# The service semiotics of luxury events: An exploration for future research and events management industry practice

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses the implications of the role of semiotics in the design and delivery of luxury event-attendees' experience. Within the contemporary industry and sector, the place of semiotics within the field of design will be established and its importance examined, with reference to future professional practice. Future research opportunities will also be identified.

KEYWORDS: customer service, event design, experience design, brand experience, luxury service, luxury experience, service design, service management

## Introduction — a semiotic approach to luxury event design

"Semiotic" is derived from the Greek *semesion*, which means sign, *semainon*, which means signifier, and *semainomenon* meaning signified or indication (Yakin & Totu, 2014). Semiotics has been explored in numerous contexts, but less so in its wider relationship to contemporary service design and provision of luxury hospitality, events, and tourism. Understanding the role of semiotics in luxury event attendee experience design is important because it can potentially lead to greater levels of perceived customer authenticity in the service encounter (Brown & James, 2004; Bladen et al., 2018; Culler, 1981; Frow, 1991).

## The semiotics field of enquiry

Todorov (1977) stated that semiotics issued from the four traditions: semantics, logic, rhetoric, and hermeneutics. Semiotics is the study of sign processes, related to the production of meaning and, unlike linguistics, includes any sign which communicates, mainly using non-language means, particularly through the senses, i.e. visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory or gustatory. Such signs are used by event designers to engineer the stimulation of the senses of events attendees in order that attendees may infer meanings, which they in turn use to form their event experiences.

The underpinning theory of semiotics dates as far back as Plato and Aristotle, who related signs to an individual's experience of the world. The study of such signs developed as a branch of medicine in relation to symptoms as diagnostic signs of illness, popularised in English medicine through John Locke, who termed *Semeiotike* as "the doctrine of signs", explaining it as "… the nature of signs the mind makes use of for the understanding of things, or conveying its knowledge to others" (1823/1963, p. 175). Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) began the study of signs as part of social life, and Thomas Sebeck (De Gruyter, 1969) launched the first international journal dedicated to the study of signs called *Semiotica*.

In the nineteenth century, it was Charles Sanders Peirce (1931) who first defined the term "semeiotic" in relation to the social sciences as the "formal doctrine of signs" as philosophical logic used by "an intelligence capable of learning from experience" (Peirce, 1931, p. 227). This development began the study of the philosophical relationship between the external object as signifier and its internally signified (or interpreted) meaning. The latter involved the role of the internal representation machine. The key interest in experience design of Peirce's work is his recognition of the roles of *interpretant* and *interpreter* in the formation of meaning. The interpretant can be related to the internal representation image of the object (the design stimulus) to the interpreter (the event attendee), which is the individual making the meaning of the object using their own internal representation.

A simple example of the practical application of Peirce's theory of semiotics to the design of the luxury event experience is the way the most popular music from different generations is used by DJs at luxury wedding events to elicit emotional engagement from different ages of attendees through the stimulation of memories of particular times in their lives. Such a theory helps to explain how attendees at an event are in themselves a community who agree on a collective meaning of communication codes regarding their understanding of objects encountered in events, whether they be dress, behaviour, symbols, colours, language, or other aspects of design which enable the content of the designed experience to be interpreted.

Therefore, event designers require an understanding of how event attendees process cognitive and emotional cues. Pictorial semiotics are also relevant as much of our roles as interpreters are based on the heritage of art and its pictorial representation throughout history. In the present day, it could be argued that films and other faster forms of media have a greater influence on interpretant development than classical artworks. However,

it should also be respected that traditional cues may be being disrupted by the role and pace of technological change, which is likely causing interpreters to develop and adapt new representations at a faster rate of change. Other important drivers of such change include culture and globalisation.

## Semiotic research in tourism, hospitality and events

Semiotics is still of current interest to the research community, as evidenced by Mello and Netto's (2020) study of the success of Air France's "Air France, France is in the air" advertising campaign as an example of tourism semiotics in the expression of brand hospitality. However, this study highlights the general focus of semiotics research on cultural symbols as semiotic communicators of hospitality service and cultural authenticity. While such focus on cultural cues is recognised and used extensively in the planning of themed events, many of which are delivered at a level of high luxury, such a management-centred rather than attendee-centred approach is limited. Another example of such culture-focused research is the study by Uyzbayeva et al. (2019) of the semiotics of traditional Kazakh food.

