

Research Article

Kayleigh Jones, Miguel Moital*

Techniques employed to create event prestige value for corporate VIPs: the V.I.P. Framework

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Abstract: This research explored the techniques employed by event managers to create event prestige value for VIPs in a corporate events context. Research on prestige has mainly focused on the attributes that deliver prestige value (the prestige values). However, by focusing on those delivering prestige (as opposed to the recipients of prestige), this research identified two deeper, less explicit mechanisms required to deliver prestigious experiences, labelled Interaction and Principles. By identifying a more comprehensive set of techniques, those designing VIP experiences will be better equipped to satisfy the prestige needs of VIPs.

Keywords: Corporate events; VIP; Prestige; Event experience; V.I.P. framework

1 Introduction

Prestige value is defined by Vigneron and Johnson (1999) as the supposed personal worth obtained through the consumption of products that portray the concept of prestige (sometimes also referred to as status) for the individual. Vigneron and Johnson (1999) suggest that prestige motivation is determined by five sources of value: conspicuous, unique, social, emotional and quality. Once one or more of these sources of values is perceived from the attributes of a product or service, then it is seen as holding prestigious value. Prior prestige research often places sole emphasis on the consumer seeking prestige. However, this poses

potential methodological challenges as prestige is identified as a hidden need, and often one that a consumer would be reluctant to acknowledge (Mason 1981; Chao and Schor 1998; Sorensen 2003), questioning the validity of the findings. To overcome this limitation, rather than focusing on the VIP attendee, this study focuses on those who have to deliver prestige experiences. In particular, the study examines the techniques employed by event managers to create prestige value of VIPs. A technique can be defined as ‘the formal or practical aspect of any art, occupation, or field; manner of execution or performance with regard to this’ (Oxford University Press 2017). This study considers two modes of techniques: operational and principle. The former concentrates on the practical actions employed by the event manager to create prestige value, whereas the latter focuses upon the formal guiding processes behind the actions employed.

Individuals considered as having VIP (Very Important Person) status often hold significant influence within an institution (Diekema 1996); therefore, it is becoming increasingly common to recognise and honour their status through granting them privileges. Diekema (1996) further argues that VIPs often have a greater need for status and recognition and therefore a greater need for prestige, and so creating prestige value for VIP guests is of great importance. The VIP process is a self-reflexive one, in that being a VIP brings with it certain privileges, but these privileges in turn increase the VIP status of the individual. The term ‘VIP’ can be applied to many situations, however, this study focuses upon VIPs within the corporate context. Hage and Dewar (1973) operationalise the concept of the elite within an organisation. They note that the concept can take the form of two definitions. The first considers the elite as the CEOs and those who hold a high-level position within the chain of command. The second considers the elite as being elected as such based upon whether they participate in critical strategic decisions. However, the latter definition has blurred boundaries (Hage and Dewar 1973) and for the purpose of this research, the former definition will be assumed throughout. Subsequently, Chief Operating Officers (CEO), their direct reports and the Managing Directors (MD) of each business unit are the individ-

*Corresponding author: Miguel Moital, Department of Events & Leisure, Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University, Dorset House, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, BH12 5BB, Poole, Dorset, United Kingdom, Email: mmoital@bournemouth.ac.uk
Kayleigh Jones, Department of Events & Leisure, Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University, UK

uals awarded the VIP status at corporate events. Scholars highlight the importance of prestige for the elite within corporations (Dutton et al. 1994; Smidts et al. 2001; Hiller et al. 2014), but little research has focused upon the techniques employed to create prestige value, especially in relation to the corporate events industry, thus suggesting a gap in the literature.

Allen (2008) suggests the range of activities falling under the corporate events umbrella has flourished over the past decade, extending beyond typical trade-shows and conferences. The corporate events mentioned throughout this research will focus on tradeshows (an exhibition where businesses promote their products and services to prospective clients), exhibitions (an event at which items are presented and displayed) and fund-raising events (an event organised to collect money to support a charity). Furthermore, corporate events can be two-fold as although they incorporate both VIP and non-VIP attendees, often larger tradeshows contain programmes that only VIPs are permitted to attend. Corporate events significantly contribute to revenue for not only the event sector, but also the global economy, with countries relying on the sector as a strategic driver for their financial system (Reic 2012). The segment was estimated to increase by an additional £2.1 billion in revenue from 2007–2017 (DCMS 2007). Subsequently, the corporate events sector has great importance to the global economy, and hence, it is imperative to ensure that consumers are motivated to attend the events, with offering VIP status regarded as an effective motivational strategy (Tanford et al., 2012). Furthermore, past literature has highlighted esteem (Maslow 1943) and recognition (Murray, 1938) as relevant human needs, both of which reflect the essence of prestige. Similarly, research shows prestige/status is an important motive to attend events (Crompton 1979). Therefore, exploring the techniques the event managers employ to create prestige value for consumers is of great value to the corporate events industry.

