The impact of COVID-19 on regional event attendees’ attitudes: a survey during and after COVID-19 lockdowns

Reyhane Hooshmand and Billy Sung
Consumer Research Lab, Curtin University, Perth, Australia
Kym Jefferies and Rob Jefferies
Jefferies and Associates, Geraldton, Australia, and
Joanna Lin
Consumer Research Lab, Curtin University, Perth, Australia

Abstract
Purpose – The current research presents a case study on how COVID-19 has influenced event attendees’ attitudes toward safety procedures, venue capacity, purchasing tickets in advance, type of events (e.g. theatre, music and art) and the mode of the event (i.e. live vs online).
Design/methodology/approach – In two timeframes (i.e. during and after COVID-19 lockdowns), data were collected via a self-completed online survey from a regional Western Australia (WA) town, Geraldton. In total, 94 event attendees were recruited in Wave 1 (during lockdowns), and 126 respondents were recruited in Wave 2 (after lockdowns). The naturalistic data collection examines how COVID-19 has influenced attendees’ attitudes.
Findings – The findings suggest that attendees have adapted to the new normal of COVID-19. If safety procedures are followed, most respondents are comfortable attending an entertainment event during and after the lockdown (Wave 1 and Wave 2). Furthermore, respondents exhibited comfort following COVID-19 safety precautions at events even after COVID-19 lockdowns, except for mandatory mask-wearing. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted event attendees to prefer lower seating capacity at events, while the gradual easing of restrictions reduces their discomfort toward higher seat capacity.
Originality/value – Although some research has examined the financial and economic impact of COVID-19 on the event industry, there is limited research on consumers’ or attendees’ perceptions and attitudes toward events, particularly entertainment events and festivals, as the world emerges from the pandemic. Thus, the current case study is the first to examine event attendees’ attitudes toward entertainment event management and operation during and after COVID-19 lockdowns. The finding provides significant theoretical and managerial implications surrounding the reaction of event attendees toward entertainment events (i.e. festivals) during health crises such as COVID-19.
Keywords Event management, COVID-19, Safety precautions, Venue capacity, Event type, Attendees’ attitudes
Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Events have played a significant role in history as a part of celebrations, exhibitions, anniversaries and special gatherings (Getz and Page, 2019). In the 21st century, technological advances and social media development have pushed the event industry into making events and festivals a pivotal part of people’s lifestyles (Getz and Page, 2019; Park and Park, 2017). After this development, the event industry experienced increasing growth in its financial status (Getz and Page, 2019; Gajjar and Parmar, 2020), with the business events industry contributing US$ 1.5 trillion to the global GDP in 2018.

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The event industry encompasses corporate, sports, education and entertainment events, with the entertainment segment dominating the market with US$ 453 million in 2020 (Research Dive, 2021). For the purpose of this study, we will focus on entertainment events. The entertainment segment involves events such as music concerts, live shows and festivals and is predicted to reach US$ 27,286 million by 2028, yielding an expected growth rate of 12.4% from 2021 to 2028 (Dinesh et al., 2022). In addition to economic growth, events, including entertainment events, have positively influenced countries’ cultural awareness and job opportunities (Lee et al., 2017; Gössling et al., 2020). Despite the benefits associated with events, the research field of events is relatively novel and young (Getz and Page, 2019; Park and Park, 2017). Therefore, there is a pivotal need for more research in the event area (Backman, 2018), especially after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like most industries, the pandemic greatly affected the event industry, specifically the entertainment segment. As such, many entertainment event locations, such as theatres, film sets, music halls and concerts, were forced to close due to restrictions on social gatherings. The prohibition of mass gathering events was one of the initial responses implemented by governments to control and reduce the transmission of COVID-19 (Moritz et al., 2021; Jamal and Budke, 2020; Yang et al., 2020). A survey conducted in the United States indicated that most event planners did not expect the revenue of events to return to pre-pandemic levels until at least the end of 2022 (Statista, 2021). Approximately half of the surveyed believed it would take until 2024 to recover from COVID-19 fully (Statista, 2021). Similarly, the Australian Government implemented restrictions such as mask mandates, social distancing, a total ban on local and national events and the closure of national and state borders during the pandemic. The restrictions led to the postponement and cancellation of many entertainment events and festivals in Australia, resulting in a sharp decrease in event revenue. Such COVID-19 restrictions in Australia were said to negatively impact small towns and regional areas (Hearn et al., 2020).

