AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF EVENT IMAGE

Claire Qian DENG, MPhil Student
School of Hotel and Tourism Management
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Tel: 852- 3400 3144
Email: 09900798r@polyu.edu.hk

And

Mimi LI, PhD, Assistant Professor
School of Hotel and Tourism Management
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Email: hmmli@polyu.edu.hk

ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to measure and explore the dimensionality of the event image by using the case of 2010 Shanghai World Expo. After literature review, this study used Keller’s framework of brand image as the conceptual base, followed the free associations method to identify the preliminary items, adopted expert opinions to further purify the measurement items, and finally employed the exploratory factor analysis to explore the underlying structure of the event image. Finally, seven dimensions were extracted: “benefits & Event content”, “facilities”, “service”, “attitude”, “waiting & crowdedness issue”, “F&B”, and “Souvenir”. The results of current study were relatively consistent with the conceptual grounds of Keller’s framework and to some extend confirmed previous empirical studies, which could provide useful implications for both future research and industry practice.

Keywords: Event image, Mega event, World Expo, Exploratory factor analysis.
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INTRODUCTION

Events, which play a more and more important role in the destination marketing and branding process, also attract great attention both from academic field and tourism industry. Research focuses concerning events generally include the evaluation of the impacts brought by events; the event market demand; the consumer behavior research of event participants; the effect of events on changing the image of the hosting destination; and so on. Although event impact studies are relatively comprehensive and well-investigated, the research perspective is from the local residents or local society of the hosting destination. However, the event attendees or visitors, as actual participators in the event, are the most appropriate and important people to evaluate an event. Their perception and evaluation could provide valuable implications to different stakeholders of an event. Therefore, from the literature review, a clear research gap can be identified that there are needs to develop a construct, which can effectively and comprehensively evaluate the event from the perspective of consumers.

In tourism and retail marketing areas, the consumer-perceived image studies are always an important research stream. The research of image began in the early 1960s in the field of retailing, based on theory derived from the Wharton Studies (Fisk, 1961). In 1961, Fisk outlined a conceptual model to measure the influence of image on basis of its six dimensions concerning consumer patronage. In tourism research field, studies on tourism destination image can be traced back to the early 1970s, when Hunt (1975) believed image is a critical development factor in destination’s tourism success. Since then, destination image has emerged as a crucial marketing concept and research area in the tourism field (e.g. Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Kim & Richardson, 2003), and there is a large and expanding body of studies on this topic. The reason why image studies are so significant lies in its value to capture the consumers’ evaluation and to predict consumers’ responses. Therefore, current study thinks that the consumer-perceived image of an event is suitable and essential to fill in the research gap mentioned before. However, event image has been less thoroughly studied than destination image and brand image, and the existing literature does not provide a well-acknowledged definition or measurement scale for this construct.

Concerning the importance of the event image, the research efforts on the event image are severely unbalanced. Especially, researches which are devoted to comprehensively measuring and exploring the dimensionality of the event image are in great need. Therefore, the overall objectives of this study are to measure and explore the dimensionality of the event image by using the case of 2010 Shanghai World Expo.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Event

Even if the importance of events has been realized, in the research area, the efforts are very unbalanced. Although studies trying to define events can be easily identified, there is still no widely accepted definition of event in the tourism literature, and many terms have been used loosely. One commonly used term “a special event” refers to “a onetime or infrequently occurring event outside the normal program or activities of the sponsoring or organizing body. To the consumer, a special event is an opportunity for a leisure, social, or cultural experience.
outside the normal range of choices or beyond everyday experience” (Getz, 1991). Another noticeable effort is that Getz (2008) proposed the concept “planned events”, which incorporates almost all types of events and other terms in event and festival field. Planned events are “spatial—temporal phenomenon and each is unique because of interactions among the setting, people, and management systems—including design elements and the program” (Getz, 2008, p. 404). This concept, planned events, is more comprehensive and appropriate for current study.

As for the typology of events, Getz (2008) provides comprehensive categories of planned events on their form—that is, obvious differences in their purpose and program. Some are for public celebration (this category includes so-called “community festivals” which typically contain a large variety in their programming and aim to foster civic pride and cohesion), while others are planned for purposes of competition, fun, entertainment, business or socializing.