2 Literature review

Prestige consumption can be defined as the motive that encourages individuals to strive to improve their regard through the consumption of experiences, that symbolise prestige for the consumer and surrounding others (Correia and Moital 2009). Prestige is a key human need as demonstrated by featuring in some of the most influential motivation models. Maslow (1943) identifies the need for ‘esteem’, which addresses ones’ desire for high social

status, reputation and prestige, while Murray (1938) highlights recognition, defined as the need to obtain status. Vigneron and Johnson (1999) suggest that prestige motivation is determined by five sources of value: conspicuous (signifies wealth; often price is the key indicator), unique (related to limited availability, not being accessible to all), social (consumption is socially important individuals), emotional (related to emotional merits of the product or service rather than the tangible ones), and quality (related to luxury; quality perceived as almost perfection). Once one or more of these sources of value is perceived from the attributes of a product or service, then it is seen as holding prestigious value. What makes a product or behaviour prestigious varies across individuals, with the sources of prestige value are often dependent upon an individual’s previous experience, interactions with others and socio-economic background (Vigneron and Johnson’s 1999). Furthermore, Wiedmann et al. (2007) recognise that the perception of prestige may also depend upon an individual’s disposition at that time. Consumers also differ in the amount of prestige they seek to gain during prestigious consumption (Eastman et al. 1999), and the attractiveness of a certain product or service could be relatively explained by how much prestige it is seen to bestow to the owner (Hughes 1996). Thus, recognising which sources of value are important to consumers and to what extent, is crucial when organising an event (Getz and Page 2016), in order to produce an experience that will meet the desired needs of the consumers.

Individuals within corporations often have a desire to exercise power and influence over those below them in the organisational hierarchy. Often this is referred to as status striving (Barrick 2013), whereby motivation is based on the ability to obtain influence, power and prestige (Barrick et al. 2002). Thus, employees engage in tasks with the purpose to attain status, such as attending events with perceived prestige value. Hogan and Holland (2003) note that within corporate environments, there is emphasis placed on ‘getting ahead of others’ and social comparison, which transmits signals of how an individual’s behaviour compares to others. Feedback from fellow colleagues is an important part of this process, which informs the individual of whether their behaviour has been recognised (Hogan and Holland 2003). For example, if the MD of an organisation can bypass a long queue that other event attendees must join, and others see this, he/she is likely to feel their social standing has been recognised, as they have shown to others how important they are to receive that privilege.

Status striving has greater intensity at the higher levels of the organisational hierarchy, as there is an

improved chance of advancing further (Dugger 1980). At the higher levels, status becomes uncertain as employees more frequently shift roles, thus the striving intensifies, and status consideration begins to pervade all business activities (Dugger 1980). As previously mentioned, research suggests that the VIPs within an organisation are often the executive directors and those who hold a high-level position within the chain of command (Hage and Dewar 1973). Thus, these are the individuals classed as VIPs at corporate events. Consequently, event managers need to acknowledge that VIPs are likely to be facing a high level of intensity with regards to status striving, and must therefore employ techniques to accommodate this. Hiller et al. (2014) examined the occupational prestige for management accounts. However, this study did not extend beyond this specific job role and cannot therefore be generalised to all job roles or used within an events context.

While prestige has been studied with regards to tourism (Correia and Moital 2009), organisational behaviour (Dutton et al. 1994; Smidts et al. 2001; Hiller et al. 2014) and sporting events (Moital et al. 2013), there has been little research into prestige motivation within a corporate events context – especially for VIPs. Thus, there is the requirement for additional research of an exploratory nature within this area. Furthermore, previous prestige research has focused on the individual engaging in prestigious consumption. However, this poses potential methodological complications as prestige is identified as a hidden need, and often one which a consumer would be reluctant to acknowledge (Mason 1981; Chao and Schor 1998; Sorensen 2003). One way of overcoming this limitation is to focus on the activities undertaken to deliver prestige value. Consequently, this research paper will address the research gap by concentrating on the event managers and the techniques they employ in order to create prestige value for VIPs at corporate events.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data collection

Given the paucity of research on the techniques employed to deliver prestige value in experiences, and the hidden nature of prestige consumption, exploratory research through in-depth interviews was employed. Qualitative studies often aim to ‘provide a rich, contextualized understanding of human experience through the intensive study of a particular case’ (Polit and Beck 2010, p.1452). In correspondence, this study aims to investigate human

experience by exploring the techniques that event managers employ to create prestige value for VIPs at corporate events. Many of the research questions focused upon ‘how’ prestige value is added and ‘how’ VIPs are treated, thus suggesting a qualitative approach. Furthermore, qualitative research provides a rich insight into consumer behaviour (Burns and Bush 2013) and this was especially appropriate when exploring prestige, as on the rare occasion when participants did struggle to acknowledge prestige, there was the capacity to probe them.