One of the local areas in Australia affected by COVID-19 restrictions is Geraldton. Geraldton is located in Western Australia (WA) and is populated by 39,000 people. It is a diverse economy, including mining services, agriculture, working port and fishing. Travellers have also identified Geraldton as one of the tourist attractions of Australia. In 2018, tourism covered roughly 3% of the local economy (Hearn et al., 2020). Furthermore, local events play a crucial role in increasing the number of tourists visiting Geraldton. Among the local events in Geraldton, one of the primary annual events is ‘Funtavia’ festival. Funtavia is a small-scale festival supporting local producers and artists with paid opportunities and audiences. It is considered an entertainment event, reflecting the art and culture of Australia, specifically in Geraldton (Hearn et al., 2020).

Although some research has examined the financial and economic impacts of COVID-19 on regional events (e.g. Ahmed and Memish, 2020), there is limited research on attendees’ attitudes toward these events and festivals as the world adapts to the new normal with the COVID-19 pandemic. To our knowledge, no research has investigated attendees’ attitudes toward attending regional entertainment events during and after the COVID-19 lockdowns. The current research presents a case study on how COVID-19 has influenced event attendees’ attitudes toward modes of events (i.e. live or online events), COVID-19 preventive measures, seating capacity, purchasing tickets in advance and the type of events (e.g. theatre, music and art), focusing specifically on entertainment events.

Data was collected from a regional WA town, Geraldton, at two timeframes: (1) in August 2020, when WA was emerging out of COVID-19 lockdown and most COVID-19 restrictions were eased; and (2) in December 2020, when the local community enjoyed several months of COVID-19-free period and when the WA government announced that all venues in WA were required to keep a register of event attendees for contact tracing purposes.
Review of the relevant literature

COVID-19 and events

The COVID-19 epidemic was identified as one of the most devastating pandemics of the twenty-first century (Fernandes, 2020; Ahmed and Memish, 2020). The pandemic disrupted the worldwide business sectors and different ventures radically. In turn, the tourism, hospitality and event industries were severely affected. As such, various events witnessed the closure of venues and cancellation of shows during the pandemic. This is unsurprising given that events are incredibly vulnerable to internal or external disturbances making them an easy target for COVID-19 or any infectious disease epidemics (Ahmed and Memish, 2020; Ishola and Phin, 2011). Furthermore, evidence suggests that the event industry lost nearly US$666 million due to cancellations in 2020 (Madray, 2020; McCloskey et al., 2020). Therefore, due to the severe impacts of the pandemic on events, it is crucial to understand how people think about attending events, such as entertainment events, after the pandemic.

The government’s safety protocols (Lai et al., 2020), as well as COVID-19’s high transmissibility (Bai et al., 2020), severity and mortality rate (Lai et al., 2020), led to rapid changes in individuals’ attitudes toward social behaviours, such as attending events. Some people avoided attending events and festivals and practised self-isolation even when health precautions and COVID-19 preventative measures were in place (Ning et al., 2020; Dillette and Ponting, 2020; Yang and Chu, 2018). Some followed safety precautions such as avoiding handshakes and practising social distancing, which was anticipated to continue post-pandemic (Shaw et al., 2020). Behavioural scholars argue that past behaviours reflect current and personal habits and that current habits will affect future behaviours (Fredricks and Dossett, 1983). In fact, people generally want to keep consistency in their behaviours and habits (Agag et al., 2022; Fredricks and Dossett, 1983). Prior studies also revealed that intra-pandemic perception is associated with post-pandemic attitudes and habits (Dedeoglu and Bogan, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2021). Despite research showing that COVID-19 may change event attendees’ behaviour and habits, limited research has compared people’s attitudes toward attending entertainment events during and after the COVID-19 lockdown (Braidwood, 2021; Goldborough, 2021; Kelly, 2021).

Furthermore, several studies have also focused on digital modes of events and their significance in terms of aesthetics and accessibility for future events (Svich, 2021; Aebischer, 2021). For example, Séraphin (2020) reviewed existing literature on future events and concluded that online events play a more significant role and events will have to be more adaptable to accommodate future crises. Interestingly, preliminary evidence also suggested that “smaller community festivals may be a more efficient method of limiting the number of attendees and cutting down costs for the festival hosts and attendees” in the future (Davies, 2021, p. 188). However, previous studies have not empirically focused on attendees’ attitudes toward different event types (e.g. theatre, music, art) and ongoing COVID-19 preventive measures at events. Furthermore, prior attempts mainly focused on large-scale events, particularly sports events, lacking sufficient research on medium and small local entertainment events.