The reason why events attract so much industry and academic attention lies in their contribution to the destination. In the context of tourism destination marketing and branding, events can play a number of important roles – as attractions, image maker, animators of statistic attractions, and catalysts for other developments (Getz, 2005). From long-term development perspective, image makers could be the most important role of events. Events can have the effect of shaping an image of the host city or country, leading to its favorable perception as a potential travel destination. With media focus on the host city, even for a relatively short duration, the publicity value is enormous (Getz, 1991). The relationship between events and the overall, themed image of a destination can be illustrated through examples. Cameron (1989) noted the role of festival and events, and cultural tourism in general, in altering the image of the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania, which was an old industry town. By fostering cultural attractions and events, the towns successfully began to attract both investment and tourists.

Although the positive relationship between events and destination image has been supported by studies and examples, it can be seen from previous experience that not all events can generate positive or huge benefits for the hosting place. The effectiveness of hosting events to some extent depends on the size or reputation of events. Most of successful cases share the commonality of mega-events or upper-class events. The more prestigious and famous an event, the more and bigger effects the event can bring. Therefore, in this study, a mega event was used as a case.

The definition of mega-event is still in debate, and scholars tried to define it from different angles. Marris (1987) suggested that mega-events can be defined in terms of their volume of visitors, cost, or psychology. The volume should exceed one million visitors, the capital cost should be at least $500 million, and the reputation of these events should be that of a must-see event. Among these factors, the key characteristic is the prestige factor. However, others emphasized the economic effects of the event instead. For instance, Vanhove and Witt (1987) stressed that a mega event must be able to attract worldwide publicity. Rooney (1988) summarized the common features of mega-event: they are loaded with tradition; they have profound historical significance; they have developed a mystique or taken on almost mythical proportions; they benefit from media overload, frequently at the international level; they are often complemented by other events, such as parades and festivals; and they are sometimes tied to specific places. Getz (1991) concluded that from the perspective of tourism, the mega event must be linked to “attractiveness” and his definition focuses on “the proportion and number of visits made by overnight travelers to the event”.

Although the definition of mega events has not been agreed on, the widely acknowledged mega events include the Olympic Games, the World Cup, and the World Expositions. These events almost meet all the standards set for mega events. These events are attractive not only to generate abnormally large number or proportion of tourists who travel long distances and stay overnight, but also to shape the destination image in a major way. In current study, the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai is the case adopted to help understand and explore the event image construct.

**Event Image**

In marketing area and tourism field, the image studies of product and tourism destination have a large body of literature and are still booming. With the theoretical discussion and empirical investigation, this line of research has developed as relatively mature. It is widely accepted that the image perceived by consumer or tourists is a key construct in consumer decision-making and post-purchase evaluation processes. Previous studies has empirically suggested that even if the consumer has not personally used a product, the previously hold image of this product can influence their purchase decision and that if they has personal experience with this product, they will form their own evaluation and modify their perceived image of this product in the positive or negative way. This rational is also applicable to the events, which could be regarded as a kind of product as well. However, in previous literature, studies which try to theoretically understand and empirically measure this construct is indeed limited.

Although limited, some research efforts to understand and measure the image of event can still be notified in the event sponsorship literature. The closet attempt to define the image of events was made by Gwinner (1997), who proposed a model of image creation and image transfer in event sponsorship. Gwinner (1997, p. 147) defined event image as “the cumulative interpretation of meanings or associations attributed to events by consumers”. In addition, Ferrand and Pages (1996) defined the image of events as “a cognitive construction associating rational and affective representations of an event by a person or a group” (p. 282) from the perspective of psycho- sociology. In order to conceptualize the event image, it is necessary to review and understand the fundamental theories which underlie the image studies.

In the marketing and branding literature, the foundation for brand image studies is Keller's (1993, p. 3) framework of brand equity. Keller presents a thorough theoretical framework on brand knowledge and brand’s constitutes: brand awareness and brand image. Brand image was defined as “perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory”. These kinds of associations can be classified into three major categories: attributes, benefits and attitudes. Attributes refer to those descriptive features that characterize a product or service, and they could be product-related attributes or non-product-related attributes. Benefits are the personal value consumers attach to the product or service attributes what consumers think the product or service can do for them. Brand attitudes are defined as consumer’s overall evaluations of a brand. Fundamentally, the event image is formed in people’s memory just similar as the way brand image is formed. Therefore, present study believes that Keller's (1993) framework is suitable to explore the conceptual meaning of event image, and that the event image is defined as “perceptions of an event as reflected by the associations in consumer’s memory”.

Like the destination image and product/brand image, the event image is dynamic in nature and is influenced by a variety of factors. The most comprehensive work is Gwinner's
(1997) model, which proposed that an event’s image is a function of type of event (e.g. sports, festival, arts), event characteristics (e.g. size, professional status, history, venue, promotion appearance) and individual factors (e.g. meanings associated with the event). Although these factors have not all been empirically examined yet, one feature of event image has been generally agreed: every event owns a distinctive image which is derived from its unique set of attributes (Chien, Cornwell, & Stokes, 2005).

