**Innovation in Agricultural and County Shows: Conceptualising the E-eventscape**

**Abstract**

**Purpose:** In response to the cancellation of a host of events during the summer of 2020, this paper examines the rapid innovation that created an online County Show. County Shows are traditionally associated with agriculture and the wider rural economy of a region and provide a range of visitor experiences alongside business networking and trading opportunities. The case of the Online Lincolnshire Show sought to replicate many aspects of a physical show which were evaluated by applying a newly developed model of an e-eventscape.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A mixed methods approach generated data from businesses, visitors and the Show organiser.Surveys and social media feedback from attendees captured overall satisfaction levels and suggestions for improvements. Participation in the online Business Breakfast event along with an interview with the CEO of the Show provided deeper understanding of the innovation occurring.

**Findings:** The nature of innovation was strongly rooted in place, despite creating a virtual product. Local networks and supporters were critical to staging the online Show. The proposed e-eventscape model allowed an effective appraisal of the online Show, identify many strengths in terms of the user interface and aesthetics as well as opportunities for improvement, especially linked to greater interactive engagement.

**Originality:** Little research has examined the evolving role of Shows in the rural economy and the impacts of Covid-19 accelerated innovation. As well as presenting original insights into rural innovation, the paper develops and tests a new e-eventscape model applicable to the growing field of online events and festivals. Findings also suggest that there is considerable scope for organisers to embed online content into the future of many live Shows and festivals, far beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Key Words:** Rural economy; Agricultural Shows; e-eventscape; Digital innovation; Covid-19

Introduction

The year 2020 will be remembered for Covid-19 and history may reveal a range of positive as well as negative impacts resulting from the pandemic. This paper focuses on the specific case of an Agricultural Show and the rapid innovation that took place to re-create the event in a digital space. At the start of the Covid-19 outbreak in the UK, a group of rural policy organisations wrote to the national government outlining their concerns relating to the rural economy, including: “The cancellation of festivals and events, such as agricultural shows, food festivals, will impact on business more widely through loss of footfall etc.” (ACRE, 2020). This recognises the growing importance of events as part of the fabric of an increasingly diverse rural economy where agricultural traditions blend with new leisure and retail activity (Holloway, 2004; Westwood et al., 2018).

The central research question concerns the extent to which visitor experiences of the Lincolnshire Show can be replicated online and the degree to which the digital experience creates value to both visitors and associated stakeholders. In addition, we examine the speed and effectiveness of adaptation, and the possible different ways in which businesses and sponsors gain value from participation. This raises a final question about the opportunities for continuing digital elements within the business model of future Shows. These all represent key issues for Show organiser and rural development stakeholders.

This paper follows the case of the Lincolnshire Show, whose organisers, The Lincolnshire Agricultural Society, took the decision on 23rd March 2020 to cancel the physical event. On 23rd May they released a press release announcing the intention to create an online event and by 24th June, a fully digital programme complete with online ticketing, a business networking event, animal displays, children’s activities, cookery demonstrations and a range of sponsors had been designed and implemented. The paper proceeds by comparing models of e-servicescapes and eventscapes to provide a framework for analysing the effectiveness of the Show’s online format from a consumer perspective.

Agriculture Shows and their role in the rural economy

Agricultural and Country shows (hereafter “Shows”) are immersed in history and tradition, providing continuity for their associated communities in the face of substantial rural change (Gray, 2010). Their continuing popularity is sustained by a loyal visitor-base, a familiar place in the calendar and renewed interest in food, farming and the environment. As with many other festivals though, they face challenges to create contemporary experiences that appeal to both repeat and first-time visitors (Black, 2016; Kwiatkowski and Hjalager, 2018). Many new visitors have little connection with the food and farming sector, placing emphasis on the need for broader educational, retail and craft-based activities to represent the contemporary rural economy. For example, Shows play a key role in the testing and marketing of local foods with awards held in high esteem due to the perceived expertise and independence of well-established Shows (Henryks et al., 2018). The resurgence in demand for local (Tregear, 2011; Skallerud and Wien, 2019) and ‘alternative’ foods (James and Halkier, 2016) is part of a new rural consumerism that attracts both rural and urban residents seeking connections with the countryside (Westwood et al., 2018).