Event research during the pandemic

Individuals’ behaviours are habitual and contextual. Natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes and health pandemics like COVID-19 can significantly affect people’s behaviours and habits (Sheth, 2020; Shaw et al., 2020; Qiu et al., 2020; Wilson and Chen, 2020). As such, the COVID-19 outbreak has caused unexpected changes in people’s habits. After the pandemic, behaviours such as gatherings, socialising and handshaking might be perceived as unfavourable or risky (Shaw et al., 2020). Since the pandemic triggered life-changing or traumatic experiences for some, people might become susceptible to adapting to
a new lifestyle norm or maybe returning to their old lifestyle (Parent and Smith-Swan, 2013). Although most habits are expected to return to normal after COVID-19, some previous habits might completely vanish as individuals find alternative behaviours or habits more convenient and affordable. For example, before COVID-19, some individuals were reluctant to adopt digital technology to conduct daily transactions, such as meetings or shopping. However, during the pandemic, people and businesses generally accepted that digital technology is more accessible for daily transactions (Sheth, 2020). For instance, Amazon reported a significant and unprecedented spike in its orders during COVID-19, suggesting that many people have switched to doing their daily tasks and shopping online. However, there is still the question of whether people will continue their current lifestyle or revert to their old habits after the pandemic. Therefore, examining how people’s attitudes toward attending events (e.g. entertainment events) change before and after the COVID-19 lockdown is essential.

Furthermore, event researchers acknowledged that the value of each event is assessed based on the attendees’ attitudes toward the event (Xu and Zhang, 2021; Lee et al., 2010; Yan and Halpenny, 2019). However, for attendees, events and festivals are catalysts for viral transmissions during the pandemic (Templeton et al., 2018). In fact, music and outdoor entertainment events are likely to have increased significant risks as attendees can freely move to communicate with each other (Templeton et al., 2018). This perception may affect people’s willingness to attend events during the pandemic (Lundberg, 2020). Therefore, examining how attendees’ attitudes toward health and safety precautions in regional entertainment events might change as they emerge out of lockdown is necessary.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the events industry was amidst social and technological change, fueled by the rise in smartphone ownership, social media usage and faster Internet speed (Ryan et al., 2020). As such, many events have incorporated digital technologies into their experience (Van Winkle et al., 2016). For example, the use of social media for promotions and as a storytelling tool for events and festivals (Hudson and Hudson, 2013). However, with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the massive spread of the virus, the event industry experienced significant challenges (i.e. cancellation of events and venue closures). As a result, the industry saw an acceleration in digital development and transformation (Werner et al., 2022). Given the impossibility of holding live events in the face of the pandemic, online events became the alternative (Estanyol, 2022). For example, the entertainment events industry shifted to online streaming (i.e. Twitch, Facebook and YouTube) and online media platforms (i.e. Netflix, Amazon Prime and HBO Go).

Previous studies on the impacts of COVID-19 on events and festivals were limited as most of them mainly focused on large-scale events and did not compare attendees’ attitudes toward entertainment events and the mode of delivering the event (online or in-person) (e.g. Moritz et al., 2021; Miles and Shipway, 2020). Furthermore, they did not look at different safety precautions during and after the COVID-19 lockdowns and were largely theoretical and conceptual works. For instance, Miles and Shipway (2020) investigated large sports event management within crises and disasters. They highlighted that stadiums and event venues have opportunities to enhance the resilience and operation of future events in terms of technological advances as well as through health and safety measures. A few non-COVID-19 related studies also emphasised the importance of event venues in the performance of sports events during other health pandemics (Shipway, 2018; Walters et al., 2017). However, these attempts are limited as they have not compared attendees’ attitudes toward venue capacity and safety precautions during and after the COVID-19 lockdown.

Furthermore, investigations regarding the most appropriate alternative to live events arose during the health pandemic (e.g. Ryan et al., 2020; Werner et al., 2022; Wreford et al., 2019) since many events and festivals were forced to cancel or postpone. Many event planners have found online events as a practical alternative to face-to-face events during the pandemic
(Saarto, 2021). This is supported by Werner et al. (2022), who highlighted that events are better to hold online during the pandemic. In fact, event planners also anticipated the potential for online events to continue after the pandemic (Grassilli and Colta, 2021; Potter, 2020). Estanyol (2022) has also interviewed some event managers regarding events during the pandemic. They suggested that online events have become an alternative for event management when external circumstances become too risky for in-person events. Therefore, under certain limitations and strict controls during health pandemics, the live event may be less preferred (e.g. Getz and Page, 2019; Séraphin, 2020).

