



International Journal of Development and Sustainability

ISSN: 2186-8662 – www.isdsnet.com/ijds

Volume 7 Number 11 (2018): Pages 2797-2806

ISDS Article ID: IJDS18081101



Sustainability of the exhibitions: A stakeholder framework

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Abstract

This study assesses the sustainability of the exhibitions based on stakeholders' perspectives. According to previous studies, exhibition organizers, exhibitors, attendees, and government were regarded as stakeholders in the exhibition industry. This study conceptualizes the model of the sustainability of the exhibitions based on reviewing previous works. The indicators of the sustainable exhibitions should include the cultural, social, economic, and natural environments. In addition, the government is identified as having an important role in the exhibition industry. Finally, this study also addresses the future development of and threats to the in-exhibition industry, providing directions for future research on this subject.

Keywords: Attendee; Exhibitions; Exhibitor; Stakeholders; Sustainability

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Cite this article as: Lee, T.H., Tsai, L. and Jan, F. (2018), "Sustainability of the exhibitions: A stakeholder framework", *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, Vol. 7 No. 11, pp. 2797-2806.

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1. Introduction

Influencing customers' purchasing process by creating a positive image, enhancing customer relationships, and promoting activities, the exhibitions are an essential and efficient marketing platform (Kozak, 2005; Lee, Fu, and Tsai, 2018; Sarmiento and Farhangmehr, 2016). In the 1850s, the contemporary exhibitions began in Germany, and the first international exhibition was set up at the Crystal Palace in 1851 (Tafesse and Skallerud, 2017). Today, the exhibitions are a vital element of industrial marketing media (Rinallo et al., 2017). As a principal marketing tool for influencing purchase decisions (Chun, 2016), because exhibitions rank second, the number of exhibitions is growing fast, and the participation rate is growing extensively (Chun, 2016). In exhibitions, booths can meet a great number of potential customers and decrease the costs of visiting customers. For example, the Taipei International Travel Fair (TITF) had 361,071 attendees visiting the center of the exhibition in 2016. The number of global exhibition activities has prompted growth. The total indoor exhibition space worldwide in 2017 reached 34.8 million m² and 1,212 venues, which indicates a 1.4% net increase in terms of the number of venues and a 7.7% net increase in terms of exhibition space compared to 2011 (UFI, 2018). The government also encourages exhibition activities because they boost the economic performance of related industries, such as the transportation, hotels, restaurants, tourism advertisement, and network industries.

In terms of core competitiveness, major cities in Asia are competing through the exhibition industry (Meet Taiwan, 2018). Exhibitions can generate up to nine times the income for the local economy (Singh et al, 2017). For instance, the number of exhibitors at and attendees of the TITF grew rapidly from 2010 to 2016: the number of exhibitors increased from 530 to 950, and the number of attendees increased from 214,467 to 361,071, with the total trading volume exceeding NT\$3 billion (TITF, 2016). The exhibition industry contributes to a nation's economy because attendees spend more money than the average tourist (Wan, 2011). For this reason, the governments of many countries make the effort to push exhibitions development.

Tafesse and Skallerud (2017) reviewed articles on exhibitions published from 1980-2014 and found that 66% of the articles studied exhibitors, 16% studied attendees, and only 4% studied organizers. Most previous works studied a single role (e.g., exhibitors or attendees) (Reinhold et al., 2010; Siu et al., 2012) or the relationship of two roles (e.g., between exhibitors and attendees or between the organizer and the exhibitor) (Jin and Weber, 2013; Nayak and Bhalla, 2016). Unfortunately, there is a lack of integral research investigating the relationship of the three key stakeholders and assessing the sustainability of the exhibitions. To fill this research gap, this study aims to explore the relationships among exhibition stakeholders and to assess the sustainability of the exhibitions.