Telephone and skype interviews were carried out with event managers during February 2017. This provided for a private and intimate setting, since seven out of the eight participants were working from home. Therefore, participants could speak freely without the presence of colleagues influencing their responses. When conducting telephone interviews, it can be difficult to hold participant’s attention as they become distracted by their environment (Opdenakker 2006). A loss of focus could prevent vital information from being revealed and time was occupied with long pauses. This was evident for one participant who stated on two occasions, ‘*sorry, just received an email and I have lost my trail of thought*’. This was overcome by repetition of the question, and non-verbal cues such as ‘*uh-huh*’ to encourage interviewees to continue to recall their experiences (Mason and McBride 2014).

The interviews began with a non-threatening question which asked participants how long they had worked within the event industry; this enabled the interviewee to relax, thus putting them at ease (Frances et al. 2009; Fox et al 2014). The following questions were intended to facilitate the research, such as asking participants who they would define as a corporate VIP. In order to unearth the different antecedents that the event managers consider when creating prestige value, the following questions were asked twice, first in relation to the pre-event process and then in relation to the onsite process:

- How do you portray wealth for VIPs pre-event/during the event (i.e., are VIPs made aware of the expensive attributes of the event)?
- How do you create a sense of uniqueness or exclusivity pre-event/during the event for VIPs?
- How do you appeal to a VIPs social affiliation needs pre-event/during the event (i.e., do guests have access to a list of other invited VIPs, celebrities, etc.)?
- How do you make VIP guests feel special pre-event/during the event? Is there a more personal element to how they are treated?
- How do you ensure a high level of quality for VIPs pre-event/during the event? Do they experience different levels of service to other event attendees?

Participants were also asked about any follow-up processes in place to ensure that VIPs feel prestigious after the event. A final question was asked to the participants about any instances where a VIP has made the event manager aware that they felt they were not treated with the superiority that they believe they deserved and how did they overcome the situation. Throughout the interview, open-ended questions and probes such as, ‘*why did you do this?*’ and ‘*is this a normal procedure for you?*’ were exploited, as this created deeper level responses (Jones et al. 2013), regarding the techniques they employ to create prestige value for VIPs at corporate events.

3.2 Participants

Purposive sampling was employed through selecting participants who worked frequently with VIPs within the corporate events industry. The eight event managers selected for the study varied in gender, age and length of service to ensure the sample represented a variety of experiences and backgrounds, thus increasing the validity (Jones et al. 2013; Fox et al 2014). Qualitative research relies on quality over quantity (Jones et al. 2013), and although Bernard (2002) argues that there is no set number of informants that constitutes a high-quality purposive sample, previous research indicates a minimum of five informants is necessary for the data to be reliable. The eight individuals were selected from three organisations: an in-house events team within a large international corporation and two small agencies often employed to assist with events staged by the corporation. The two agencies do not work exclusively with the international organisation, also working with an array of other clients, mostly large corporate organisations. Participants from these two agencies

could therefore also draw from their experience of organising events for other organisations when answering questions.

Whereas the in-house team makes the final decisions and deals with the internal processes, such as guest lists, the agencies follow directions from the corporation but primarily manage event logistics, venue and design. The international organisation organises a wide variety of events from a 10,000+ attendee trade show, to gala dinners and from large conferences with numerous break out rooms to intimate roundtables with the CEO. Annually, the UK based team would stage approximately 8–15 events a year and these events are absolutely crucial to the company’s business model, as the events the organisation hosted were predominately B2B events. Regardless of the type of event, there would almost always be a ‘meeting centre’ where top executives within the company would meet with other top executives from different companies to develop business and close deals.

Several participants were former colleagues of the researcher who carried out the interviews and a level of trust had been built prior to the research collection, thus a rapport was present from the outset (Blichfeldt and Heldbjerg 2011). However, due to the participants being acquaintances, there is a concern for interviewees remaining in the ‘friend role’ and therefore, providing fabricated information to aid achievement of the research aim (Blichfeldt and Heldbjerg 2011), consequently impacting the quality of the study. To reduce the potential for this, participants were reminded before the interview that there were no desired responses and participants were required to answer honestly.

Table 1: Participant profile

Participant	Age	Job Title	Years in employment	Interview method	Length of interview
Diane	41–50	Event Company Director (agency)	20	Skype	20 minutes
Megan	18–30	Event Assistant (corporation)	2	Skype	26 minutes
Claire	31–40	Event Manager (corporation)	10	Telephone	30 minutes
Peter	51–60	Event Manager (corporation)	30	Telephone	34 minutes
Laura	31–40	Event Manager (corporation)	15	Telephone	32 minutes
Lauren	21–30	Event Co-ordinator (agency)	9	Telephone	21 minutes
Michelle	21–30	Event Assistant (corporation)	1	Telephone	26 minutes
Jack	31–40	Event Manager (corporation)	2	Skype	31 minutes