However, many have accepted that the pandemic is expected to stay indefinitely, with the challenges experienced during the pandemic becoming the “new normal” (Hanaei et al., 2022). For many events, online technologies cannot fully replace live events as online events are susceptible to potential network connectivity problems and provide limited opportunities for socialisation (Hanaei et al., 2022). Hence, to maintain continuity, many events have shifted to hybrid events, offering both an online and in-person component as restrictions become more lenient. This has been seen mainly in scientific events such as conferences, symposiums and meetings (Hanaei et al., 2022) and educational institutions (Singh et al., 2021). This allows attendees to have the freedom to choose their mode of participation, whether virtual or in-person. However, it is still ambiguous whether virtual or in-person events are preferable for attendees and how their perceived risk can affect their attitudes toward following safety precautions in and after COVID-19 lockdowns.

Another line of research examined how risk perception influences attendees’ intention to visit or return to an event. Unsurprisingly, the perceived risk of attending events during health pandemics and the intention to return are positively related. A recent study by Boo and Kim (2022) indicates that the revisit intention might be lower due to health risks caused by COVID-19 and ongoing uncertainty. Apart from health risks, attendees’ intention to attend an event is also affected by risks associated with costs, time pressure and uncertainty (Hutte et al., 2022). Despite previous efforts, there is still a gap in examining how attendees perceive different safety measures and whether they efficiently reduce the perceptions of risk for attending events during the pandemic.

The review of previous attempts at studying event management during the pandemic shows that people’s attitudes might differ according to the event scale (i.e. size and capacity) and mode of delivery (online or in-person). However, there is still a gap in understanding how attendees’ attitudes toward attending small regional entertainment events may change during the lockdown and after emerging from lockdown. This paper aims to fill the identified gap in the event management literature by examining attendees’ attitudes toward events, particularly regional entertainment events, during the pandemic. The current research, therefore, extends the existing literature by being the first attempt to examine people’s attitudes toward a real-world entertainment event during and after COVID-19 lockdowns with a specific focus on safety procedures, event capacity, event modes (i.e. live or online) and intention of purchasing tickets for events in advance.

The current case study on Geraldton and Funtavia
Funtavia is a local small-scale event that is annually held in Geraldton, WA (Grant et al., 2012). Funtavia is a fantastic three-day celebration that commends neighbourhood expressions, culture and the local area. Every year, Funtavia offers a setup of stupendous worldwide, country and nearby diversions with a variety of shows for everybody, including comedy, music, dance and paintings. Funtavia is financially supported by Lotterywest, local artists, Geraldton Community Bank and Regional Arts WA. Apart from focusing on the local culture and entertainment, Funtavia also plays a critical role in supporting the local industries COVID-19 and regional event
against the effects of the pandemic by developing artist programs and providing opportunities for local producers throughout the pandemic (Grant et al., 2012).

Western Australia has effectively kept a low number of COVID-19 cases and local transmission due to the strict lockdown and quarantine measures for international and domestic travellers (Ferguson et al., 2020). In July and August 2020, WA emerged from COVID-19 lockdowns, easing most COVID-19 restrictions. By August 2020, all events and venues were permitted to perform at a specific capacity and followed COVID-19 preventive measures (e.g. social distancing). By December 2020, most venues and events in WA were operating fully but required to register patrons and staff for contact tracing. With most events and venues being able to hold in the limited capacity and COVID-19 precautions, this presents a rare opportunity for the current research to use Geraldton residents as a case study to examine how COVID-19 has influenced attendees’ attitudes toward local entertainment events as they emerge out of the pandemic. Specifically, we sampled residents in August 2020 and December 2020 to examine how the gradual easing of COVID-19 restrictions changes attendees’ attitudes toward attending events based on the event mode (i.e. online or live) and the COVID-19 preventive measures at the event venue.

**Method**

*Participant and sampling*

Data collection was conducted in two waves (Wave 1 in August, 2020 and Wave 2 in December, 2020). The sampling method was simple random sampling. The survey was randomly distributed via an email list to past attendees of Funtavia (i.e. a local musical entertainment event held annually in Geraldton). All respondents were residents of Geraldton and surrounding local council areas who had at least attended Funtavia once. Respondents participated for a chance to win one of three $AU 300 gift vouchers. In total, 94 respondents were recruited in Wave 1, and 126 were recruited in Wave 2. An individual respondent may participate in both data collection waves. The completion of the survey was anonymous due to ethical and privacy reasons. Thus, matching individuals across the two data collection waves was impossible. **Table 1** shows the sample statistics of the participants. Based on the figures, the majority of the respondents were female, with 79% in Wave 1 and 82% in Wave 2. For Wave 1, most respondents were between the ages of 35 and 44 years and had an annual income between $US 100,000 and $US 149,999. Similarly, most respondents from Wave 2 were between 25–34 years and 35–45 years and also reported an annual income between $US 100,000 and $US 149,999. In terms of ethnicity and marital status, participants from Wave 1 and Wave 2 were mainly Australian and partnered with kids.