Even the more recent attempts to elucidate events design as a theoretical field, such as the generic literature review by Orefice (2018), continues to confine it more to a method of strategic stakeholder management, rather than a more design-artistry approach recognised by other authors (Berridge, 2007; Bladen et al., 2012; Brown & James, 2004). This ongoing tension between the art of the event and the management systems perspective, and the ongoing calls for new paradigms with which to approach the field (e.g. Orefice, 2018) highlight the continuing, gaping contrast between the practice of events designers and researchers in this field.

## What are luxury events?

What is meant by the term "luxury events" varies widely across the sector and its associated academic discourses. Eventia describes itself as "the official trade body of the events and live marketing industry providing leadership and representation on important issues to Government, regulators and the corporate community" (Eventia, 2020). A "luxury event, by definition, is meant to have a significant amount of elegance and grandeur. This type of event involves larger budgets and tons of creativity" (Hazeltone, 2020). This simplistic definition leads to industry recommendations to focus on the choice of a flexible venue, creation of an unforgettable ambiance, and a reminder that every little detail matters. The experience-related recommendations, which are attention to sound, sight, lighting, décor, touch, and taste, provide little insight into the production of memorable event attendee experiences with no reference to personalisation.

There is little evidence that academicians have attempted to define luxury events, but instead they have fixed their emphasis on the more traditional idea of "Special Events", as one of the traditional event taxonomies. Goldblatt, an early pioneer of special events, says "a special event is a unique moment in time celebrated with ceremony and ritual to satisfy specific needs" (Goldblatt, 2002, p. 6). Similarly, another early attempt to define special events by Getz (1997, p. 4) stated that

a special event is a one-time or infrequently occurring event outside normal programs or activities of the sponsoring or organizing body...[and] to the customer or guest, a special event is an opportunity for a leisure, social, or cultural experience outside the normal range of choices or beyond everyday experience.

In an attempt to review literature about luxury events, there is mainly a focus on brand experience of luxury consumer fashion brands, with one article making reference to the use of events to promote luxury brand experience, using special events as a novel way to augment marketing strategy (Grigorian et al., 2014). Outside of events management operational academic literature, brand marketing specialists tend to regard events as useful items in a general marketing toolbox of communication tools, rather than the main brand experience itself.

The qualities of what "luxury" is in relation to events management remain vague at best. The marketing community suggests "luxury" can be defined in rather difficult to apply terms, such as "premiumness" (Kapferer & Bastien, 2008). There is also "legitimacy in luxury", which includes an exceptional production process (often based on craftsmanship, uniqueness, and exclusivity), a product of the highest quality (often design-based, instigating consumers' emotions and self-expressive motivations), and a tradition or history associated with the brand (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004).

Grigorian et al. (2014, p. 5) demonstrated the difficulty of applying marketing theory to event management in their primary discussion of the definition of "luxury experience" itself:

What is luxury experience? Conventional wisdom suggests that luxury experience is achieved by offering the highest quality in any of the elements that mass brands also offer. For example, the product offered should be of exceptional quality. The service added to the offering should be delivered impeccably. We believe this is not enough to design luxury experience. This is because we believe that luxury experience goes beyond extreme premiumness.

However, earlier research (Berry et al., 2002; Meyer & Schwager, 2007) do begin to recognise the notion of semiotics in customer experience by suggesting that a company should orchestrate an integrated series of "clues" that will, collectively, determine how customers experience the brand.

The widely recognised, all-encompassing definition of "events" is: "The temporary and purposive gathering of people" (Bladen et al., 2012, p. 3). It is therefore proposed here that "luxury events" are defined as follows: The temporary gathering of people for the experience of abundance, great comfort and elegance.