The evolution of Shows and their audiences has led to calls for new research to support their continuing modernisation and diversification (Westwood et al., 2018). Shows, like other festivals, can strengthen and integrate place identity and a sense of community (Jarman, 2018; Hjalager and Kwiatkowski, 2018). The Show experience is representative of the local heritage and natural amenities that comprise a contemporary multi-functional rural landscape (Marcouiller and Westeren, 2019). By expanding their identity and reflecting increasing business diversity in the rural economy (DEFRA, 2019), Shows now provide networking and promotional opportunities beyond the agriculture and food sectors. With a shared sense of place attachment and engagement among participants, Shows also provides fertile ground for innovation, both for Show organisers themselves and for wider stakeholders (Larson, 2009; Schofield et al., 2017). We therefore proceed by analysing different forms of innovation relating to the rural events sector to guide analysis of the networks that were mobilised to create the online Show in our case study.

Rural Events Innovation

Innovation and knowledge spillovers tend to be slower in rural regions, which are thought to be more heavily reliant on exogenous forces for growth opportunities (OECD, 2014). Mainstream theories tend to assume that rural areas are less conducive for innovation from both internal and external perspectives due to their weaker resource base, characterised by fewer institutions and less economic diversity, and their poorer connectivity and access to larger markets (Miles and Morrison, 2018; Xu and Dobson, 2019). Despite this hegemonic pessimism, wider perspectives reveal that rural firms are innovating in many ways (Esparcia, 2014; Madueira and Torre, 2019), albeit often through more gradual and incremental processes (Shearmur, 2015).

In a rural context, an important distinction exists between innovations that are ‘new to the world’ or ‘new to the local area’ (Bosworth et al., 2016). The latter are more incremental innovations that can build economic resilience in a rural context where smallness and adaptability can be advantageous (Branicki et al, 2018). As part of the rural context, Shows can support innovation among local businesses as part of networks that anchor knowledge into the local region. Shows themselves must also innovate to stay competitive in an increasingly congested leisure and events marketplace (Kwiatkowski and Hjalager, 2018). This requires organisers to draw on strong and weak tie networks to deliver the right combination of long-term continuity and year-to-year creativity and novelty (Larson, 2009; Black, 2016). Faced with a sudden challenge, in this case the Covid-19 pandemic, both stable, long-term networks and new connections were required to address emerging priorities alongside effective leadership to sustain co-creative collaboration (Schofield et al., 2017).

As well as the physical event-based innovation and network innovations, a range of online tools and user engagement channels have emerged in the events sector to create digital innovation opportunities. Digital technology in the events sector has largely been developed for behind the scenes “process innovations” (Hjalager, 2010) such as online bookings, payments and marketing. Only more recently have virtual festivals and online events started to introduce greater interactivity and new product innovations through online and mobile media (Ryan et al., 2020). Among museums and heritage attractions, more interactive forms of ICT have been used to augment understanding and accessibly for tourists (Hjalager, 2010) but even this remains a largely static addition to the physical experience. However, combining wholly online events with physical ones and developing interactivity between the two spaces, allows organisers to conceive new experiencescapes (Marcouiller and Westeren, 2019) or eventscapes (Brown et al., 2015) to improve the visitor offering both online and at the Showground. Both the e-servicescape and eventscape models are therefore valuable for evaluating the innovation of online Shows.

E-servicescapes and Eventscapes: Towards a new model of the E-eventscape

A servicescape (Bitner, 1992) describes the entire spatially bounded environment that consumers respond to, in a range of commercial settings such as shopping malls, leisure events, sporting occasions and heritage visits (Yalinay et al 2018; Wakefield and Blodgett 1994; Leighton 2007). Consumers’ interaction with various aspects of their surroundings, including the buildings, natural elements, temperature, fixtures and fittings, colours and signs are grouped into three dimensions: ‘ambient conditions’, ‘spatial layout’ and ‘signs, symbols and artefacts’ (Bitner, 1992; Masberg and Silverman 1996). Moving beyond this original framework, other authors have integrated a social dimension to encapsulate customer-employee interactions and relationships and a natural dimension incorporating features like gardens, views and scenic open spaces, all of which can enhance the visitor experiences (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011).

The rapid escalation of online consumption has given rise to the e-servicescape, which has been adapted for different commercial contexts, including online retailing (Wu et al., 2017; Tran and Strutton, 2020) hotels (Lee and Jeong, 2012) and online casinos (Abarbanel et al., 2015). A wide variety of online environments can be described as e-servicescapes, where attempts are made to replicate what customers experience, think and feel when they visit an organisation in its physical manifestation. As with the physical servicescape, a number of dimensions have been proposed that help to create positive user-effects, some mirroring the physical realm such as the aesthetic appeal, layout and functionality of websites, including the signs, symbols, and artefacts present (mirroring ambient conditions and spatial layout) (Hopkins et al., 2009; Harris and Goode 2010). New dimensions such as financial security/trust (Harris and Goode 2010), interaction (Lai et al., 2014) and social conditions, especially in the leisure sector (Lee and Jeong, 2012), highlight the distinctive requirements for e-servicescapes that result from the greater anonymity of the user experience. Clearly, these must be addressed in any e-servicescape seeking to recreate the participative enjoyment of an event as distinct from a consumer transaction.

