize the respondents' demographic characteristics and the study variables. The reliability analysis will be undertaken to determine the internal consistency of the measurement scales.

In order to ensure adequate statistical power for additional empirical validation, the minimum sample size should be determined according to the multiple regression analysis criteria recommended by Hair et al. (2022). When estimating the sample size, the number of predictor variables, the expected effect size, the statistical power desired (0.80), and the significance level desired ($\alpha = 0.05$) should all be considered. To guarantee accurate statistical estimates and improve the research findings' generalizability, choosing a sufficient sample size is crucial.

To examine the proposed hypotheses, Pearson correlation analysis is recommended to determine the strength and direction of the relationships between the service quality dimensions and attendees' satisfaction. Multiple linear regression analysis is then performed to look at the contribution of each of the service quality measures to 'attendance' 'satisfaction' while controlling for other dimensions. Its usefulness lies in the fact that it allows the researcher to determine which of the various dimensions of service quality are the most important in explaining attendance' satisfaction and to evaluate the explainability of the service quality theoretical model proposed. A value of 0.05 ($p < .05$) is recommended for statistical significance.

The proposed service quality concerns approach for community-based art festivals could be useful for future studies in this field as it provides a methodical approach in the empirical validation of the conceptual framework of the service quality concerns. Results of empirical studies supporting the festival organizers to boost their festival's user satisfaction, and make art festivals more sustainable in Malaysia, would be useful to improve the service quality theory in event management studies.

Proposed Conceptual Framework: The framework proposes three service quality dimensions; 1) content of activities, 2) booth layout and function, and 3) exhibition and booth attractiveness as antecedents of event attendees' satisfaction, drawing on empirical evidence from exhibition and festival studies.

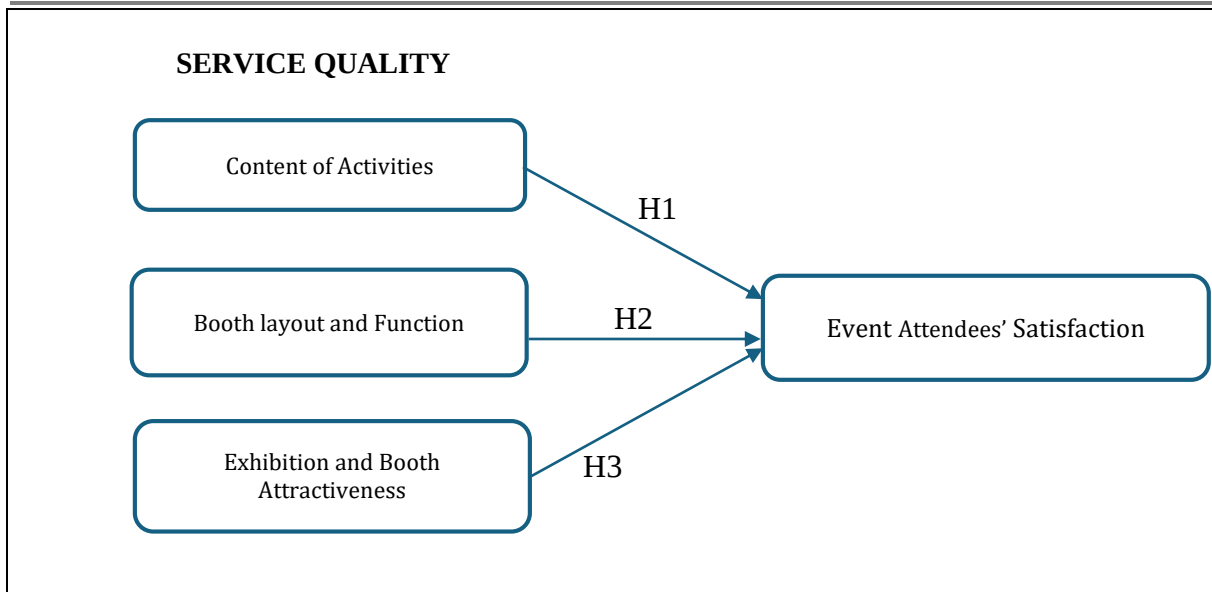


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study (Adapted from Chen and Mo, 2012)

Based on the framework above, the hypothesis will be tested as the following:

H1: Content of activities has a significant positive relationship with attendees' satisfaction.

H2: Booth layout and function have a significant positive relationship with attendees' satisfaction.