*Design and survey instrument*

The data collection in Wave 1 and 2 involved a self-completed online survey via the Qualtrics platform. Each wave of data collection lasted for four weeks. Respondents were recruited via an email marketing campaign, and the email addresses were supplied through Funtavia’s existing customer database. In the recruitment email, respondents were provided with an information sheet and an online link to the survey. The survey consists of six parts. In the first part, respondents were asked to report under what condition they would attend an event in Geraldton, assuming all recommended COVID-19 safety procedures were followed. Respondents were provided with five choices: now (at the time of the survey), when all government restrictions on events are lifted, when there are no transmission risks in Australia, when there are no transmission risks across the globe and unsure. In the second part, respondents reported their comfort level on a scale of 1 (very uncomfortable) to 5 (very comfortable) toward seven COVID-19 safety procedures mandated by the government for
events: mandatory temperature check, registering personal details, hand sanitiser, safety cues and signages, disinfecting procedures, distanced seating arrangement and mandatory face mask. In the third part, respondents indicated their comfort level on a scale of 1 (very uncomfortable) to 5 (very comfortable) on different venue seating capacities used by the government at varying stages of the COVID-19 lockdown: 1,000 or more, 500, 100 and 50 people. For the fourth part, the respondents reported their likelihood of attending a live or
online event on a scale of 1 (extremely unlikely) to 5 (extremely likely) for seven event types: theatre, comedy, music, dance, circus, art and exhibition events. In the fifth part, respondents indicated how far in advance they would purchase tickets for an event in the current climate with seven options: less than one week in advance, one week in advance, two to four weeks in advance, one month in advance, two to three months in advance, four to six months in advance and more than six months in advance. In the sixth and last part, respondents reported their demographic information. At the end of the survey, respondents were then encouraged to ask friends from different households to participate.

Results
All data analyses were performed using SPSS software, explicitly comparing attendees’ attitudes pre-vs post-COVID-19 lockdowns. The increasing number of comparisons in data analysis might lead to a family-wise error rate (FWER), resulting in the inflation of the critical \( p \)-value. Therefore, we have controlled for the FWER using a recent correction method developed by Araujo (2020). Araujo’s correction adjusts the critical \( p \)-value level based on the number of comparisons or null hypothesis tests conducted. This correction is more reliable and accurate than Bonferroni’s and Šidák’s corrections (Araujo, 2020). This study concerned 15 null hypotheses at the alpha level of 0.05 and intended to reduce the probability of unreliable conclusions due to the FWER, resulting in an adjusted \( p \)-value of 0.0034. We analysed the data to explore how Geraldton’s attendees’ attitudes changed across the two waves (i.e. during the lockdown and after the lockdown) by examining: (1) attendees’ attitudes toward attending Funtavia; (2) attendees’ attitudes toward different safety procedures; (3) attendees’ attitudes toward different venue seating capacity; (4) attendees’ attitudes toward ticket purchase in advance in each wave; and (5) attendees’ attitudes toward attending online or live events.

Attendees’ attitudes toward attending Funtavia
In general, results show a significant difference between Geraldton’s residents’ attitudes toward attending Funtavia during Wave 1 and Wave 2 (\( t = 1.78, p = 0.010 \)). Figure 1 illustrates that if COVID-19 safety procedures are being followed, approximately 90% of respondents will participate in Funtavia during Wave 2, while 69% will attend during Wave 1. Furthermore, 21.69% of respondents in Wave 1 and 10.63% in Wave 2 stated that they...
would attend events only when all government restrictions on events are lifted. Only 1.88% of respondents in Wave 1 and 2.12% in Wave 2 responded that they would attend events given that there are no transmission risks in Australia. Interestingly, no one stated they would only participate in events if there were no transmission risks worldwide. Most respondents said they would participate in events at the time of the survey and the percentage in Wave 2 (after lockdown) was noticeably higher than in Wave 1 (during the lockdown).