The most relevant dimensions for any (e-)servicescape are highly contextual (Tran and Strutton, 2020), making it feasible to draw from both the eventscape and experiencescape literatures to create an adapted model for rural events. Broadly speaking, the term ‘eventscape’ arose out of other studies of the physical and the incorporeal attributes of servicescape, as applied to the creation and execution of an event or festival. An eventscape can be viewed as a construct combining the tangible elements of an event with the experiences provided (Tattersall and Cooper, 2014; Carneiro et al., 2019). Translating these elements to an “e-eventscape” for online events requires a new combination of dimensions.

Addressing this theoretical gap in understanding consumer experience for such events, we propose five dimensions for an “e-eventscape” in Table 1, enabling researchers to identify and analyse the full range of outcomes and experiences available in the context of online events. Applying the model to examine the case of the Online Lincolnshire Show the five dimensions are extrapolated into a set of context-specific questions to inform the research process. Alongside core factors of layout, functionality and aesthetic appeal, we add innovative features relating to community involvement and identity since they represent key features of both consumer online activity (Hollebeek, et al., 2019) and agricultural shows (Westwood et al., 2018).

**Table 1: Developing a model of an e-eventscape**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Aesthetic appeal and design**  Do you like the way this website looks?  Is the general design of this website appropriate, appealing and pleasing?  Do you think that this website is entertaining?  Is the website sufficiently interactive?  Would you describe it as a high-quality experience? | **Layout and functionality**  Is the website easily navigated with clear information?  Are there convenient ways to move between related pages and different sections of the Show and its parts?  Do you have any suggestions how the site can be personalised or tailored to you?  How would you assess site usability? |
| **Reputation and identity**  Does this website enhance or detract from your view of the Lincolnshire physical Show?  Do you feel the website represents the County of Lincolnshire? | **Community and involvement**  Does the site facilitate interaction and belonging among visitors to the Show?  Does the online Show experience help you to feel part of the Lincolnshire Show event?  Do you feel totally absorbed and involved in the processes of this Show website? |
| **Behavioural intention**  Is there anything about the current website show that might out you off from participating?  Would you participate in an online show through this website in the future?  Would you engage with the website in parallel to attending a physical Show in the future? |  |

Methodology

A mixed methods approach built around the single case of the Lincolnshire Show was devised to capture as much information and feedback as possible. The philosophical basis of mixed methods resides in the philosophy of pragmatism, where researchers adopt appropriate methods in response to the research questions, rather than focusing on the methods themselves (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2009). Designing qualitative and quantitative analysis around the theoretical model of the e-eventscape generates deep and rich insights to ensure the case is significant, complete and grounded in sufficient evidence (Yin 2009). With a number of Shows going online during the summer of 2020, we do not claim this to be representative of all others but our single case analysis develops a conceptual model that can be tested and adapted in a range of settings.

The methods consisted of participant observation, surveys and an expert interview with the lead organiser of the Show. Each of the research team visited the Online Show, watching the full range of videos, and one of the researchers participated as a delegate at the Business Breakfast. A digital feedback survey was circulated to all participants in the Business Breakfast session, generating 28 completed responses out of the 110 attendees. Additional data included social media feedback for the Show and website analytics indicating the numbers of visitors and length of time that they spent engaging with its different components.

After the event, individual perceptions were captured by asking volunteers to view the Online Show retrospectively and answer a series of open-ended questions structured around each of the five e-eventscape components in Table 1. In the midst of the pandemic, sampling was by necessity driven by purposive and convenience criteria with consideration given to respondents’ understanding of the intent of the research. A group of 12 university students/recent graduates with professional or study-related interests in Shows were identified and asked to spend approximately thirty minutes analysing and reviewing the Online Show. This generated eight completed reviews which were analysed thematically around the five elements of the e-eventscape model. Their detailed responses allowed issues to be explored idiographically, seeking new qualitative insights about perceptions of the social reality of the Show rather than universal truths (Hackley, 2019).