2. Stakeholder's perspectives on exhibitions

Exhibitions attract various relational and peripheral groups, for instance, manufacturers, exporters, importers, distributors, industry associations, and the government (Rice, 1992; Tafesse and Skallerud, 2017). Exhibitions mainly participate through the modality of exhibiting, visiting, and organizing (Tafesse and Skallerud, 2017).

According to stakeholder theory, there are three key stakeholders of an exhibition: the exhibition organizers, exhibitors, and attendees (Whitfield and Webber, 2011). Organizers establish the exhibitions, attract exhibitors to set up booths, and promote the exhibitions to attract attendees to visit (Jung, 2005; Whitfield and Webber, 2011). Organizers not only hold the exhibitions but also promote the exhibitions to attract the maximum number of attendees and exhibitors (Jung, 2005). Exhibitors are the main customers of the organizers. They rent and decorate their booths to attract attendees to visit their booths for sales, positive image and promotion (Whitfield and Webber, 2011). The exhibitors also participate in exhibitions to fulfilling their corporate social responsibility and to gain competitive advantage (Whitfield and Webber, 2011). Attendees are the main customers of both organizers and exhibitors (Whitfield and Webber, 2011). Organizers and exhibitors want to attract the maximum number of attendees to visit their exhibitions. For attendees, the main purpose of visiting the exhibitions is to collect information (Smith et al., 2003), particularly technical data and big data that can lead to future purchases and business trends (Breiter and Milman, 2006). A decrease in the number of attendees will make the exhibitions fail, and furthermore, the exhibitions will stop be held and even die. Therefore, ensuring attendees satisfaction and repeat visitation is the key success factor (Whitfield and Webber, 2011). The exhibitions will have sustainable development only if attendees demonstrate repeat visitation, thus attracting a number of exhibitors to set up booths. Through technological development, exhibitors can utilize the advanced technologies of online marketing to attract attendees and, further, affect attendee satisfaction and repeat behavior (Han et al., 2016).

Whitfield and Webber (2011) suggest that exhibitors and organizers should enhance the new products on display to attract attendees. Organizers can establish good exhibition servicescapes for product display and communication between exhibitors and attendees, and exhibitors can provide technical personnel and display new products to boost repeat visitation. A successful exhibition will attract the maximum number of attendees and expand benefits for industries, including accommodation, food, and transportation companies.

Exhibitions play a role of face-to-face information and communication (Stoeck and Schraudy, 2005). The exhibition industry is a service industry and should create exhibition brand value (Jin and Weber, 2013). There are buying-selling and seller-customer relationships among organizers, exhibitors, and visitors. Organizers should guide the industry trends, develop innovative exhibitions, and support exhibitors in ensuring good communication with attendees (Heckmann, 2005). Organizers can establish relationships between satisfaction and service quality with exhibitors and attendees to achieve exhibitions sustainability (Jin et al., 2012); therefore, they can create exhibitions brand preference to make exhibitors and attendees revisit and achieve exhibitions sustainability.

As mentioned above, attendees, exhibitors, and exhibition organizers are identified as the key stakeholders in the exhibition industry (Tafesse and Skallerud, 2015). Regarding the modalities of exhibition participation, Tafesse and Skallerud (2017) reviewed the literature from 1980 to 2014 and found that there were 60 articles adopting the exhibiting modality, 15 articles adopting the visiting modality, four articles adopting the organizing modality, and 12 articles adopting a combination of participation modality. Their review indicated that limited research focused on all three stakeholders, which will become very critical in the exhibition industry (Tafesse and Skallerud, 2017). Thus, examining the interrelationship among these three stakeholders is warranted.

3. Indicators of the sustainable exhibitions

Sustainability is widely regarded as a development that meets the needs of present development without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). According to scholars' findings, sustainable development has usually been assessed in terms of three dimensions: the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural dimensions (Stylianou-Lambert et al., 2014). Sustainable development can increase the dimension of culture, and this dimension of culture for sustainability has been identified (Stylianou-Lambert et al., 2014). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO) defined culture as a kind of special spiritual, material, and sensitive characteristic of social groups, including art, lifestyle, and value beliefs (UNESCO, 2001). The dimension of culture is considered a fundamental factor for sustainable development, being peacefully incorporated with other pillars of sustainability (Stylianou-Lambert et al., 2014).