As far as the measurement of event image is concerned, there are only a limited number of studies. For example, in an empirical test, Gwinner and Eaton (1999) used a set of personified adjectives to measure event image and the sponsoring brand image. By closely examining these adjectives in their scale, two dimensions can be identified. One is concerned with activities, including calm, leisurely, slow, fast, exciting and monotonous, which is also identified by Mehrabian (1980), Foxall (1996), and Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957). Another dimension represents the potency of the event, including adjectives such as aggressive, masculine, and wild. In 2006, Xing and Chalip (2006) developed a scale, which covers evaluation, activity and potency dimensions and include nine adjective pairs. These adjective pairs contain “valuable - worthless”, “unsatisfying - satisfying”, “inspiring - uninspiring”, “unenjoyable - enjoyable”, “pleasant - unpleasant”, “busy - quiet”, “fast - low”, “leisurely - active”, and “calm - exciting”.

These efforts to measure the event image usually use the adjective semantic scale, since their theoretical explanation and understanding of this construct is different. In current study, Keller's (1993) theoretical framework about brand image is adopted to capture the conceptual meaning of the event image, so the measurement items this study expects to capture are broader than previous studies, not only including cognitive attributes, but also containing benefit-related and attitudinal items.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study is conducted in the context of one mega event: the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. The image of the event is regarded as “perceptions reflected by associations held in consumer’s mind” (Keller, 1993; Cai, 2002). Aaker (1991) suggested many ways, including qualitative and quantitative methods, to measure various associations. The qualitative method is used to capture as many associations as possible, while the quantitative method can evaluate the favorability and strength of various associations. Since present study aims to explore events associations as comprehensively as possible from the perspective of tourists, both qualitative and quantitative methods are used. The measurement scale for the event destination image was developed following the steps suggested by Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham (2006).

**Define the construct theoretically.**

First step is to provide an operational definition describes the actions or operations that will be used to measure or control a variable (Weiten, 2010). According to Keller's (1993) and Cai’s (2002) studies, the event image refers to “perceptions reflected by related associations held in the tourist’s mind”.

**Develop a preliminary list of potential scale items by in-depth interviews.**

Second is to develop a list of potential scale items that are correspondent to the definitions of the event image. By literature review, a list of items was drawn to capture the construct domain. Following, on basis of the definition of image, the free association procedure
was followed to interview both tourists and local residents who have visited the 2010 Shanghai World Expo to identify as many relevant event associations as possible. Convenient sampling method was adopted to approach 12 potential interviewees, and finally 10 in-depth interviews were conducted. During the interview, interviewees were asked to tell whatever came to mind when they thought of the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. All the interviews were recorded for data analysis with the permission of the interviewee. Next, all the interviews were transcribed and analyzed by content analysis. From the data analysis, 55 items related to event image of the 2010 Shanghai World Expo were generated.

Judge the items for content validity by expert opinions.

This process involves asking opinions from experts to rate how well the definition and the items match the construct and examine items for redundancy. In this study, 5 experts from both academia and industry were invited by convenient sampling method. Through email, the preliminary list of items for event image was sent to these experts for further refining and assessing the content validity of this construct. As a result, 18 items were deleted and finally 37 measurement items were retained.

Conduct a survey to evaluate the items and explore the dimensionality of this construct.

The questionnaire of the survey used the 7 point Likert scale (1: extremely disagree, 7: extremely agree). The survey was carried out at August, 2010 during the Shanghai Expo. The subject of this survey is the leisure tourist who has visited 2010 Shanghai World Expo. Convenient sampling method was employed at some tourist attraction sites in Shanghai, such as the bund and the people square. At the site, the respondents were asked to illustrate their level of agreement on all 37 statements about the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. At last, 320 questionnaires were distributed and 302 were finished and returned. After data examination, the number of valid data sets for further analysis was 296. Following, exploratory factor analysis and the reliability test were used to further explore the dimensionality and structure of this construct.

FINDINGS

Descriptive analysis of event image detected that the highly agreed items for the event image include “large-scale” (M=6.41), “effective and wide publicity” (M=6.28), “helpful and friendly volunteers” (M=6.18) and “attractive and unique pavilions” (M=6.17). On the other hand, the least-agreed items consist of “not crowded” (M=2.40) and “acceptable waiting time” (M=2.05).