Introducing the case study: The Lincolnshire Show 2020

The online Lincolnshire Show took place on 24th June 2020 at <https://lincolnshireshowonline.co.uk/> with a schedule of events mirroring that of any other year. The “Main Ring” included a range of video features, including highlights from past years, interviews with local organisers and new recordings created by sponsors and supporters to showcase their groups’ activities. Alongside the “main ring”, there was the traditional “agriculture, livestock and equine zone”, an “education zone”, a “countryside and heritage zone” and a series of cookery demonstrations in the “food and Lincolnshire kitchen zone”. In each zone, videos were released throughout the day to create the sense of a live event where viewers were encouraged to enjoy picnics and to set up their homes with Lincolnshire flags and bunting to recreate a Show atmosphere.

The day began with an online “Business Breakfast” networking conferencing organised by a local company with the support of several business networking groups from the region. At its peak, this had over 100 participants and combined a keynote speech with break-out sessions and plenary discussions. The website also offered a space for businesses to promote themselves and to allow visitors to “drop in” to their virtual stands for video conversations during the time that the Show was open, essentially trying to recreate the physical interactions that tend to occur during the annual Show. Customers could follow links to sponsors’ websites and there was also a donation link, reflecting the fact that the whole event was free to attend and all sponsorship and donations were for local charities.

The motivation to switch to online arose from discussions with other regional Shows and the possibility of doing something collectively. As conversations progressed, Lincolnshire pursued a different route working with local IT and design companies to create a distinctive event, illustrating the value of place identity even in online spaces. The organiser noted that *“You need a voice in the dark otherwise people will forget who you are”*, adding that although it might not make any money at the time, it was essential for continuity otherwise *“you might not have a business and you might need to start again*.” Once the idea was in place, other rationales began to shape the narrative of the innovation such as *“we wanted to attract new audiences”* and *“it’s telling our story as a charity as well”*[[1]](#footnote-1). Developing ideas from their “armchair agriculture” programme of activities for schoolchildren, they were also able to focus on inclusivity of people from different backgrounds who might not usually be able to attend the Show.

The success of these innovative strategies was confirmed by web analytics and social media feedback for the event (provided by the Show organisers). On the day, the site attracted 10,062 unique visitors and 38,494 unique page views. The CEO commented that she received a letter from the Chamber of Agriculture in Australia who watched the Show and visitors from other regions asked if the Show happened every year – proof that they were reaching new people. With website visitors including 86.91% from UK, 11.43% from US and 1.66% rest of world as well as a broad regional spread across the UK, including 9% from London, the online platform offers clear scope to widen audiences for retailers and exhibitors whilst also raising the profile of the County.

The incremental innovations that grow from a one-off decision highlight the importance of creative renewal within the events sector. During the interview, held a week after the online Show, the CEO was already considering how the platform could enhance future Shows saying, *“With the platform, I see it as a marketing tool… it can show people what it’s about. If exhibitors agree to be at the Show, they will automatically be on the digital platform.”* Indeed, when taking the risky decision to spend twice the amount of their Covid-19 emergency grant in the development of an online platform of their own, rather than buying something *“off the shelf”,* they were already looking to future uses. This entrepreneurial outlook was confirmed by statements such as “*you’re more in control”* and *“sometimes you have to take a risk don’t you?”*

Having set out the background and the nature of innovation within the organisation, we move on to review the actual Show in two parts. Firstly, the “Business Breakfast” and then the wider range of events that comprised the Show itself.

The Business Breakfast

Traditionally, many sponsors and other local businesses get together on the first morning of the Lincolnshire Show for a Business Breakfast and this was recreated on the Zoom video-conferencing platform and live-streamed via Facebook. In keeping with tradition, the online event started at 7am and ran until the official opening of the Show at 11am. As this was fairly early in the development of large scale online networking events, delegates were still learning how best to engage in different elements of the programme and the flow between break-outs and “main-room” sessions was far from perfect. This was confirmed by a few comments in the survey feedback, including, *“The technology regarding the breakout rooms was hit and miss - it needs to be slicker next time”* and *“the links were not there long enough to* *choose and I ended up in a room where I was the only participant”.* However, in the midst of the pandemic, participants were forgiving and generally supportive and understanding of the learning processes that everyone (including the researcher) was experiencing. One sponsor responded, *“the day ran very smoothly (a few small hiccups but to be expected)”.*

From the 28 survey respondents, six had never attended the Lincolnshire Show before, illustrating the scope for online participation to widen the reach of an event. Respondents were very positive about the event, with 22 (78.6%) saying that they were “very satisfied” overall, 21 (77%) stating that they considered the technology to be either “high quality” or “very high quality” and 17 (60.7%) stating that they would attend similar events if they were staged more frequently through the year. This positivity is partly reflective of a community pulling together in challenging times, grateful for the altruistic efforts of organisations trying to fill large gaps in daily life; as the Show organiser commented, *“There so much love for the Show people wanted to support it.”* Whatever the reason, this still provides a solid foundation for future online innovation.