Sustainable tourism can provide economic growth, protect the environment and enhance quality of life (Eagles et al., 2002; Lee and Hsieh, 2016). Some scholars suggested using economic, socio-cultural, and environmental indicators of sustainability to measure the degree of sustainability (Choi and Sirakaya, 2006; Lee & Jan, 2019; Tanguay et al., 2013). Assessing sustainable wetland tourism, Lee and Hsieh (2016) also suggested two dimensions of sustainability: stakeholders and the environment. The stakeholder dimension has five indicators: tourists, residents, for-profit organizations, governments, and non-profit organizations.

Stylianou-Lambert et al. (2014) proposed four pillars of sustainability: cultural, economic, social, and environmental. Each pillar intersects with the other three pillars. The crucial point of this concept is that the four pillars should be in a state of equilibrium. Pop and Borza (2016) also indicated four pillars: the cultural, economic, social, and natural environment. Although the heading of the natural environment is different from the heading of the environment of Stylianou-Lambert et al. (2014), the contents of the natural environment pillar and the environment pillar are similar, with the two pillars discussing matters relevant to eco-building, environmental education, and eco-exhibitions. Therefore, these four pillars of sustainability have been widely identified.

Stylianou-Lambert et al. (2014) has indicated that sustainable development has four intersecting circles. Regarding the cultural dimension of sustainable development, policy makers, cultural skills, and knowledge for future generations are important factors. These factors will affect present and future generations and form an identity image. The social pillar emphasizes the overall local community and the creation of a sense and image of local places. This pillar stresses that sustainable development should have open and accessible servicescapes for local communities and foreign attendees. Stylianou-Lambert et al. (2014) also suggested that museums have the social responsibility to encourage participation and citizenship. The environmental dimension mainly includes landscape planning, environmental preservation (Tétreault, 2011) and environmental education (Henriksen and Jorde, 2001). The economic dimension includes fund-raising issues, the development and promotion of tourism, job creation and economic revitalization for the local community (Misiura, 2006). According to Stylianou-Lambert et al. (2014) theoretical framework for sustainable development, four intersecting circles include these parameters, which should be considered in developing the sustainability of museums. The circles intersect because the parameters can be common to other pillar; for

example, cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue in the cultural pillar are related to active citizenship and participation in the social pillar. The museum will emphasize certain aspects of this model and connect other pillars through different modalities.

Based on the economic, environmental conservation, cultural promotion, and good governance concepts related to meeting the goal of sustainability (Gurung and Seeland, 2008), Bhutan's tourism development strategy is gross national happiness (GNH) (McDonal, 2005). The GNH idea focuses on human welfare, not only material or economic indicators (Hirata, 2004; Gurung and Seeland, 2008). Reaching the maximum level of happiness or preserving local culture and the environment cannot be achieved through the accumulation of fortune and consumption. Environmental, economic, social and cultural sustainability are the four pillars of GNH, and these pillars balance spiritual and material pursuits. Only the development of economic sustainability can have a negative impact on the other pillars. Therefore, tourism sustainability entails sustainability consisting of economic, environmental, socio-cultural, and GNH pillars (Gurung and Seeland, 2008).

According to previous scholars' findings concerning sustainability development, we propose a model of exhibitions sustainability (Figure 1). This study suggests that the sustainable exhibitions will combine the stakeholders with the four pillars of sustainability to achieve exhibitions sustainability. Lee and Hsieh (2016) have even indicated two important dimensions for sustainability: stakeholders and the environment. We reviewed the literature and proposed the four stakeholders of exhibitions: organizers, attendees, exhibitors, and government policy. Gurung and Seeland (2008) suggested that a good government is a key indicator for sustainable development. We also found that the activities of very large-scale exhibitions are usually mainly supported by governments (Meet Taiwan, 2018). Therefore, the government can be one of the stakeholders of exhibitions. Though exhibitions, the stakeholders will create enormous economic benefits, but they must balance spiritual and material benefits. Therefore, this study suggests that in the sustainable exhibitions, there will be equilibrium across the dimension of the social, cultural, natural and economic environments; leads to the stakeholders and the dimensions of sustainable development to make exhibitions sustainability comprehensive (Figure 1).