**Attendees’ attitudes toward safety procedures**

A mixed-method ANOVA was conducted to analyse attendees’ attitudes toward COVID-19 safety procedures. Specifically, safety procedures have been defined as a within-subject factor with seven levels (temperature check, personal details, hand sanitiser, COVID-19 safety cues and signage, disinfecting procedures, distanced apart seating and mandatory mask) and Wave as a between-subject factor with two levels (Wave 1 and Wave 2). The results in Figure 2 reveal that attendees’ attitudes toward safety procedures were slightly different between Wave 1 and Wave 2 ($F = 1.832, p = 0.17$). However, no significant Procedure x Wave interactive effect was found, suggesting that attendees’ attitudes toward COVID-19 safety procedures were broadly similar across the two data collection waves ($F = 1.308, p = 0.25$). On average, respondents reported descriptively (i.e. not significantly) higher comfort to adopting safety procedures in Wave 2 ($M = 4.11, SD = 0.90$) compared to Wave 1 ($M = 3.98, SD = 1.05$). Interestingly, participants stated significantly different attitudes regarding types of safety procedures ($F = 98.688, p < 0.001$, partial eta squared $= 0.292$). Referring to Figure 2, participants had significantly lower and lowest attitudes toward mandatory masks than other safety procedures (all $p$’s $< 0.0034$). This was followed by temperature checks, recording of personal details and hand sanitiser (all $p$’s $< 0.206$). Following that were safety cues and signages, disinfecting procedures and socially-distanced seating (all $p$’s $< 0.0034$), which did not differ significantly from other safety procedures (all $p$’s $< 0.485$). Overall, respondents were highly reluctant to follow mandatory mask-wearing in both Wave 1 and Wave 2.

**Attendees’ attitudes toward venue seating**

Another mixed-method ANOVA was conducted to analyse attendees’ attitudes toward venue seating capacity. Venue seating has been defined as a within-subject factor with four levels (1,000 or more people, 500 people, 100 people and 50 people) and Wave as a between-subject factor with two levels (Wave 1 and Wave 2). Figure 3 shows a significant difference between attendees’ attitudes regarding different venue seating within and between the two waves.

![Figure 2. Attitude toward COVID-19 safety procedures in events](image-url)
Respondents’ attitudes toward venue seating capacity sharply dropped when the event venue seating capacity increased from 50 people ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.830$) to 100 people ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.936$). Furthermore, respondents showed lower attitudes toward venue seating with 500 people ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.120$) and with 1,000 and more people ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.224$) (all $p$’s $< 0.001$). In fact, they showed the lowest attitudes toward a venue with 1,000 or more seating in both Wave 1 and Wave 2 ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.224$). Such negative sentiment toward regional events with 1,000 or more seating is significantly stronger than other venue seating capacity (all $p$’s $< 0.001$). The interactive effect between Venue seating x Wave was also significant, suggesting that attendees’ attitudes toward event venue capacity significantly differed in Wave 1 and Wave 2 ($F = 9.442$, $p < 0.001$, partial eta squared $= 0.107$). As such, respondents felt more comfortable with all types of venue seating after the COVID-19 lockdown (Wave 2) ($M = 3.812$, $SD = 1.082$) ($p$’s $< 0.001$).

**Attendees’ attitudes toward purchasing tickets in advance**

The results of the $t$-test displayed in Figure 4 show that respondents stated a significantly higher willingness to purchase tickets in advance in Wave 2 ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.44$) rather than in Wave 1 ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.17$) ($t = 3.784$, $p < 0.001$). Interestingly, regardless of the COVID-19 situation, respondents represented the highest attitudes toward purchasing tickets 2–4 weeks in advance. Surprisingly, people’s attitudes toward purchasing tickets one week in advance have sharply decreased after the lockdown (Wave 2) compared with during the lockdown (Wave 1). Overall, the results show an increase in purchasing tickets in both Waves for one month in advance; however, Wave 1 experienced a higher increase than Wave 2. After one month in advance, the trend sharply falls for both Waves, with Wave 2 yielding a higher value than Wave 1.

**Attendees’ attitudes toward event types**

Event types were classified into seven categories: theatre, comedy, music, dance, circus, art and exhibition. Event modes were classified into two categories (i.e. live and online), and Wave was classified into two levels (i.e. Wave 1 and Wave 2). Thus, we conducted a three-way mixed-method ANOVA test at the adjusted alpha level of 0.0034. Based on the findings, the three-way interaction was not significant ($F = 2.376$, $p = 0.030$, partial eta squared $= 0.061$). However, there was a significant two-way interaction between event mode (i.e. online vs in-person) and Wave ($F = 3.954$, $p = 0.001$, partial eta square $= 0.017$). Referring to Figures 5 and 6, respondents exhibited significantly higher attitudes toward attending live events than online events in both Wave 1 and Wave 2 ($F = 354.058$, $p < 0.001$, partial eta square $= 0.614$).
Figure 4.
Percentage of respondents for advance ticket purchase for COVID-19 and regional event.
Interestingly, respondents stated higher attitudes toward attending live music shows in both Wave 1 and Wave 2 ($p < 0.001$). Exhibition events represented the lowest and significantly lower attitudes than other event types (all $p$'s < 0.001).