3.3 Analysis

A total of eight interviews were conducted in February 2017, varying in length from 20 minutes to 34 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded after obtaining participant consent. Interviews were transcribed, and thematic analysis was undertaken. Thematic analysis focuses on identifying explicit and implicit ideas while enabling the categorisation of themes, so that conclusions can be drawn (Namey et al. 2008). Explicit themes are unambiguous and often the participant is fully aware of the precise, clear and structured information they are giving (Han and Ellis 1998). In this instance, conspicuous value through expensive brands was an explicit theme. Implicit themes are those embedded within the data and usually participants are unaware of this knowledge they hold (Han and Ellis 1998). Often these themes stem from memories of past experiences (Mathews et al. 1989). One example is that of ‘assumed value’ as this is the guiding principle behind the attributes employed to create conspicuous or unique value. To ensure superior analysis was undertaken, the steps laid out by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) were adopted as a foundation (Figure 1).

Although the interview questions were organized around the five sources of prestige value, upon analysis of the data it was clear that the answers were more muddled. Participants often brought multiple sources of value such as unique and quality under the question addressing conspicuous value. Consequently, the data analysis was

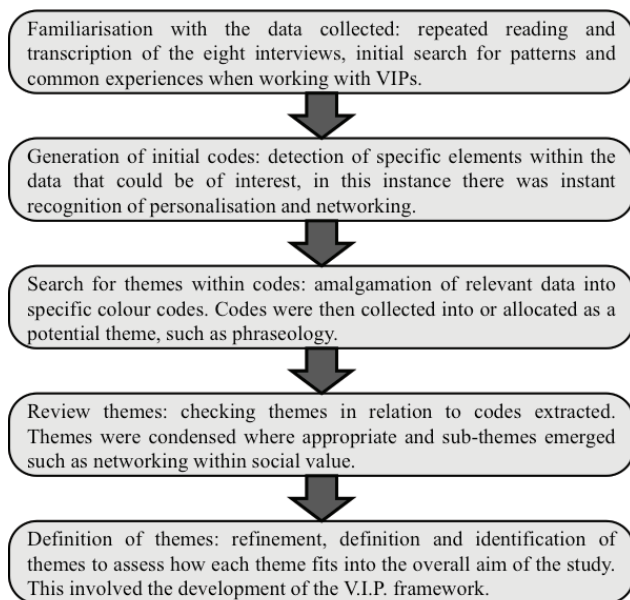


Figure 1: Data analysis process

Source: Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006)

approached in a naturalistic way. While close attention was paid to the relevant question, this did not prevent from also considering other sources of value within each question. Thus, themes were constructed using the data in its entirety. Such approach was even more important given that the attributes delivering the five prestige sources of value were found to be insufficient to explain the techniques that the event managers employed to create the event prestige value for VIPs at corporate events. Often certain techniques within the data emerged, which did not fit within the five sources of value. Thus, from a management perspective, it is vital to consider the techniques employed on three levels: the specific attributes employed that deliver the sources of prestige value, the interaction between event managers and VIPs, and the principles guiding the deployment of prestige value. The analysis section is organised around these three levels.

4 Results

4.1 Sources of value

As the literature review highlights, different consumers have different motivations for pursuing prestigious experiences, and many consumers pursue different experiences with different motives (Ghosh and Varshney 2013). Therefore, often more than one attribute are employed to deliver a source of value. Additionally, often a technique employed by an event manager fits into multiple sources of value. Thus, potential links have been considered throughout the analysis.

4.1.1 Conspicuous value

An initial finding of this study was that within corporate events, the discussion of cost with VIP guests was severely frowned upon. Instead, the conspicuous value derived from an event must be assumed, regardless of the actual value the event has. Participants eluded to displaying assumed value through numerous tangibles, such as tickets, transportation and hotel rooms, that the VIP will assume to be expensive as prices will not be shown to VIPs at any time during the event process. This differs to Correia and Moital’s (2009) findings as often consumers would seek conspicuous value through ticket prices and event expenditure; however, neither element is available for public knowledge at corporate events. As Diane exemplifies,

‘never would a cost be shown but I suppose they would subconsciously be aware this was more expensive’

This assumed value often stems from VIP guests being told of elements that could give clues about the price, such as the brand of the service or the type of product they will consume:

‘they will be aware that say, the Mandarin Oriental is a more expensive hotel than the Novotel, so they can see that difference’ (Megan)

‘a dinner for a VIP is more likely to include champagne rather than prosecco, it will be the finer wines, it is more likely to be Michelin star food’

Although Bagwell and Bernheim (1996 p.362) argue that conspicuous consumption ‘must be observed readily by large numbers of people’ for conspicuous value to be achieved, more recent research suggests that obvious displays of wealth no longer indicate the status of a consumer, and instead status is conveyed indirectly and with greater sophistication (Chaudhuri and Manjumar 2006), in this instance through the assumed value given to a particular hotel brand or food type.