4. Threats and opportunities of the exhibitions

According to technological development, virtual exhibitions are innovative and affect the method by which organization and customer needs are met. Through virtual worlds, companies can have more spaces to display products and engage in e-commerce (Pearlman and Gates, 2010). The virtual exhibition (VE) can enhance the experience of exhibitors and attendees, information transfer, and communication through a virtual environment (e.g., the internet, a mobile phone, and the cloud), without a geographic location (Engle and Anderson, 2018).

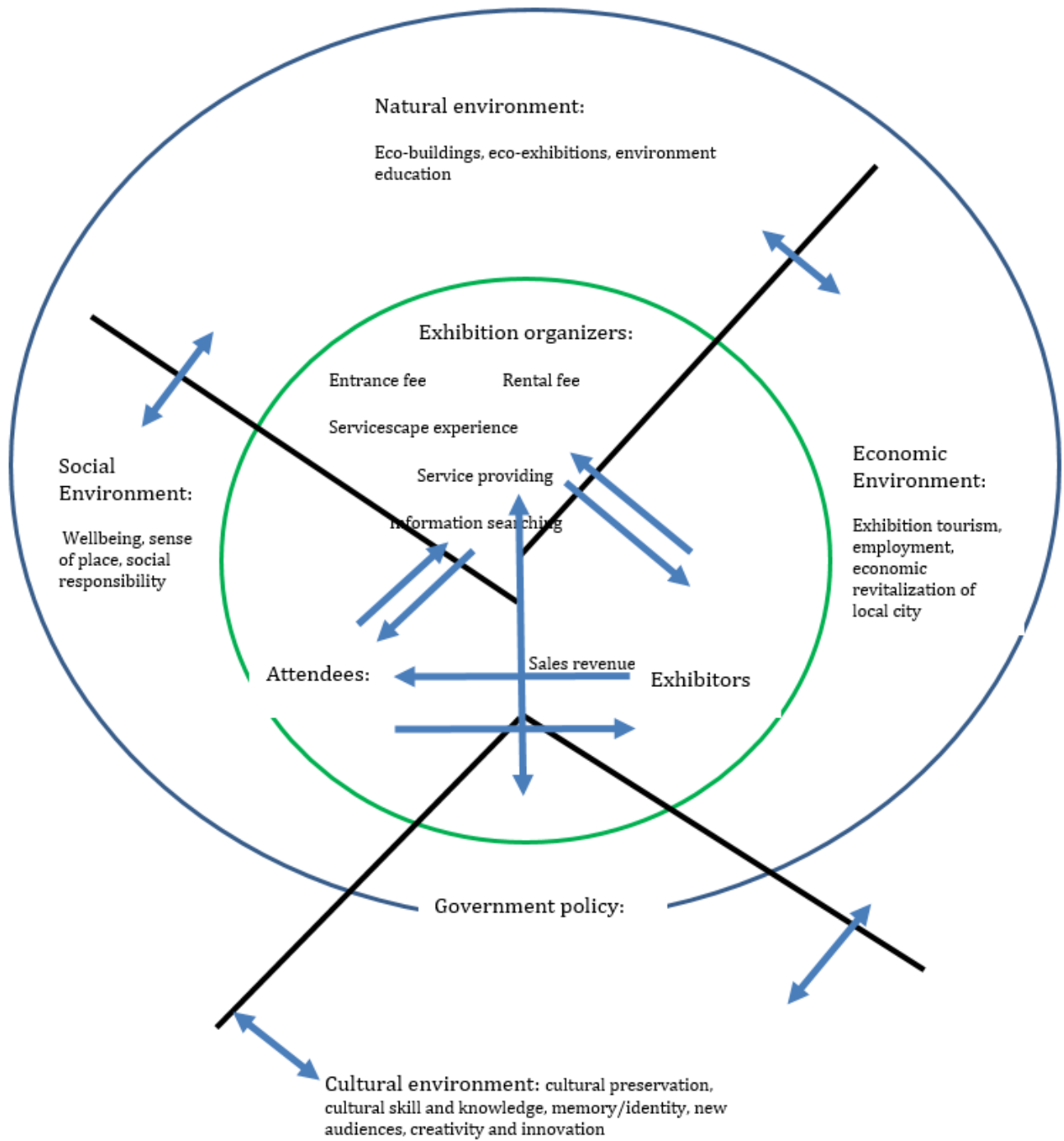


Figure 1. Sustainability of exhibitions

Artificial intelligence can operate virtual booths to make attendees visit the VE and facilitate communication between exhibitors and attendees who speak different languages. The VE provides greater information and faster communication than traditional exhibitions (Lee-kelley et al., 2004), and it is a useful platform and tool for marketing and promotional activities and experiences (Engle and Anderson, 2018). Because VEs can send

important messages to target customers (Turban et al., 2000), deliver advertisements (Chaffey et al., 2000), and attract new attendees and establish long-term relationships with customers (Turban et al., 2000), they might challenge and threaten traditional exhibitions, at least for certain industries (Lee-kelley et al., 2004). However, VEs will increase costs related to hardware, software, and manpower. Scholars have also indicated that companies will develop new approaches to marketing and communication in the virtual environment (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). The attendees of traditional customer exhibitions will buy and take away products, but the attendees of VEs will have to wait due to the delivery time (Lee-Kelley et al., 2004). Some customers will buy products at the VE and not visit the exhibition venue. Consequently, although VEs can be a threat to traditional exhibitions, they can also serve as a marketing tool to assist organizers and exhibitors in communicating with attendees in traditional exhibitions. Thus, VEs cannot completely replace traditional exhibitions in the future, and exhibitors can utilize VEs to support communication with consumers by developing a new VE model.