Taken together, the data analyses indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed Geraldton’s residents’ attitudes toward attending Funtavia. In general, respondents felt more comfortable regarding COVID-19 safety precautions in Wave 2 compared to Wave 1. The potential reason might be that they became used to COVID-19 safety precautions or procedures during Wave 2 rather than Wave 1. The findings also demonstrate that people preferred live events, especially live music events, over online events. A plausible explanation is that since the respondents’ local festival (i.e. Funtavia) was cancelled around the time of the first data collection (Wave 1), their desire to attend an event is higher. Overall, it can be concluded that as time passes, people assimilate to the state of life COVID-19 has brought about and, with that, adopted safety practices and limitations into their lifestyles.

**Discussion**

The global outbreak of COVID-19 has changed people’s attitudes toward attending events (Bai et al., 2020). The COVID-19 lockdowns and preventive measures have also negatively
affected events (Madray, 2020). The current study aimed to extend the existing literature on events by examining how attendees’ attitudes toward entertainment events changed during and after the lockdown. Specifically, we examined attendees’ attitudes toward COVID-19 safety procedures, event seating capacity, purchasing tickets in advance and event mode (i.e. live vs online). Generally, the results show that if safety procedures are being followed, most respondents prefer to attend events in both Wave 1 of data collection (when WA emerged out of COVID-19 lockdown in August 2020) and Wave 2 (in December 2020, when there were three months of COVID-19-free period after lockdown). However, respondents exhibited descriptively (but not statistically significant) more interest in attending entertainment events after the COVID-19 lockdown (i.e. Wave 2) compared to before the lockdown (i.e. Wave 1). This might be because, as time passes, people are getting more used to COVID-19 and its precautions.

Additionally, people’s attitudes toward advanced ticket purchasing improved between Wave 1 and Wave 2. Specifically, respondents only felt comfortable buying tickets up to one month in advance during the lockdown. However, after the lockdown, they felt more comfortable buying tickets more than a month in advance. A plausible explanation is that during the COVID-19 lockdown, there was an increased fear of getting infected and uncertainty related to event cancellations. In turn, people tended to wait until the last minute to purchase event tickets. Thus, the reported results indicate that respondents are more inclined to attend entertainment events as the region emerges from the COVID-19 lockdown and as restrictions ease. This serves as insights for event planners to gradually resume normal operation and increase their event capacity as COVID-19 is gradually being controlled.

Despite attendees’ positive attitudes, they have shown significantly different comfort levels toward each safety procedure. Interestingly, although wearing a mask has been identified as one of the most effective ways to prevent COVID-19 spread, respondents have stated the lowest attitudes toward mandatory mask-wearing protocol in regional entertainment events. In fact, the norm of wearing a mask at an event has not been adopted or accepted yet. Regarding seating capacity, attendees felt more comfortable attending entertainment events with higher capacity after the lockdown compared with the lockdown period. The potential reason might be that they are getting more used to the COVID-19 restrictions, or they only follow the recommendations of the government.

As COVID-19 has led to a surge in online events due to the gradual lockdown and other restrictions, we also examined attendees’ attitudes toward event modes (i.e. live vs online). Overall, people preferred live events over online events. The potential reason might be that live events can better entertain attendees and provide more face-to-face opportunities for socialising. Therefore, despite COVID-19 accelerating the shift to online events, the pandemic did not seem to influence attendees’ preferences for online events. When looking at both data collection waves, respondents enjoy music more than other event types, followed by theatre, circus, dance, arts and exhibitions. This pattern of attitudes toward the event types reveals that preference toward event type remained unchanged from before and after the COVID-19 lockdowns. This suggests that the pandemic did not shift attendees’ attitudes toward different event types, even if the events require social distancing and other COVID-19 preventive measures. This could also be attributed to the characteristics of the sample, as data was collected from residents familiar with the annual music event in Geraldton, WA. In addition, this particular finding could result from the skewness in the respondents’ age and gender. For example, younger respondents might prefer more entertaining events, such as music shows. Therefore, respondents were generally supportive of and were more inclined to host the annual music events when WA began to emerge out of lockdown. The current findings are novel as most prior studies have suggested that online events have been adopted by event attendees as an alternative to live events during the pandemic (e.g. Ryan et al., 2020;
Werner et al., 2022; Wreford et al., 2019). However, our results indicate that despite the restrictions of COVID-19, people still prefer live events. Therefore, the findings of this research imply that attendees’ attitudes towards events might differ from what event organisers plan to do to reduce the impact of the pandemic on events.