4.1.2 Unique value

Consumers have a need for uniqueness, and prestige consumption often occurs through the acquisition of a product or service, which has the connotation of having a limited supply (Vigneron and Johnson 2004; Liang and He 2011). Thus, consumers, in this instance VIPs, are motivated by the snob effect of engaging in something the masses do not (Ghosh and Varshney 2013). Creating exclusive access *areas* for VIP event attendees was a common theme many participants touched upon, as event managers actively ‘*try to give a sense of exclusivity to the area where the VIPs are*’ (Claire). Upon arrival at a charity dinner for instance, VIP guests would have access to areas, catering, and entrances regular attendees would not, as Diane explained:

‘normally we create a VIP only drinks area on arrival with tray service and canapes, perhaps a VIP only entrance too’

Additionally, exclusivity was also created through limiting the number of attendees to certain elements of the event. This was similar to the findings of Moital et al. (2013), as although there are not a limited number of tickets, there is a limited number of hand-picked individuals invited to specific event programmes. As Laura suggests,

‘you build exclusivity by making it, a much more focused event.....we maximise it at about 120 [VIPs].....it makes it feel like an incredibly important community’

When an event contains rare attributes that VIPs would not often engage in, then the event is perceived as prestigious to them. Peter noted how an event manager can create rarity at events,

‘introduce them to others, either subject matter experts or executive and they get to connect with people that they ordinarily wouldn’t get to’

Peter notes that often the VIP guests would not ordinarily get to connect with other VIPs; however, at the corporate events, time is allocated to introduce guests. Furthermore, unique value is rarely the singular motive behind the engagement with prestige consumption (Husic and Cicic 2009; Ghosh and Varshney 2013), and other sources of value must be considered in connection. In this instance, ambient and social value are also created as guests can socialise and network with others they perceive as having high social standing. However, the prominent element of this attribute is the uniqueness of connecting VIP guests with individuals they would not ordinarily get to network with, thus creating unique value.

4.1.3 Social value

Participants emphasised the importance of creating social value for VIPs at corporate events, and providing the opportunity for VIPs to network with peers proves key when delivering this social value. All eight participants mentioned the vital requirement of dedicated areas and time slots for VIPs to network with peers. Peter exemplified how the ability to network is an attribute of the event which pulls the VIPs towards attending:

‘the opportunity to network with peers is one of the main reasons they [VIPs] go to one of these events. If you’re creating a VIP experience, you want to bring people at that level together’ (Peter)

Laura recalled an account of how she incorporated VIP engagement with an industry specialist into an event,

‘we had a VIP breakfast with him.....he [the specialist] did a fifteen-minute speech and then the remainder of the time the VIPs sat around the table networking with him’

Moital et al (2013) found that affiliation with known strangers strongly appeals to consumers’ social needs,

and in the corporate environment, this tends to focus on industry experts. VIP guests were likely to perceive Sir Tim as socially important (Ghosh and Varshney 2013); thus, by networking with him, a VIP is likely to feel an increase in their self-esteem (Dutton et al. 1994; Fuller et al. 2006), which further creates perceived prestige value.

Wiedmann et al. (2007) note that value is often delivered through the ability to spend time with others, and a focal point for event managers was placed upon segregating VIPs and those with whom they want to socialize with. On a practical perspective, this includes ‘*sitting VIPs together in the same table*’ (Lauren) or having ‘*a VIP dedicated area and we give lanyards [to access the area] to those we think the VIPs want to network with*’ (Claire). Techniques such as these enable the VIP guests to derive status due to becoming a member of the prestigious group (Loch et al. 2001) made up of those they consider as having a high social standing. Upon personal association with the group, prestige value is created (Dutton et al. 1994).

4.1.4 Ambient value

Ambient value was not clearly articulated by participants. However, participants often referred to creating an atmosphere where VIP guests felt special. As Peter notes,

‘people like feeling special, so you bear that in mind when you’re planning an event, so how do we put things in place to make people feel special?’

This coincides with the findings of Moital et al. (2013), of prestige within the context of a sporting event, as this found emotional value, or in this instance – ambient value, deriving from an atmosphere where individuals feel special. Thus, employing techniques to ensure that VIPs feel special fulfils this source of value and contributes to creating prestige value. Diane identified an attribute employed to create ambient value pre-event,

‘phone calls make people feel special, someone’s taken the time to give you a ring rather than simply send you another email’

This suggests the employment of personalised communication for VIP attendees to encourage the feeling of being special. This will be discussed further under the interaction process between event managers and VIP attendees.

4.1.5 Quality value

When participants were asked how they portray quality value, they frequently mentioned the employment of individual hosts for each VIP,

‘more often than not, we will have a hostess with the VIP the whole way through’ (Laura)

These hosts are extensively briefed pre-event to ensure the VIP can depend upon them to guide them through the event. Crompton and Love (1995) found detailed sources of information at the event site result in perceived high service quality. By dedicating specific hosts to VIP guests, they have a reliable source of information onsite throughout, thus delivering quality value and therefore enhancing the prestige value to VIPs.

