

Understanding sustainability paradoxes in event design and management: Insights from Italian event organizers

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Abstract

The present study uses paradox theory to investigate the paradoxes in designing and managing sustainable events by adopting the managerial perspective of event organizers (EOs). In-depth interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 26 managers working in Italian EOs. Thematic content analysis of the interview transcripts was used to identify the paradoxes and underlying dualities that emerge in sustainable event design and management. The preliminary outcomes reveal four interdependent paradoxes that emerge at both the organizational and interorganizational level.

Keywords: Event sustainability; Event organizers; Paradox theory; Qualitative research.

1. Study background

The growing academic interest in events reflects their importance at the social, cultural, political, environmental, and economic levels (Ferguson, 2023). However, despite their sizeable—both beneficial and detrimental—impact, the literature on event sustainability remains scant (Mair & Smith, 2022). Furthermore, while environmental sustainability has received significant attention (Boggia et al., 2018), the broader spectrum of event sustainability dimensions has been comparatively neglected (Mair & Laing, 2013).

The extant literature has predominantly focused on the sustainability of individual events, concentrating on the outcomes and impacts of events themselves. At the same time, narrow attention has been paid to event organizers (EOs). As orchestrators of the entire event lifecycle—creation, design, management, delivery, and disposal—(Richards, 2019), EOs occupy a central position where they confront the multilayered sustainability dimensions and, therefore, represent key informants in research aimed at investigating event sustainability according to a holistic perspective.

Similar to other sectors, pursuing sustainability in the event industry is not a straightforward path; rather, it is marked by inherent contradictions and paradoxes (Müller, 2017). Paradoxes manifest in the form of competing priorities, conflicting stakeholder interests, copresence of inclusionary and exclusionary practices, and so forth (Duffy, 2014). Thus, paradox theory has been valuably used to understand the dynamics in the events industry (e.g., Müller, 2017; Duignan et al., 2023). In management, paradox theory explores how organizations address persistent

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contradictions in their activities and decision-making processes by focusing on the coexistence of seemingly conflicting tensions and the strategies involved actors employ to cope with rising conflicts (Shad et al., 2016). Despite its usefulness, paradox theory has mainly been used to investigate sustainability at the organizational level while neglecting a system-based perspective that appears more effective for comprehending the multilayered connections and tensions between social, environmental, and economic issues related to business activity (Carmine & De Marchi, 2023).

Against this backdrop, the present study uses paradox theory to investigate the paradoxes inherent in the design and management of sustainable events by adopting the perspective of EOs. The present research extends beyond the conventional emphasis on environmental aspects and implements a comprehensive examination that includes the economic and social dimensions of event sustainability. By adopting the EOs' lenses, this study provides a more holistic and multistakeholder view of sustainable event paradoxes.

2. Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of the present study, a qualitative research methodology is adopted (Silverman, 2020). In-depth interviews were conducted online with a purposive sample of 26 managers working in Italian EOs in the period June–September 2022. Sample selection criteria included being a member of the Italian association of EOs, “Club degli Eventi” (a representative body for agencies operating in Italy, specializing in events and live communication) and achieving an annual turnover higher than 500,000€. Thematic content analysis was used to codify the interview transcript and interpret the results in the light of the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006)¹.

3. Preliminary results and discussion

Four paradoxes were identified (*Guilt paradox*, *Extraordinariness paradox*, *the Lier's paradox*, and *Virtuality paradox*), characterized by inherent contradictions and interdependence.

The *Guilt paradox* consists of idealistically pursuing sustainability and being pragmatically aware that events cannot be sustainable; it mirrors the awareness of EOs that, despite their efforts, simultaneously pursuing economic, environmental and social goals will inevitably make them experience discomfort at the cognitive and emotional level and face multiple tensions of organizational and interorganizational type. Similar to other economic activities (Luo et al., 2020), also in the event field, the coexistence of economic/financial goals (i.e., profit maximization) and environmental and social pursuits—which often imply sustaining higher costs and making long-term investments—provokes tradeoffs at both the strategic and the operational level between “business as usual” and sustainable choices. In the event industry, these tensions are worsened due to the transient nature of events (i.e., time-bound occurrences), entailing

¹ Samples of verbatim quotations from transcripts are available upon request.

a further contradiction that opposes the event's ephemerality to the capability of generating a long-lasting positive impact (i.e., a legacy) on the territory and local community where the event is held. In addressing this paradox, EO leaders must handle internal frictions arising from a possible misalignment between internal stakeholders' values, beliefs and priorities and negotiate the terms of transactions with external stakeholders (clients and prospects) that may exhibit inconsistent requirements. Sustainability-oriented EOs, in fact, face obstacles in finding demand for sustainable offerings that is limited compared to more convenient mainstream alternatives. The position of EOs that aim to adopt sustainable practices—even at the cost of their profits—could be more challenging in managing commercial relationships with clients and other actors in the supply chain who often prioritize financial returns over environmental or social impact. In this context, EOs, which are responsible for event design and implementation, and should ideally be entitled to make strategic and operational decisions aimed at sustainability, find themselves in a situation of substantial powerlessness, “trapped” in a system of relationships that hinders their decision-making autonomy.