Extending the opportunity for stronger alliances with sponsors, through both monetary and non-monetary involvement, is important for the continuing development of shows and festival and their wider value across the local economy (Hjalager and Kwiatowski, 2018). This was recognised by the Show organisers as the Business Breakfast brought together “*lots of businesses that probably hadn’t connected with us [who] now feel part of the Lincolnshire Show… It’s opened up a lot of opportunities for us as well, not just for the Show but for other events as well that all support the Lincolnshire Show”*. Interestingly the online conversations were not about selling, but much more about support, understanding and empathy (researcher notes). People spoke quite candidly about the ways that they had started to re-evaluate their time and be more selective about networks – one commented that since working from home they felt more of an individual identity rather than having to operate in the “established spaces” of their business. Breaking out of corporate constraints, one participant commented *“behind the screen we are nice people”,* adding that it was easier to give recommendations and help people out, something they hoped would continue once business returns to more frequent face-to-face contact. It is important to remember that participants in the event were predominantly still able to work (not furloughed) and operating in small businesses where collaboration and networking was an important part of their activity. Nevertheless, the value of this event and its distinctiveness as a relaxed space for conversation and making low-key connections, not for “hard-selling”, spilled over into the digital world.

Relating the Business Breakfast to the e-eventscape, the interaction and sense of community was replicated effectively through the online space and feedback identified a positive behavioural intent for continuing engagement. The negative comments requesting “more instruction on Zoom for hosts” or “technical support or a test session on the day before” confirm the importance of the “functionality” domain in relation to the ease of use of the technology but these are easily remedied. Other comments fitted a typical event with reflections on the agenda, timings and quality of speakers very much in line with traditionally staged, in-person events.

The team behind the online networking session have since staged a number of local business club events and have developed a new platform that is being adapted for multiple office, events and educational applications. Another attendee has published a book on digital networking with some contributions linked to the event (Adey, 2020). This is a classic example of how innovation spirals out from the initial idea through engaged individuals drawn together for diverse reasons. A common thread is the connection to the Show and its representation of the County as the place where these entrepreneurs operate, hence the importance of recreating the event despite the prevailing Covid-19 pandemic.

The visitor experience

The first element of the e-eventscape concerns the site’s aesthetic appeal. This includes factors like use of colour, animations, interactivity, entertainment and the general appeal of the site, including its ability to arouse the visitors interest (Wu et al., 2017). Generally, the Online Lincolnshire Show can be said to be largely attractive to our visitors, as indicated by the following two comments: *“Yes- the colours and theme make it inviting and appealing...”* and *“Yes - I think it appeals to a large audience and has a clear theme which is appealin*g.”

The warm, bright colours used in the website design are redolent of a fine summer’s day at the live Show. Its theme evokes an agricultural show, particularly the landing page featuring lively and colourful scenes depicting the Show’s various activities. The range of content was considered to be entertaining with a range of lively videos across the zones, but a criticism was raised about the level of the site’s interactivity:

*“Not really very interactive at all. It's just watching videos, passively. I was surprised that the exhibitor section didn't have more direct buying options, or wider product displays. It was a long way from an in-person experience. I did like the options for contacting exhibitors though.”*

The CEO explained that they were *“trying to make it live without being live and interactive on the day”* by releasing content at fixed times but this was a compromise given the tight timeframe to deliver the online Show. This cautious approach was reiterated when the CEO explained, *“We could have done more but I was worried… I’d rather have done less and delivered”*. This led to the prioritisation of other aspects of the e-eventscape that were more in the control of the organisers. Subsequent feedback, however, suggests that events of this nature are built around personal interaction so more should be done to re-create this interaction in rapidly evolving virtual events arenas.