Participants often alluded to high quality tangibles within the exclusive VIP areas,

“the furnishings are different, the carpets for example are nicer, the furniture is nicer.....there is a different environment for them” (Megan)

VIPs are likely to associate the appearance of the tangibles with superiority, perhaps because of the assumed value placed upon them. Subsequently, by portraying high quality through tangibles, the event is judged as holding prestige value (Vigneron and Johnson 1999).

4.2 Interaction

4.2.1 Phraseology

Interaction with VIPs throughout the event process played an important role when creating prestige value. The findings focused upon the vocabulary used when communicating with VIPs, how communication takes place and by whom. Firstly, the primary research highlighted that a common theme in motivating VIPs to attend corporate events is through the phraseology utilised. Peter notes that,

‘the language used is slightly different [for VIPs], you can use the word exclusive, limited, selected there’s a whole kind of phraseology’

As previously mentioned, consumers avoid attending large events where the masses gather; so, when event managers use phrases such as exclusive, limited and selected, it is arguably more attractive to VIPs, as they perceive they will

be engaging in an experience the masses are not (Ghosh and Varshney 2013). Furthermore, this phraseology is potentially influenced by the desire to manage consumer expectations as pre-event positioning enables VIPs to ‘get a good feel for the event’, as Paul remarked.

4.2.2 Personalised communication

In addition, VIPs face a more personal experience when engaging in communication with the events’ team. The SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) places emphasis on the importance of empathy and individualized attention to consumers. This individualized attention often takes place through the personalised communication with VIP guests pre-event. As Laura explains,

‘with a VIP stakeholder, you tend to find that most of the communications either face-to-face or over the phone, you take the time to brief them and provide one-to-one documentation’

4.2.3 Dedicated team

As previously mentioned, this personal communication could deliver ambient value to VIPs as they feel special, and the notion of feeling special can offer prestige value for VIP attendees, as found within the sporting events’ context (Moital et al. 2013). Furthermore, the personalised communication and time spent perfecting the phraseology for VIP guests, is executed by a dedicated team who manage the VIP experience from beginning to end. Megan notes,

‘[VIPs] have a dedicated support team, which will only be dealing with 100 attendees’ (Megan)

This attribute could be guided by the desire to manage a VIP’s time better, so that they are not waiting for hours for a response to their needs. Moreover, the extent to which employees provide a prompt service is important when delivering good service quality (Parasuraman et al. 1988). Therefore, event managers employ a dedicated team to deliver quality value, thus contributing to the prestige value of the event.

4.3 Principles

The primary research highlighted five guiding principles behind the event managers’ deployment of techniques and design of interaction; assumed value, social equity,

managing expectations, time management and preferential treatment.

4.3.1 Assumed value

As previously mentioned, when planning and staging corporate events, event managers on no occasion would show VIP guests the costs of any event attribute. Diane even argued that when managing VIP attendees, money is ‘*deemed to be to vulgar a topic*’. Trachtman (1999) also recognises that the discussion of money often inflicts embarrassment upon individuals and the notion of discussing expense is avoided. Thus, all value must be assumed through attributes within the event such as the world-famous hotels in which VIPs are placed for the duration of the event. Therefore, assumed value is a principle that guides the techniques event managers employ to create prestige value for VIP attendees.

Furthermore, within a corporate context, engagement with products or service displaying wealth ‘could lack prestige’ (Aalsemgeest 2016, p.395), as individuals may believe that exchanging wealth for intellect as degrading as no value can be placed upon this. In this instance, the corporate VIPs at the event are considered the most knowledgeable individuals within the organisation. Thus, by allowing VIP attendees to assume the value of their experience, a VIP is less likely to feel insulted by the actual value placed upon them.

4.3.2 Social equity

The data emphasised that often event managers conceal the attributes creating prestige value for VIPs. As Diane notes,

‘at conferences, [VIPs] have the best seats, I guess that is different to other guests, but this wouldn’t be obvious as we don’t want people to feel less superior’

Feeling ‘less superior’ derives from attendees making social comparisons of the event attributes different groups were engaging with. This can be explained by the social equity theory, which rationalises how individuals seek to maximise their outcome of a situation comparative to the inputs they employ (Fisk and Young 1985). Inequity is observed when an individual perceives their situation as unequal to others (Braithwaite 2005), and for those profiting from the inequity (Braithwaite 2005), emotions such as guilt are likely to surface (Sprecher 2001). Thus,

the employment of ‘hidden VIP areas’ could stem from a desire to reduce the guilt felt by VIPs, as when attendees are not aware of the rewards the other party is receiving, both parties are unable to evaluate the level of fairness (Collie et al. 2002), thus inequity cannot be perceived.

