

# Understanding The Experiential Consumption Of Special Event Entertainment (SEE) At Shopping Centres: An Exploratory Study

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## Abstract

Entertainment seeking is an experiential activity occurring within the shopping centre environment. Few studies (e.g. Sit, Merrilees, and Birch, 2003) have examined the consumption of special event entertainment (SEE). SEE is offered on an occasional, temporary and discrete basis and includes events such as fashion shows and school holiday programs. SEE plays a role in creating an exciting or entertaining atmosphere at a shopping environment. An understanding of consumer and environmental variables impacting on consumer response to SEE is valuable to shopping centre management. An exploratory study involving two separate focus group discussions was conducted. In particular of consumer variable, four key motives were found applicable to SEE consumption, namely self gratification, affiliation, stimulation and community support. Self gratification and affiliation motives were applicable to both young and middle-aged participants. However, the stimulation motive was primarily relevant to young participants, and the community support motive was mainly applicable to their middle-aged counterparts. Two environmental variables, perceived crowding and accessibility, were consistently identified as issues by both young and middle-aged participants. These two environmental variables were identified to induce or hinder shopper response to SEE. Managerial implications and directions for future research are addressed.

## Introduction

Given the increasing scarcity of people's leisure time and a shift toward electronic shopping, shopping centre management realise that creating an exciting environment may entice mall patronage (Kingston, 1994). Indeed, many shopping centres are seeking to become a community recreational venue for seeing and being seen, for meeting, and for passively enjoying the environment (Gralla, 1996). Hence, various entertainment features are being incorporated into the shopping centre mix.

Shopping centre entertainment can be classified into three categories, namely special event entertainment (SEE), specialty entertainment and food entertainment (Sit, Merrilees, and Birch, 2003). The key distinction between these categories is their length of operation. SEE represents a variety of events or shows that are offered on an occasional, temporary and discrete basis such as fashion shows and school holiday programs. Conversely, *specialty entertainment* and *food entertainment* contribute to the more permanent tenant mix of a shopping centre (Barreto and Konarski, 1996). Specialty entertainment involves movie theatres and video arcades, while food entertainment includes the range of eateries, cafés or restaurants at a shopping centre.

SEE generally focuses on 'adding value' to the total shopping experience of shoppers. That is, SEE generally appeals to shoppers' senses through excitement, fun and novelty (Taher, Leigh, and French, 1996). Shopping centre management commonly uses SEE to entice mall patronage and encourage patrons to stay longer in the shopping centre, aiming to generate commercial opportunities for other retail tenants such as cafés, restaurants and other specialty

outlets (Maugeri, 2005). Despite the increasing popularity of SEE in shopping centres, very few studies (see Sit, Merrilees, and Birch, 2003) have examined consumer response to SEE. To fill this gap in the literature, an exploratory study was conducted to examine consumer and environmental variables that are influential to shopper response to SEE.

### **Exploratory Research**

Given the gap in the literature on the consumption of SEE within the shopping centre context, two focus group discussions were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the consumption process (Hyde, 2000). Sixteen participants were conveniently recruited from a university community in a regional city of Queensland, Australia. Participants were evenly divided into two focus groups with one being labelled the 'youth' group and the other as the 'middle-aged' group. The 'youth' group comprised undergraduate students who were aged below 25 years. Conversely, the 'middle-aged' group comprised university administration staff who were aged 30 years and above. The majority of participants in both focus groups were female participants. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide the flow of discussions. One moderator facilitated both focus group discussions and each discussion took approximately an hour to address all research questions. The focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed and then analysed. The qualitative data was content analysed and supported by ethnographic statements or direct quotations from the focus group discussions (Krueger, 1988).

### **Discussions of Results**

The findings from the focus group discussions were integrated with the findings from the literature to better understand shopper response to SEE in shopping centres. The findings in this paper are preliminary due to the small convenience sample. Most participants in both focus groups were aware of or had been exposed to SEE in shopping centres. Examples of SEE that were recalled by participants included a reptile show, a circus show, a kung fu show, band performances, fashion shows and school choirs. Middle-aged participants were less enthusiastic to most of those recalled SEE events, whereas their younger counterparts appeared to enjoy the reptile show the most.

#### **Consumer response to SEE**

Given the experiential nature of SEE consumption, consumer responses to such events should be affective oriented. When younger participants were asked how they felt about SEE, common affective responses included 'interesting', 'exciting', 'surprising' and 'involving'. These affective phrases could be grouped into the dimension of *excitement* (see Wakefield and Baker, 1998). Some younger participants also associated 'annoying' and 'irritating' with SEE. Conversely, middle-aged participants' responses to SEE were dominated by negative phrases such as 'irritating', 'annoying', 'frustrating' and 'interfering'. This highlights that middle-aged participants were less responsive to SEE than their younger counterparts.

## Consumer variable – shopper motives

Four motives were identified that trigger shoppers' responses to SEE, and they have been labelled 'self gratification', 'affiliation', 'stimulation' and 'community support'. Each of these motives are now discussed in detail.

**Self-gratification.** Self gratification was found to be applicable to both young and middle-aged participants, and it concerns pursuing or learning about one's personal interests via SEE (Westbrook and Black, 1985). For example, responses from young participants included:

*I like the Kung Fu show because I actually practise Kung Fu. It is interesting to see different styles [of movement]...it is something of personal interest to me...I like the martial art aspect of it.*

*I find the bands are appealing because I like music...I always have the radio on. It is just a personal interest.*

While, responses from middle-aged participants included:

*I love looking at animals...I like furry animals even snakes and reptiles...I just really have an interest in animals...I will definitely stop and look at that [the animal program].*

*Once I watched a Caribbean band playing at the shopping centre...I like the music they played.*

**Affiliation.** Similar to the self-gratification motive, the affiliation motive was relevant to both the young and middle-aged cohorts. This motive concerned the need to socialise or interact with other people (Westbrook and Black, 1985). However, the distinction between the two groups was that young participants emphasised hanging out with friends or supporting friends who are involved in SEE (peer affiliation). On the other hand, their middle-aged counterparts, especially mothers with young children, focused on bonding with family members (family togetherness).