When it comes to the e-servicescape and its layout, this second ambient aspect of design is about the overall structure of the site. This includes the use of space, font size and the overall layout and navigational features of the website (Lee and Jeong 2012), comparable to the general layout and ease of moving around a physical Show. Respondents commented fairly positively on the important aspects of website layout, usability and navigation although there was a perceived lack of customisation. One respondent commented that generally for an offering like this, customisation is not expected but went on to suggest that some attempt could be made to personalise the visitor experience:

*“Since it is a Show, I would expect a standard line-up. However, at the beginning, the viewer could be asked which areas are of interest to sort the zone areas according to preference.”*

The six zones of the Online Show were accessed through a drop-down menu with each having a series of digital videos updated through the day. One respondent noted that this arrangement, “*is understandable, but the zone areas at the beginning were not clear.*  In development of this theme, another respondent pointed out that: *“Before opening the site I was half expecting there to be some sort of map of the regular show layout, which I'm familiar with, so I could have clicked on the areas/tents I'd usually go to.”* The lack of this facility, meant that it could be difficult to find particular matters of interest in comparison to the live Show, for example the same respondent added:

*“I'd tend to go to look at the poultry on arrival. I still have no idea if there is any poultry on the website, I haven't found any, can't search for it, and don't know whether it would have been filed under 'livestock' or 'heritage'.”*

For one respondent navigation was *“…probably my biggest issue. Several lists of links to various items badly or not described at all, often simply a person's name with no indication of what the content would be about if you clicked through. Most amusing was probably ‘Ladies in Pigs Sausage’.”*

While these criticisms are valid, the site is not complex to navigate. Some features could have been better signposted and structured but the overall accessibility was considered most important. Both the CEO and a survey respondent identified this in relation to the rural context with mixed IT skills and connectivity:

*“It was important for the online show that it worked on a laptop, a phone, an I-pad…” (CEO)*

“*I think the site user friendly for all ages and the ease of navigation means that even those who do not have much experience using the internet can navigate the page as it’s very easy to look at the categorises and sections.” (Survey respondent)*

The third area of our e-eventscape model relates to reputation and identity. This is very much about the contextual element of the model, where the Show’s offer should attempt to reflect the agricultural area that it purports to represent, including its unique heritage and traditions (Westwood et al., 2018). There were mixed views regarding the website’s representativeness of the county of Lincolnshire, reflecting the fact that rural place identities are complex (Giles et al., 2013), and respondents identified some ambiguity and inconsistency with comments including:

*“Yes, the flag is there and the images of the scenery is representation of Lincoln. I feel like the cathedral could have been included somewhere as a recognisable representation of Lincoln.*

*“No. Too generic. Make it special. Make it Lincoln!”*

*“A large banner for Harper Adams, which really detracted, it somehow stuck out… as not very Lincolnshire.”*

In this third area of the model, respondents were also asked whether the website enhanced or detracted from the visitor’s view of the physical Show. Opinion was generally supportive of the website being created as a second best option that "*will never replace the real thing… [but]… is nice for those people who cannot attend”*  and which could have a role in the future, especially reaching out to new audiences. One respondent noted, “*I feel like it’s given me an insight and I would now go to the physical Show.”*

The fourth and unique aspect of the proposed model concerns community and involvement. A key aspect of contemporary digital life is the way that various platforms can effectively bring people together. In online communities, value creation depends on the on the quality of the interactions shared between not only the company and the customer, but between the customer and the customer (Ardley and McIntosh 2019). In terms of the former, one respondent points out that *“I think the site has done the best to interact with its audience while being online. It’s obviously not going to be the same as physically being there, but it’s created a sense of belonging to the visitors.”* Interestingly, web analytics data shows that despite attracting fewer page views in total, the various live event pages saw people spending longer, on average, engaging with their content (2m18s) compared to pages with just pre-recorded content (1m 02s). However, as discussed previously, the customer-to-customer interactivity was more neglected, echoed by another respondent who stated: *“How? I did not see any ways of interacting with other people.”*

The fifth and final aspect of our model is about future intended behaviour and this part of the e-eventscape is about either avoidance or approach behaviour (Lee, and Jeong, 2012). We asked whether visitors to the website, would repeat the activity, either in conjunction with a live Show, or just online. In the main, respondents would participate again in an online Show although they consistently recognised the primacy and uniqueness of a live event. Reflecting this perspective, one respondent stated, *“I would much prefer a physical show due to the atmosphere but happy to engage with a website.”* The continuing sense of dislocation remains a weakness when substituting a live event in this way, but the auxiliary artefact is nevertheless playing an important role in building and sustaining connections with Show supporters. This is captured by another of our respondents who said, *“I think online events do present the feeling of being disengaged from the experience, however, after viewing a multitude of events and shows online, I think the Lincolnshire show has done a great job.”*

Generally, while the online show received large numbers of visitors, and it can reasonably be regarded as being successful and appreciated, greater attention on functionality and interactivity could further enhance the visitor experience.