H3: Exhibition and booth attractiveness have a significant positive relationship with attendees' satisfaction.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To ensure the success of a festival, it is crucial to understand the quality of service offered by the art festival event organizer. The service quality of an event is a critical component in the perception of the event in a range of event types, from a small community event to a large-scale cultural event. Providing high-quality service cannot be a blanket solution and knowing which dimensions are important for satisfaction will help to design high quality events that match visitors' expectations. The service level plays a crucial role in the overall experience and satisfaction of an individual at an event.

Festival experiences have a role to play in destination competitiveness and can provide a range of benefits for participants, not least on the emotional level and in terms of social interaction. In the context of a festival, quality service can have an impact on the emotional reactions of those who attend and increase their perceived quality of the festival (Pai et al., 2021). In the previous literature, it was stated that the dimensions of service quality can impact on the satisfaction and loyalty of visitors (Na & Zakaria, 2024), which has a relationship with positive event environments and professional management.

Furthermore, people can make positive emotional associations and first impressions based on the visual appeal (Bitner, 1992). Studies have demonstrated that attractive exhibition rooms can improve participation and satisfaction with the exhibition (Wu et al., 2016). In the festival environment, the location and purpose of the booths can encourage engagement, decrease crowding and promote contact between the exhibitors and the festival guests (Jung, 2005; Lee & Min, 2013). The content of activities creates opportunities for visitors to actively participate in events and provide memorable experiences (Cole & Illum, 2006; Pai et al., 2021). For these reasons the aim of this conceptual paper is to define dimensions of service, which are the content of activities, layout and function of the booths, exhibition and attractiveness of the booths, that influence the satisfaction of the visitors of art festivals.

This study aims to place service quality as a multidimensional construct provide insights on how service quality may impact the quality of events in the context of art festivals. Literature shows that the quality of the programme is one of the important factors affecting the engagement and satisfaction of the visitors in terms of content of the

activities (Pai et al., 2021; Na & Zakaria, 2024). There is a growing demand for meaningful and participative experiences at the festival rather than being there to observe. However, there is less empirical evidence about specific types of activities and satisfaction in the context of art festivals has been studies. The literature reviewed indicates that the layout and function of a booth is more appreciated for its operational efficiency than its visual impact (Jung, 2005; Lee & Min, 2013). Good booth setup may encourage contact, reduce congestion and encourage participation among attendees. Conversely, there is limited empirical evidence that has been found regarding the relationship between spatial design and crowd control, and satisfaction in festival scenario.

Regarding the attractiveness of an exhibit and a booth, the literature indicates that the visual design has a significant impact on the initial impression and feelings (Wu et al., 2016). Good impressions and exploration are created with attractive exhibitions spaces and creative booth designs. Even so, there is a lack of understanding regarding aesthetic elements and satisfaction in Malaysian art festivals particularly. These findings together highlight the need for empirical studies to validate and test the framework provided in this paper. Finally, the study is a valuable addition to the research of event management by bringing the field of service quality studies to the less researched setting of art festivals in Malaysia.

The proposed framework combines several theoretical approaches to explain the effect of specific dimensions of the service quality on the satisfaction of the visitors. Other than that, the framework also provides directions to festival organizers interested in making specific changes to improve the festival experience for visitors by increasing efficiency, improving programme quality and improving visual design as well as event coordination. In relation to art festivals that specifically focus on Malaysia, it implies that the organizers should consider the creative exhibition design, operational management, programme content and professional coordination to ensure visitors' satisfaction and to promote the sustainability of the creative economy sector.

Implications

The paper conceptually contributes to the current literature of event management by applying the service quality theory to the setting of community-based art festivals in Malaysia. The suggested framework gives a better understanding of how the service quality factors presented by Chen and Mo (2012), such as content of activities, booth layout, and exhibition and booth attractiveness affect attendees' satisfaction. The framework provides a basis for future empirical research to validate the hypothesized linkages and further investigate service quality within the framework of art festivals.

From a practical perspective, the suggested framework offers valuable direction for festival event organizers in designing and delivering high quality festival experiences. It stresses the necessity for the development of engaging programme activities, the improvement of the booth's layout and functionality and the creation of visually appealing and interactive exhibition spaces to improve overall event attendees' satisfaction. Moreover, the framework can help event organizers to identify important service quality aspects in the planning of community-based art festivals. Finally, the successful application of these strategies could enhance the image of the festival, promote re-visitation to the festival and contribute toward the sustainability of community art festivals in Malaysia.

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