Before exploratory factor analysis, data examination has been conducted to check and accommodate missing data, meet the underlying statistical assumptions, and identify outliers that might disproportionately affect the results (Hair et al., 2006). In order to examine whether the data is suitable for factor analysis, the KMO and Bartlett's Test were conducted. The KMO value is 0.841, which falls into the range of being great (values between 0.8 and 0.9 are great), so it is confident to conclude that factor analysis is appropriate. Bartlett's Test shows the value of 3110.95 with significant level of 0.00, which indicates there are some relationship between the variables we hope to include in the analysis. In sum, the factor analysis is appropriate for the data set. Principal component factor analysis was used to extract factors whose eigenvalues are greater than 1, and varimax method was adopted to rotate the data for easy interpretation.

The results from the exploratory factor analysis are shown in Table 1, with the reliability
test for each factor. Ten items were deleted after several rounds of analysis because of cross-loading on two factors or factor loading less than 0.4. The remaining 27 items were run by factor analysis again. This process resulted in a seven-factor solution explaining 63.53% of the total variance (see Table 1).

The first dimension includes eight items with factor loading higher than 0.4. These eight items reflect benefits the event attendee gain from this event and event-related activities and exhibitions. Therefore, the first factor was named as Benefits and Event Content. This dimension accounts for 26.381% of total variance, and the reliability coefficient of this dimension is 0.861.

The second dimension consists of five items with factor loading higher than 0.4. These items are all related to events facilities for the attendees, so this factor was named as Facilities. This dimension accounts for 9.586% of total variance and the reliability coefficient (Cronbach’s $\alpha$) is 0.765, which indicated a good internal consistency.

The third dimension was labeled as Service and includes three items with factor loading higher than 0.4. These three items are about the service provided by volunteers and working staff in the expo park and in the pavilions. It explains 7.398% of total variance, and the reliability coefficient of this dimension is 0.828.

Five items were grouped into the fourth dimension, which was named as Attitude. These items exhibit event attendees’ attitude or overall evaluation of the World Expo. 6.710% of total variance was explained by this dimension and the reliability coefficient was 0.739.

The remaining three factors contain two items for each and were named as Waiting & Crowdedness issue, F&B and Souvenir. Their reliability tests all reaches the acceptable level, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

As to examine whether this scale consistently reflect the construct it is measuring, Cronbach $\alpha$ was adopted to test each factor and the overall scale. The reliability coefficients for each factor range from 0.739 to 0.861, which indicates a satisfactory level of internal consistency. The overall reliability of the measurement scale is good with the Cronbach $\alpha$ value of 0.898.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Latent Variables and Observed Variables</th>
<th>Factor Loadings</th>
<th>Eigenvalue</th>
<th>Variance Explained</th>
<th>Reliability Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EI35</td>
<td>Learn some most-updated philosophy concerning environment protection, lifestyle, technology and design</td>
<td>0.815</td>
<td>7.123</td>
<td>26.381</td>
<td>0.861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EI34</td>
<td>Broaden outlook, and experience cultures of different countries</td>
<td>0.764</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EI36</td>
<td>Improve the relationship with friends/relatives, and increase communication with them</td>
<td>0.733</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EI33</td>
<td>Satisfies curiosity</td>
<td>0.720</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EI37</td>
<td>Relax</td>
<td>0.639</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EI20</td>
<td>Unique and attractive exhibition in the pavilion</td>
<td>0.566</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EI21</td>
<td>Appealing interactive activities in the pavilion</td>
<td>0.506</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Factor Score</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>Cronbach’s α</td>
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<tr>
<td>EI19</td>
<td>Unique and special performance in the expo park and the pavilion</td>
<td>Factor 2</td>
<td>0.444</td>
<td>2.588</td>
<td>0.765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EI12</td>
<td>Enough resting areas in the expo park for visitors</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.771</td>
<td>9.586</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EI13</td>
<td>Available and convenient information centers</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.764</td>
<td>0.444</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EI14</td>
<td>Waiting areas equipped with advanced cooling systems</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.671</td>
<td>2.588</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EI11</td>
<td>Available and convenient supply of drinking water</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.603</td>
<td>9.586</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EI16</td>
<td>Special channels for special groups of visitors (e.g., the older, the disabled)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.515</td>
<td>0.444</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>EI23</td>
<td>High-quality service provided by the staff in the pavilion</td>
<td>Factor 3</td>
<td>0.810</td>
<td>1.998</td>
<td>0.828</td>
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<tr>
<td>EI22</td>
<td>Good-image staff in the pavilion</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.767</td>
<td>7.398</td>
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<tr>
<td>EI24</td>
<td>Helpful and friendly volunteers</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.736</td>
<td>0.444</td>
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<tr>
<td>EI1</td>
<td>Large-scale</td>
<td>Factor 4</td>
<td>0.763</td>
<td>1.812</td>
<td>0.739</td>
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<tr>
<td>EI2</td>
<td>Effective and wide publicity</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.720</td>
<td>6.710</td>
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<tr>
<td>EI6</td>
<td>Attractive and unique pavilion</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.604</td>
<td>1.372</td>
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<tr>
<td>EI3</td>
<td>New and unique theme</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.545</td>
<td>1.372</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>EI5</td>
<td>Display some advance technologies and design philosophy</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.541</td>
<td>0.444</td>
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<tr>
<td>EI28</td>
<td>Acceptable waiting time</td>
<td>Factor 5</td>
<td>0.912</td>
<td>1.372</td>
<td>0.844</td>
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<tr>
<td>EI29</td>
<td>Not crowded</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.912</td>
<td>5.082</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>EI17</td>
<td>Varied F&amp;B service</td>
<td>Factor 6</td>
<td>0.864</td>
<td>1.187</td>
<td>0.759</td>
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<tr>
<td>EI18</td>
<td>Reasonable distribution of F&amp;B</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.781</td>
<td>4.397</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EI17</td>
<td>Varied and special souvenir</td>
<td>Factor 7</td>
<td>0.679</td>
<td>1.073</td>
<td>0.761</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EI18</td>
<td>Available and convenient souvenir store</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.660</td>
<td>3.974</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total Variance Explained</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>63.53%</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Cronbach’s α</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.898</td>
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**CONCLUSION**