In the external environment, the pressure exerted by event participants provokes a further paradox; the *Extraordinariness paradox*, which relates to the tensions arising when EOs attempt to fulfill event participants' expectations together with pursuing sustainability. Event participants' satisfaction is conventionally associated with spectacularization and EOs' ability to create extraordinary and memorable experiences (Skandalis et al., 2024). Spectacularization and extraordinariness typically come alongside “special effects” (fireworks, extravagant setups, exotic food for banquets, etc.) and they are less aligned with frugality, moderation, and, generally, restraint, which are stereotypically considered crucial aspects of sustainability. Accordingly, EOs must balance creating memorable and impactful events (eventually carrying out resource-intensive activities) and making conscious, responsible decisions that align with sustainability principles. To satisfy event attendees by performing impressive actions EOs could make sustainability-related decisions, opting for superficial yet highly noticeable measures, giving rise to a further paradox.

In the *Lier's paradox*, EOs may select event features more for their marketing appeal than their overall impact, preferring visible, often easily marketable actions—using recycled materials, promoting public transportation, supporting local suppliers (e.g., zero-km food for banquets) (Merrilees & Marles, 2011)—to other, more effective actions that are less visible and impactful at the communication level. Doing so may lead to a paradoxical situation where less committed companies, including those implementing greenwashing and social washing strategies, are prized by the market at the expense of companies genuinely committed to sustainability. Given that, in addition to end users, memorable—and therefore successful—events are also pursued by EOs' clients, less committed companies could be preferred to authentically sustainable EOs by clients as well.

The last paradox, the *Virtuality paradox*, emerges from replacing in-person events with online events—that are virtually participated—to significantly reduce environmental pollution and increase social inclusion, overcoming the unavoidable adverse impact of “real” meetings (*Guilt paradox*). Although effective in offsetting the

greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) caused by physical travel and venue usage and enhancing event accessibility by enlarging the prospective audience to those who cannot move to reach the event location (Hutte et al., 2022), online events still entail several sustainability-related problems: (1) digital carbon footprint – the infrastructure supporting online events (servers, clouds, networking equipment, and devices) require large amounts of electricity, often produced from non-renewable sources, contributing to GHG; (2) rebound effects – the convenience of attending online events can lead to an increase in the number of individual event participants and the cumulative number of events people participate in, giving rise to rebound effect phenomena that worsen the overall digital footprint of the event; (3) e-waste – relying on electronic devices to participate in online events can shorten the span of devices' useful life and contribute to electronic waste; (4) digital divide – especially in already disadvantaged countries, some people could lack the necessary equipment (unreliable internet connections, obsolete devices) and knowledge (lack of digital literacy) to access online events fruitfully. In essence, substituting physical events with online events could lead to a paradoxical situation where online events may reduce partially, entirely or even outweigh the benefits of sustainability gains achieved by digitizing physical events.

4. Conclusion

By adopting the EOs perspective, this study provided a holistic and multistakeholder view of the paradoxes challenging sustainable event design and management. This study identified four main paradoxes that generate tensions at both the organizational and interorganizational levels. The way EOs address sustainability-related paradoxes depends on EO's orientation toward sustainability and contextual factors related to the technological and market environments. Market-related factors include the sensitivity toward sustainability of downstream supply chain actors, either business clients or public entities that commission the events, and event participants' expectations. Furthermore, the study revealed that actions taken by EOs to mitigate tensions arising from one paradox may give rise to further paradoxes, resulting in additional contradictions that have, in turn, to be addressed. Far from being isolated phenomena, paradoxes show mutual connections and interdependence. Accordingly, coping strategies aimed at handling paradoxes should be crafted by adopting a comprehensive view that includes both sustainability-related rising conflicts and the measures taken to address them.

The present paper provides the preliminary results of the ongoing content analysis of the interview transcripts. By proceeding with the analysis, we expect to identify further paradoxes and uncover additional relations that connect them.

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