Discussion: Creating and conceptualising an e-eventscape: stakeholders and value generation

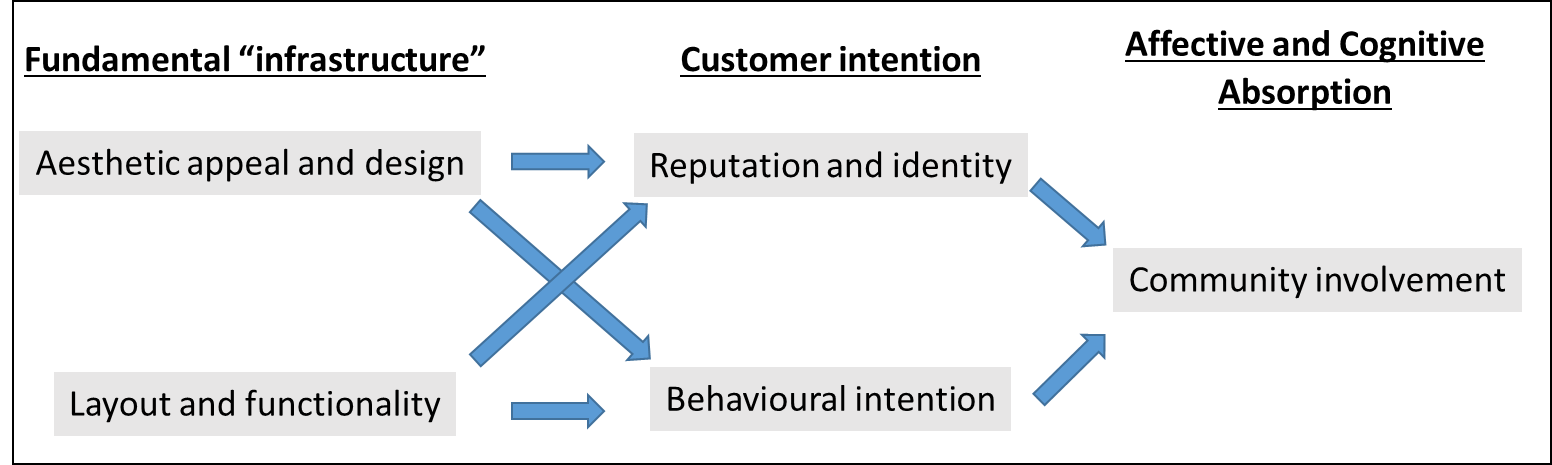
It is important to remember that this Show was put together in just a few weeks during a period of widespread uncertainty about the emerging impacts of Covid-19. Nevertheless, the mixed-methods engagement with participants, organisers and visitors has allowed an initial appraisal of a new e-eventscape model. The case also allowed reflection on the role of innovation in Shows for the wider rural economy and assessment of the evolving virtual-spatial interface.

Theories of “smart” rural development advocate the importance of both social and digital factors (Slee, 2019) and this is confirmed here as technology provides the vehicle for innovation but social networks and engagement with Show supporters determine its success. The innovation itself was rooted in place as the organisers are a Charity whose mission is focused on the rural economy and communities of Lincolnshire. The significance of place attachment and identity was not lost on the organiser and the majority of survey respondents also recognised this in the final product. The ability to capture this local identity in an online space and reach out to visitors beyond the region, including internationally, offers a huge opportunity for communicating a place brand, building networks and expanding online retailing attached to these events. The opportunity for emigres or individuals with mobility difficulties to participate in many aspects of a Show through the online platform as well as the scope to extend the timeframe of activities beyond the days of the physical event all add further opportunities for Show organisers and participants.

Throughout this paper, we have sought to identify the essential features of an e-eventscape that Show organisers must consider when developing online events. In terms of specific improvements to the site, navigation could have been improved with a focused search facility, not dissimilar to the event programme available to purchase at a live event. This would also enable more customisation to occur, where some personal information could be gleaned from visitors that could be used to personalise content for future visits. The opening page of the Online Show could be designed around an image of the exhibits, tents and attractions that could simply be clicked on in order to see what was available. This could include more developed content embracing the unique heritage of the County and the Show, with potential brand-values extending beyond the Show. For example, more elements of Lincolnshire farming, food delicacies and destinations could be showcased to enhance perceptions of place and generate wider audience engagement with the County. Some element of gamification could be used to increase engagement; for example voting for “people’s favourites” in the animal shows, home-participation in cookery classes and quizzes or educational “treasure-hunts” could all increase interaction and promote learning about different features of rural life.