The main semiotic, sensory components of luxury events, in particular, are therefore categorised under the main headings of abundance, comfort and elegance and will likely be developed in accordance with the innovation of the market at the time and the theme for each designed event. In line with the foregoing discussion of some industry views about what luxury entails, there is a general approach synonymous with expectations of luxury event attendees.

O'Toole (2011, p. 183) defines events design as "a purposeful arrangement of elements of an event to maximise the positive impression on the attendees and other key stakeholders", and Ferdinand and Kitchin (2012) state that events design relates to the activation of sensory and emotional experiences. Similarly, the variety of works in the events' literature also often implicitly allude to notions of semiotics in design. For example, Liu et al. (2017) found that event attendees form experiences by adding their individual life history to the sensory, cognitive, affective,

emotional and social experiences at an event. Such life history will likely include the use of memorial cues by attendees, many of which may be unconsciously applied.

Although experience design within the events sector has gradually become better documented, mainly due to the work of Berridge (2007), what is less well acknowledged among event management specialists is the importance of products and services, only as "supports" to the overall event attendee experience. While in the previous decade there has been greater inroads into the popular recognition that events are ultimately designed experiences, there has still been more focus on service quality management, rather than the design components that stimulate the formation of the attendees' experiences.

Pine and Gilmore (1999) stated that brands should provide differentiated and personalise-able experiences for customers. Bladen et al. (2012) proposed that customisable services and standardised products were vital supports for this design. This therefore placed services and particularly products in a subordinate role to requirements for event designers to engineer scope within each design-driven event, for attendees to personalise their own experiences, in addition to their consumption and products within what has been termed a "servicescape". It is suggested that this potential oversight has led event businesses and hospitality organisations to concentrate on innovation and differentiated advantage mainly in the category of zero defects service delivery which, while of primary importance to mass-produced services such as fast-food and some retail hospitality businesses, would not of itself facilitate event experience, and would be particularly ineffective in the production of luxury events.

It is the goal of sensory design in luxury events to provide semiotic symbolism which denotes top quality, obviously, as there are so many different definitions of quality, from fitness for use (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007) through to more that have high-end and luxury emphases. All these apply to the luxury event experience, which should have zero defects in relation to attendees' expectations and yet also deliver beyond expectations in the realm of customer delight (Kasambu & Sritharan, 2018). Luxury symbols of quality, such as the best-sourced luxury foodstuffs for event catering, have long been used by event planners to convey a sense of opulence to attendees.

It is also worth noting that semiotic symbolism overtakes quality with luxury (Audrin et al., 2017), as consumers use intrinsic and extrinsic cues to set preferences and make purchase decisions. The authors found that this tendency changes in relation to materialistic values, which in application would perpetuate opportunities for brand alliances between brand producers, for example in the provision of event technology, sound, visual systems, lighting used in events staging, through to branded catering products.

Relationships between the people and event attendees will take on new dimensions and will need to be interactive, within the scope of the current health guidelines, in order to arrive at predicted or expected outcomes, as discovered by Lu et al.'s (2015) study of staff-customer relationships in luxury hotels. That study found that although mirrored in terms of expectations, attendees and service providers likely use different language to describe them.

Service blueprinting, scripting, and front and back of house customer journey mapping are all required for event service design and management, with service-experience augmentations, beyond core provisions. While failure-avoidance and customer-recovery will still be required, real value, reflected by premium pricing, denoting value (Lu et al., 2015), will need to be made tangible by the semiotics of customer relationships. Such relationship semiotics will incorporate customised, formal interactions, which will include adaptations to changing and individual customer needs, wants, demands and preferences. All delivery will likely embody designed cues in addition to customary service standards such as politeness, staff grooming, uniforms, etc., which denote exclusivity of customer experience.

## Event design theory

### The place of personalised experience in the production of luxury events

The present shortage of adequate industry practice and academic definition in the production of luxury event experience can possibly be traced back to a view that popular project planning tools, including management by event objectives, are commonly used by event planners and taught on events management training and degree programmes. There is still less emphasis on the steps required to ensure the production of meaningful event experiences. Naturally, there is popular focus on event themes (e.g. Getz, 2007; Goldblatt, 2002; Monroe, 2005), which in turn assists the drive towards many of the common characteristics of recognised event designs. However, such focus can easily overlook the need for designers to place importance on the personalisation by each luxury event attendee on their own event experience.