After literature review of previous studies, this study identified that although events have attracted great attention in both the academic and practical fields, limited efforts have been made to explore and measure an important construct related to events: the event image. With the main objectives of exploring the underlying dimensions of this construct, this study used Keller’s framework of brand image as the conceptual base, followed the free associations method to
identify the preliminary items, adopted expert opinions to further purify the measurement items, and finally employed the exploratory factor analysis to explore the underlying structure of the event image. Through in-depth interviews following free associations procedure and expert opinions, 37 measurement items were identified. Then, a survey was conducted to collect empirical data from post-visit tourists in the context of the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, and 296 valid data sets were gained. After the exploratory factor analysis, 27 items were retained and six dimensions were extracted. The analysis results also indicate satisfactory reliability of this measurement scale.

Although every event varies due to a number of factors, the results of this study to some extent confirmed previous theoretical proposition and empirical studies. Current study adopted the definition of event image as “perceptions of an event as reflected by the associations in consumer’s memory” by following Keller's (1993) theoretical framework of brand image. Through data analysis, seven dimensions were identified including “benefits & Event content”, “facilities”, “service”, “attitude”, “waiting & crowdedness issue”, “F&B”, and “Souvenir”. In Keller's (1993) framework, brand associations can be divided into three categories: cognitive attributes, benefit and attitude. Similarly, these ten factors identified in current study can also fall into the same three categories. “Benefit” and “overall attitude” were found corresponding to the benefit and attitude associations in Keller’s framework, and “facilities”, “service”, “event content”, “F&B”, “waiting and crowdedness issue”, and “”souvenir” can be grouped as cognitive attributes of the event.

Furthermore, more specific than Keller’s categorization of brand associations, especially the cognitive attributes, current study further identified important cognitive aspects of an event perceived by tourists. This study not only found the activities dimension, which has also been identified by previous empirical studies (Mehrabian, 1980; Foxall, 1996; Osgood et al., 1957), but also found other aspects such as service, facilities, some managerial issues are also essential parts of the image of an event perceived by the consumers.

The significance of current study is reflected in two respects. On one hand, this study could contribute to fill in the gap of limited event image studies. Specifically, the scale development and the dimensions identified could provide useful guidelines and implications for future research under this topic. On the other hand, practical implications for practitioner in the event industry could be drawn as well, because important aspects perceived by visitors were found through empirical investigation in current study.

This study also bears some limitations. Firstly, this study is exploratory in nature, so the underlying structure of event image should be verified by using multiple samples. Secondly, the measurement scale also requires more complicated techniques, such as confirmative factor analysis, to further verify its validity by using large samples. Finally, this study is conducted in the context of one mega-event: 2010 Shanghai World Expo. Therefore, this construct needs being validated in multiple contexts, which requires future research dedication and efforts.
REFERENCES