5. Conclusion

There are four essential stakeholders of exhibitions: the exhibition's organizers, exhibitors, attendees, and government. Attendees are the key consumers for organizers and exhibitors. Both organizers and exhibitors strive to attract attendees and encourage repeat visitation through the servicescapes experience and information searching, thus earning entrance fees, rental fees, and sales revenue, and ultimately achieving the economic goals of exhibitions sustainability. In addition, the organizers and exhibitors may consider local culture elements, social responsibility, and eco-innovation in designing the servicescapes of exhibitions. Thus, the organizers and exhibitors express the economic, culture, social, and environmental benefits for all stakeholders, which may assure the sustainability of exhibitions.

We indicate that organizers follow the key development industries of government policy to hold exhibitions. The government provides resource support to exhibitions for the key development industries of government policy. Exhibitions for the industries that are the focus of government policy can usually attract a great number of attendees, and the scale of such exhibitions is better than before the policy implementation. Therefore, the exhibitions would be sustainable and kept large-scale because of support and leading of government and the cooperation of organizers and exhibitors to attract attendees. For example, COMPUTEX TAIPEI is the second large scale exhibition of global computer exhibitions due to the resources of the government and strong support chain of Taiwan's computer industry.

The sustainability of the exhibitions considers the cultural, social, economic, and natural environments. The four essential stakeholders will wish to gain not only economic benefits but also spiritual benefits such as life satisfaction. By VEs assistance, the communication of four stakeholders would be more efficient. Moreover, the four pillars of exhibition sustainability should be in equilibrium with cooperation of stakeholders. Once the equilibrium among the cultural, social, economic, and natural environments is established, the goals of exhibition sustainability can be achieved.

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