Pine and Gilmore (1999) expounded an early view of branded service provision within the realm of the personalised customer experience, which was able to augment consistent products, through service delivery and experience design, to command meaningful and differentiated brand-experiences, which customers were prepared to pay premium prices to purchase. This foundational perspective was developed by events academicians (e.g. Berridge, 2007; Bladen et al., 2012; 2018; Brown & James, 2004) to encompass an application to design-driven events, which saw proposed development of event management practice beyond the more popular staging of event logistics, in order to meet the planned management objectives of the event. Thus, while event cycles and project planning practices remained relevant, the essence of the delivery of unique and personalised event attendee experiences began much more to be articulated in terms of sensory stimulation through sensory cues. These cues are semiotics and their design and provision form the basis of attendees' luxury event experience.

### Content versus experience-driven luxury events

Berridge (2007) differentiated between content- and experience-driven events. Content-driven events are those which mainly emphasise programming of a systematic selection of scheduled occurrences which fill time and are the popular industry approach for planners of conferences, meetings and other staged occurrences. This article does not really consider these events, because they tend not to involve much experience design and therefore are not particularly relevant to the luxury events industry.

Conversely, experience-driven events are those which seek in their concept to derive experiential outcomes for their attendees. Such events are often luxurious and comprise high-end, often premium priced staging elements and are popularly applied to corporate, music, festival, museum and other events, including large-scale hospitality events such as banquets and weddings. Their outcomes often focus on affective, or emotional achievement and to this end rely on the intricate and sophisticated use of sensory stimulation through ambiance, décor, service provision and technology, to promote attendee memory and other psychological personalisations.

*Psychological design of experience-driven events*
A three-stage event design model was proposed by Bladen et al. (2012) in an attempt to augment event managers' understanding of event planning, including design, in order to reconsider some of the shortfalls presented by the popular event project planning models of the time (e.g. Shone & Parry, 2010), which although particularly useful for content-driven event projects, tended not to best serve experience-driven event producers.

This three-stage event design model focused sequentially on the origination of event concept and theme, followed by event design and resulting in the logistical delivery of the event through staging. As the previous attempted elucidation of this complex process by Hazeltone (2020) from the leading UK professional body of events management (Eventia) suggested, the current emphasis of much of the industry on staging elements, such as venue, details and other staging aspects, remains at risk of overlooking the necessity of event conceptualisation in favour of more practical staging features, thus possibly risking inadequate attendee experience personalisation and formation. It is therefore evident that a more attendee-centred approach, using semiotic-based design, will be more likely to elicit more successful, managed event attendee experience formation.

## The current situation

Luxury events are a segment of the experience economy. Recent changes due to the global pandemic and its implications to wider global and national conditions make consideration of this phenomenon a timely priority for these experience sectors. While the Covid-19 pandemic so extensively impacted the events sector in 2020, of the events that emerge from the national and local lockdowns of industrial activity, in what at the time of writing is being termed "the new normal", it is predicted that event producers will continue to embrace the view that luxury events are personalised event attendee experiences, even if future practice has to accommodate new, pandemic-related regulatory requirements.

*Future implications*
From the foregoing discussion, future directions for theoretical and empirical research, which invariably function to inform and support industrial practice, the following recommendations are offered here for consideration by the wider academic community.

1. A semiotic-based approach to event experience design should be adopted to further develop a more event attendee-centred approach, to continue away from the more producer-orientated one which to date dominates the theoretical field;

2. An examination should be made of the relationship between Peirce's (1931) roles of interpretant and interpreter in relation to event design objects; and

3. An examination of the changing representational roles of technology, generation, media and social media, culture, globalisation and environmental messaging should be made in relation to their influences on the formation and change of event attendees' interpretant formation and change.

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