Furthermore, organisations actively engage in status levelling (Walton 1985), which is the attempt to blur status distinctions between groups of employees. Thus, by acting in a discreet manner when creating prestige value for VIPs, less separation will be witnessed ensuring that the distinctions between the groups remain blurred. However, to minimise conflict between the VIPs and regular attendees, sources of value are often granted discreetly; this is discussed in depth later. Peter recalled a time conspicuous value was portrayed discreetly through presenting VIP guests with a gift left in their hotel room,

‘if you give gifts discreetly as a room drop then you can put an expensive piece in the VIP rooms and a less expensive piece in the other delegate rooms’

Although, one can still flaunt their expensive gifts should they wish to and obtain the Veblenian effect they desire (Ghosh and Varshney 2013).

4.3.3 Management of expectations

Managing VIP expectations is an additional principle guiding the attributes employed by event managers throughout the duration of the event process. The management of expectations is crucial for VIP attendees as consumer satisfaction is typically reliant upon the ability to comprehend the level of service anticipated (Fisk and Young 1985). Laura illustrates a frequent procedure employed to ensure that VIP expectations are met:

‘what we usually do is [to] provide a one-to-one briefing of what is going to happen at the event, and then we step them through what their experience is going to be’

While conducting the briefings, managers must be careful not to over promise, as high expectations can result in dissatisfaction if the promises are not fulfilled (Kurtz and Clow 1992). Additionally, if the expectations are not met, a VIPs need for prestige is also unlikely to be met; thus, managing expectations is crucial for delivering prestige value.

4.3.4 Time management

During the primary research, it was clear that event managers strived to manage VIPs’ time due to their increasingly busy work-lives, as Laura recognises,

‘what you find with most VIPs is their time is expensive.....they have a limited period of time that they can spend in one place before they have another commitment’

Time management is the process of establishing needs, defining goals, prioritising and planning tasks required to meet the goals and satisfy the needs (Lakein and Leake 1973). Attributes employed to minimise time wasted at corporate event were frequently mentioned such as,

‘we create fast track tunnels when they [VIPs] want to get in and out of the building’ (Paul)

Schuler (1979, p.845) found that ‘time management means less stress for individuals’, thus explaining the desire for event managers to ensure a VIP’s time is highly orchestrated for the duration of the event. Furthermore, when applied to sports events, Moital et al. (2013) identified the feeling of enjoyment deriving from relaxation due to a lack of stress. Therefore, by managing a VIP attendee’s time, they may feel less stressed, more relaxed, and consequently, they are more likely to enjoy the event and perceive their experience as providing prestige value.

4.3.5 Preferential treatment

Individual VIP preferences were considered throughout the duration of the event and this surpassed the treatment of regular attendees. Thus, preferential treatment was the final principle guiding the techniques and inter should tomorrow action employed when creating prestige value for VIPs. Lacey et al. (2007) argue that with the emergence of Customer Relationship Management technologies, organisations are better equipped to appeal to consumers’ preferences as the technology stores data concerning likes and dislikes. Paul exemplified,

‘within a database, we hold a list of [VIP’s] likes and dislikes and you target the event towards their areas of interest’

Preferential treatment is the process of ‘giving selective customers elevated status, recognition and enhanced products and services above and beyond [the] standard customer service practices’ (Lacey et al. 2007, p.242). Within preferential treatment sits customization that

places a focus on specialised attention and limited services (Gwinner et al. 1998). Often preferential treatment is demonstrated through members-only areas and dedicated personnel (Lacey et al. 2007), which is similar to the attributes employed by participants, such as dedicated hosts and VIP only areas. Preferential treatment encourages VIPs to make social comparisons between the treatment they receive and the treatment of others (Jiang et al. 2013); consequently, a VIP may feel an enhancement of status and prestige (Drèze and Nunes 2009). Moreover, continued preferential treatment may condition VIPs to feel entitled to admiration, through the development of a persona of being unique (Boyd and Helms 2005), a trait associated with prestige.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

Individuals considered as having VIP status such as the Chief Operating Officers, their direct reports and Managing Directors of each business unit, hold significant influence within a corporation; therefore, it is common to recognise and honour their status when they perform corporate duties. The aim of this study was to explore the techniques employed by event managers to create event prestige value for VIPs. The findings showed that the tech-

niques employed by event managers could be classified into 3 different levels: sources of values (referred to as Values), Interaction and Principles. Event managers were found to employ a range of specific techniques in the form of event attributes when delivering the five sources of prestige motivation value (Conspicuous, Unique, Social, Ambient and Quality). The attributes mentioned by participants were then classified according to the source of value deemed most appropriate, such as the employment of exclusive areas delivering unique value. Another set of techniques reflected the way event managers communicated the sources of prestige value to the VIPs and these were called Interaction techniques: phraseology, personalised communication and a dedicated team. These are particularly important for managing expectations; for example, certain words or expressions (phraseology) are employed to persuade the VIP that the event will be prestigious. Finally, five principles governing the management of VIP prestige were identified: assumed value, social equity, managing expectations, time management and preferential treatment. For example, attributes employed by event managers such as secret room drops, are guided by the principle of social equity as the event managers avoid potential distressing feelings such as guilt for the VIPs (Braithwaite 2005).