**Theoretical and managerial contributions**

The event industry is an essential sector of Australia’s economy, gaining billions of dollars yearly. However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused severe impacts on small and large-scale events within Australia, including entertainment events, due to the limitations posed by the government. Previous findings regarding people’s attitudes toward attending events during health pandemics demonstrate that it is expected for event organisers to follow safety precautions at event venues (e.g. Ahmed and Memish, 2020; Dillette and Ponting, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Madray, 2020). The current findings support previous studies regarding the changes in people’s attitudes toward attending entertainment events during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, our findings also extend the existing literature by examining attendees’ attitudes toward different safety precautions and venue seating capacity to understand better what event attendees expect event organisers to do during and after COVID-19 lockdowns. For instance, our findings suggest that safety precautions such as hand sanitisers are perceived to be acceptable in post-pandemic events, but wearing masks may deter event attendance.

Furthermore, our finding supports the current literature regarding how inter-pandemic habits and behaviours might affect post-pandemic behaviours (Dedeoglu and Bogan, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2021). Our study reveals that people are willing to follow safety procedures even after the COVID-19 lockdown. However, the current findings contrast with the previous studies regarding online events being an alternative to live events during and after the pandemic. Based on our results, after the lockdown, people still prefer live events rather than online events. An explanation for this might be because of the pivotal human need to gather together and communicate. As a result, the event industry’s road to recovery might increase in momentum as COVID-19 restrictions gradually ease. Hence, our findings contribute to the event literature by showing that consumer adoption and acceptance of online events during the COVID-19 pandemic may not necessarily perpetuate after the pandemic. In fact, even after immediately emerging out of the COVID-19 lockdown, our findings show that live events are preferred over online events.

Additionally, the findings are similar to previous studies demonstrating how perceived risk impacts people’s attitudes toward attending events during health pandemics (e.g. Boo and Kim, 2022; Hütte et al., 2022). However, the findings also add to this line of work by demonstrating that people show more interest in advanced ticket purchasing after the lockdown as they might experience less uncertainty due to the cancellation. Specifically, the current findings add to the body of knowledge by generating unprecedented insights into how attendees may react toward COVID-19 safety procedures as WA emerges out of COVID-19.

Taken together, the findings suggest that event organisers and managers should follow safety procedures and precautions even after COVID-19 restrictions. This is because event attendees have adapted their lifestyles to COVID-19 and are still willing to follow safety procedures even after easing COVID-19 restrictions. However, event organisers also need to consider people’s preferences regarding safety precautions (e.g. using more hand sanitiser, fewer mandatory masks, etc.). To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to show that respondents are still not comfortable attending large-scale events (i.e. with 1,000 or more seating capacity), particularly entertainment events, as the world emerges from the pandemic. This finding significantly
contributes to the management and implementation of events by recommending event organizers to hold more small-scale events in the post-pandemic period.

Furthermore, although most studies conducted during COVID-19 suggest event organizers replace live events with online (or hybrid) events (Madray, 2020; Davies, 2021), the findings of this study acknowledge that people still prefer live events over online events. To the best of our knowledge, our findings are the first to challenge the current view that online events may easily replace live events due to the adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying restrictions. Hence, event organizers should arrange more live events as COVID-19 restrictions gradually lift worldwide.

Limitations and future research
This research has only examined the attitudes of residents from Geraldton, WA. This provides a potential avenue for future research to explore different regions as people may exhibit different attitudes toward COVID-19 restrictions based on their living area. Moreover, to extend the generalisability of our findings, future studies are recommended to test the conclusions of this research in other countries with the same COVID-19 situation to see whether the results are consistent. This study is also limited to two waves to coincide with the Western Australia community emerging out of complete lockdown and 3-months after lockdown. Future research could capture a more detailed dataset of attendees’ attitudes toward attending events focusing on more than two waves. This allows for examining how specific COVID-19 control mechanisms and events may influence attendees’ attitudes. For instance, a potential avenue is to accurately compare attendees’ attitudes before and after reaching government-mandated vaccination goals.

Future researchers may also examine other safety procedures currently being proposed by governments worldwide, such as proof of vaccination. As COVID-19 vaccination rate is increasing, another avenue for future research is to measure attendees’ attitudes before and after vaccination to see if vaccination as a safety precaution affects people’s attitudes toward attending events. Finally, the current research has mainly focused on Funtavia as an entertainment and musical event. Future studies should use the COVID-19 measures introduced in this study to examine attendees’ attitudes toward attending other social, cultural, historical and political events.

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**Corresponding author**
Billy Sung can be contacted at: billy.sung@curtin.edu.au

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