Enhanced visitor interactivity at online Shows, encompassing greater social and individual linking with others, is essential for their future development and wider community-building. This could take the form of rudimentary discussion forums right through to virtual beer-tents, displays and other live events where registered, and potentially paying, visitors can participate in real time, as happened at the Business Breakfast. Promoting this social element of the e-eventscape would increase attachment to the event, encourage visitors to spend longer on the platform and thus create a more attractive proposition for business participation too. Video content has a place, but it needs to allow for interactions build around the fixed content, perhaps with more personally tailored information made available to visitors and opportunities to converse with exhibitors through a chat function or Q&A session. Overall, with some refinements, the online show offers potential to co-exist alongside the actual show and enhance the visitor experience, mirroring digital developments in other business sectors, where the online and the offline combine to produce an immersive customer experience. To add to this, customisation of parts of the content of the site would contribute to a greater degree of personalisation, another key driver of recent digital developments (Ahn et al., 2021).

Figure 1: Modelling interdependencies in the e-eventscape



The Five components of the e-servicescape are inevitably inter-connected and might be conceived hierarchically, as illustrated in Figure 1. For example, without the aesthetical appeal created through the use of iconic images of Lincolnshire, the place attachment that influences behaviour and engagement would be weakened. Essentially, a website requires good design and infrastructure, as with any e-servicescape, but the goal of this is not simply to achieve consumer satisfaction that translates into expenditure. As we heard from the CEO of the Lincolnshire Show, maintaining a “voice in the dark” is about sustaining consumer loyalty and attachment so that they will attend future events in person as well as participating in new online activities.

The “customer intention” stage serves a dual purpose where the reputation of a show or festival translates into participation in the moment (e.g. spending time engaging with a single event) as well as a continuing intent to participate in future events as part of the event community. This represents both affective and cognitive absorption, which is more sophisticated than a retail brand community, since the goal is not just repeat purchasing but the active involvement of visitors or festival-goers. To achieve this, an e-eventscape cannot rely on an easy to use interface and a strong brand alone. This may instil loyalty in other sectors (e.g. retail) where the online activity is largely one of convenience, but an e-eventscape must offer new experiences, memories and friendships if they are to attract the visitors that sustain the other aspects of Shows’ business models. The rapid development of the Lincolnshire Show Online struggled to reach this stage except for the Business Breakfast component where genuine participation through online video conferencing was facilitated.

Whether future involvement will return to the physical showground and associated in-person events or whether a continuing blend of online and physical spaces will evolve, this affective and cognitive absorption phase is the heart and soul of events. Therefore, marketing and innovation connected to online events must replicate the emphasis on people’s experiences, out of which will flow the consumer behaviour that sustains their business models. This resonates with earlier research that identified the depth of engagement and commitment of partners as critical elements of building successful events and destination brands (Schofield et al., 2017).

Conclusions

The key research questions sought to determine the extent to which visitor experiences of the Lincolnshire Show can be replicated online and the degree to which the digital experience is of value. Our accumulated evidence suggests that the Online Show has undoubtedly provided different types of value to visitors and to participating businesses. Whilst the show does not fully replicate a live event, it has proven to be a well-received innovation that satisfied the short-term goals of the organisers. With some incremental adaptation, online events platforms will play an important role alongside future live events and the opportunity to reflect on this nascent example will provide considerable benefits for the next phase of development in this online arena. In addressing these questions about the longer-term opportunities and the timeliness of the innovation, the research has also identified the importance of local attachment for pulling together a supportive network of contributors to make it happen.

In summary, online events provide the dual opportunities of reaching wider audiences and deepening connection with local stakeholders and supporters. This challenges any pre-supposition that the online world removes the distinctiveness of place and promotes the importance of local support, albeit during a unique time of crisis. Finally, the research has shown that even the most traditional rural events can be at the forefront of innovation with the Online Show sparking further innovations among its collaborators too. As Shows and other festivals develop more ‘blended’ online and physical content post-Covid, we encourage other researchers to test and refine the e-eventscape model and to recognise the importance of their innovation to their regional and rural economies.

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1. The Lincolnshire Show is run by the Lincolnshire Agricultural Society Charity with promotes food, farming and the Countryside to school pupils, consumers and farmers themselves through events, advice and a support network available to all. <https://lincolnshireshowground.co.uk/agricultural-society> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)