The results are depicted as a roundel – the Prestige Framework of Managing VIP Experiences (Figure 2). In order to produce prestige value for the VIP, the event is to

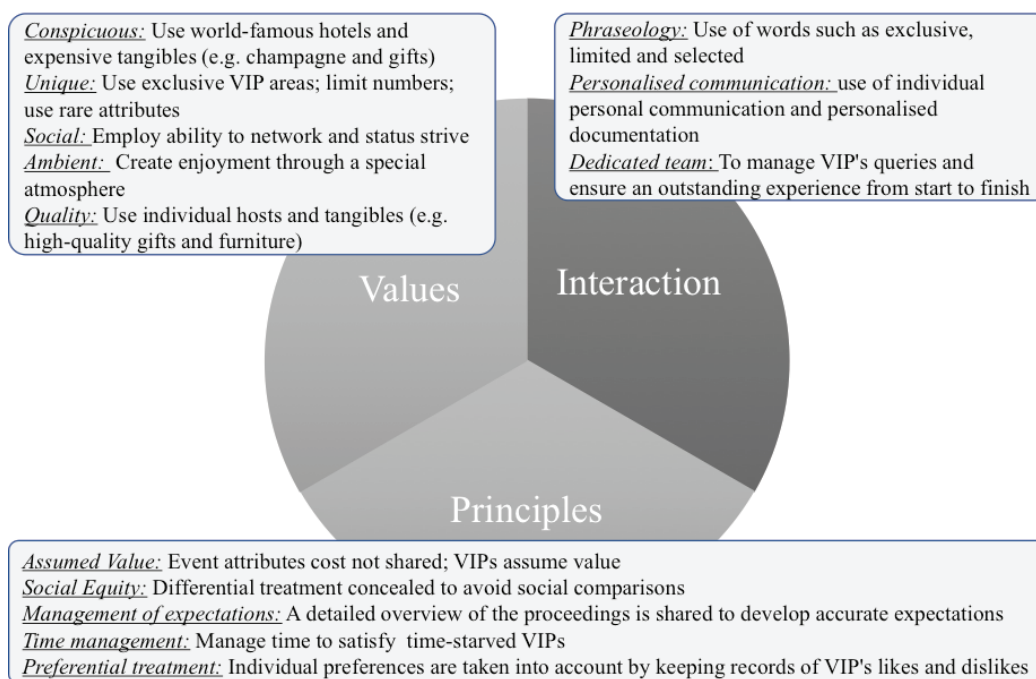


Figure 2: Prestige Framework of Managing VIP Experiences

be prepared and has to occur under the three dimensions, with each dimension concurrently and in combination. Research on prestige has mainly focused on the attributes that deliver the five sources of value (Moital et al, 2013, Correia and Kozak, 2012). By focusing on experiential services (events) and on collecting data from those delivering prestige (as opposite to the recipients), it was possible to identify two additional layers – Interaction and Principles – that govern the creation and delivery of prestige value. Thus, this paper contributes to knowledge by identifying deeper, less explicit mechanisms required to deliver prestigious experiences.

The research opens up several opportunities for further research. The primary research found the sources of prestige value to be insufficient when used in isolation to create perceived prestige value for VIPs at corporate events. While focused on corporate events, this study suggests an alternative model for managing VIP experiences, which can extend beyond corporate events to other types of events (Bladen et al. 2012), where VIPs are present. However, additional research would be beneficial to assess the effectiveness of The Prestige Framework of Managing VIP Experiences in a different context. Future research should explore prestige value at corporate events from a VIP's perspective. It would be advantageous to understand whether the attributes, interaction and guiding principles the event managers believe create prestige value for VIPs are consistent with the perceptions of VIPs themselves. Finally, an assessment of the techniques employed within different cultures would be beneficial. Thus, if it is apparent that different techniques are employed, global organisations will be required to create a more individualised approach to the management of VIP attendees per country (Eastman et al. 1999).

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Kayleigh Jones, Kayleigh holds a First Class BA (Hons) in Events Management from Bournemouth University, United Kingdom. She is a practitioner with an interest in events and marketing, and currently works as a Digital Marketing Executive for DHL.

Miguel Moital, Miguel is a Principal Academic in Events Management, Bournemouth University, United Kingdom. His research interests focus on consumer experience and behaviour in events, including prestige motivation & consumption and the creation of prestige value. His publications have appeared in *Tourism Management*, *Psychology & Marketing*, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* and *Event Management*.