For example, one young participant commented:

*I went to a school choir [at the shopping centre] because a friend's brother or sister was performing in the choir.*

Another commented:

*My friends and I went down there [the shopping centre] to see the band from AGMF.*

While example responses from middle-aged participants included:

*When my kids were little...I took them see Humphrey Bear or something like that.*

*When my kids were little...I took them to the shopping centre to see Humphrey Bear...it was on school holiday...a special trip to see that.*

**Stimulation.** *Stimulation* reflects the motive to seek novel and unique stimuli from SEE (Westbrook and Black, 1985). This motive was merely applicable to young participants and was not evident in the middle-aged cohort. In particular, young participants commented that they responded to SEE because it was something novel, something different, or something they did not see on a regularly basis. Their comments included:

*With the animal thingy...it is something you would never do in any other time...you would not normally grab a snake in your backyard...it is something that would scare a lot of people but you know it is safe to do that [at the program] because they are tamed.*

*It [the animal program] is something we do not really have access to [on a regular basis]...we do not have a reptile park or something like that here...it was really something different to us because it was something we do not normally get to look at.*

**Community support.** *Community support* reflects the motive of supporting or improving the welfare of a local community (Conisbee, Snoswell, and Armstrong, 2005). This motive was merely emphasised by middle-aged participants and was not mentioned by their younger counterparts. This finding is consistent with a recent shopping centre industry report (Conisbee, Snoswell, and Armstrong, 2005), which found that older shoppers such as baby boomers place greater emphasis on the ‘community-feel’ at a shopping centre. In this study, middle-aged participants expressed that they would be more responsive to community- or charity-based events. Their comments included:

*I would probably be more positive with events such as checking people’s blood pressure.*

*I would have more positive feelings towards something community- or charity-based being used in a shopping centre.*

*The only event I ever stopped for was the cancer fundraising thingy, ‘Shave for Cure’... it was meant to support people and make people donating money.*

### **Environmental variables – perceived crowding and accessibility**

Two environmental variables were identified which appear to influence shopper responses to SEE, namely perceived crowding and accessibility. Perceived crowding concerns shoppers’ perceptions of crowding in a confined space where SEE is held (Hui and Bateson, 1991). Perceived crowding was noted by both young and middle-aged participants. However, perceived crowding appears to have a stronger negative impact on middle-aged participants, not only on their attitudes toward SEE but also on their mall patronage. Comments from middle-aged participants included:

*I plan to stay away from those shows or events...if there are heaps of people there, I would not be going there, especially in school holidays.*

*Something that involves a lot of kids and a lot of people...I would avoid it [the shopping centre].*

Accessibility was frequently mentioned by younger participants but not by their middle-aged counterparts. In this study, accessibility reflects the ease of access to SEE in terms of viewing SEE at one's own pace or without any visibility obstructed. Given that middle-aged participants were less responsive to SEE, accessibility of SEE was not a concern as long as the occurrence of SEE did not hinder their shopping activities. Comments from young participants included:

*It [the animal program] was something you can view at your own pace...you know it would be displayed for a few days...it was not like a one-off show which everyone would go to... I did not have to worry about fighting through masses of people.*

*Often you could not be bothered because it is not like there was seating, all people standing on one level, if someone taller standing in front of you, you could not see it anyway...it is not worth it.*

### **Conclusion and Managerial Implications**

The exploratory study reported in this paper aimed to provide an understanding on consumer response to SEE in shopping centres. Consumer response to SEE is deemed to be affective-oriented due to the experiential nature of SEE consumption. The exploratory study indicates that middle-aged shoppers are somewhat less responsive to SEE than younger shoppers. However, their responses to SEE may be improved if SEE is more community- or charity-oriented. For example, a health fair that offers free information on healthy living and free cholesterol screening would likely appeal to more mature shoppers. Conversely, youth shoppers appear to be more enthusiastic about SEE. When targeting the youth cohort, management should consider offering SEE that is novel, unique and exciting. For example, younger shoppers are likely enticed by events such as 'Battle of the Bands' by inviting local teen 'garage' bands to compete at the shopping centre for scholarships or prizes (see Gentry, 2004). This study also revealed that perceived crowding has a positive or negative impact on consumer responses to SEE, and its impact should be further examined. For more enthusiastic consumers of SEE such as youth shoppers, accessibility of SEE such as its locality and visibility is a key concern, and thus it should be carefully considered when planning the SEE. Environmental variables relating to SEE are likely to have an impact on consumer affective responses to SEE. Indeed, environmental psychology theory proposes that consumer emotions are significantly and positively induced by environmental stimuli (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are a number of limitations in this exploratory study. The findings of this study are preliminary due to the small convenience sample. Thus, future research should involve a larger number and other samples with different demographics. Moreover, future research could adopt a quantitative approach to provide statistical predictions of the relationships between consumer and environmental variables. Further, there is a scope to examine the roles of consumer and environmental variables in determining consumer affective responses to SEE. Tentatively, this study proposes that consumer responses to SEE is positively associated with the intensity of shopper motives and perceived accessibility, and is negatively associated with perceived crowding.

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