Navigating Emotions in Future Thinking: A Polylogue Approach

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This article critically examines how future thinking is positioned in the mindset of event professionals through the lens of provocative far future scenarios. In debating these far future scenarios within a polylogue (multiple voices) framework, we explore how dianoetic (discursive reasoning) approaches can facilitate long-term "civilizational" thinking and capture stakeholder reactions and emotions to future event environments. As such, our study contributes comparative qualitative insights into how current and future industry professionals respond to the contradictions and complexities of event futures. Our findings have implications for industry resilience and strategic thinking at a time when COVID-19 pandemic recovery has coincided with other global economic challenges and unpredictable threats such as climate change. Our findings highlight the importance of developing effective tools to overcome emotional barriers to thinking about the future. They also reveal the importance of engaging a broad stakeholder demographic and learning from other sectors to diversify conversations about the future.

Key words: Creativity; Optimism; Scenarios; Future thinking; Polylogues; Civilizational approach

Introduction

The future is uncertain and, as we have seen in recent years, the events industry remains precarious following an era of uncertainty brought on by a series of global crises (including climate change, COVID-19, and the Ukraine war). This has triggered adverse effects such as disruption in supply chains, inflationary costs, and employee attrition to name a few (Coles et al., 2022; Kwiatkowski et al., 2023; Seraphin, 2021). Planning for an uncertain future has therefore never been as important or, perhaps, as challenging. This article presents an innovative dianoetic technique for engaging event leaders in meaningful far future thinking.

In uncertain times, there has been a reassessment at the core of event conceptualization, production, and strategic positioning. For instance, Seraphin (2021) suggested events pivot towards a media centric strategy. Hutte et al. (2022) purported investment in

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the production of regional event networks to supplement international and national event strategies, and Piccioni (2023) proposed event strategies be placed on a continuum, from physical to metaversal. These propositions are reflected in the work by Lekgau and Tichaawa (2021), who suggested disruptive innovation can enable new market opportunities. Such event innovation is also supported by Dillette and Ponting (2021). They explored how innovation has developed across content design, safety protocols, and professional growth during periods of intense change. Indeed, in the UK, the latter has emerged amorphously, exemplified through coalitions of UK industry associations and lobby groups such as UKEVENTS, The Business of Events, and more recently, The Power of Events, who aim to "showcase" the events industry.

Given such seismic shifts in events, questions remain about how events maintain resilience, grow innovation, and realize long-term economic aspirations (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2021). Coles et al. (2022) returned us to the nature of transformation and the need to assess the adaptability of events to a more crisis orientated future. This claim is supported by Werner et al. (2022), who underlined the need for adaptive skill-based innovation in the face of changing future environments. Equally, Lekgau and Tichaawa (2021) proposed event management companies need to integrate a process of change mentality to broaden resilience in the sector and meet future challenges.

Yet, there is resistance to future thinking. One reason for this is that future thinking is seen as competing against immediate business concerns and can be viewed as threatening when future scenarios disrupt current practice (Hines & Gold, 2015). Moreover, thinking about the future requires organizational capacity stretched beyond everyday limits and the exploration of interdependent, complex, and often contradictory variables (Montuori, 2011). As such, and to our knowledge, there is little research into how future thinking is positioned within event management strategy, or how such thinking can stimulate innovation, and generate greater sector resilience.

In this study we recognize the role that emotion plays in future thinking and, in particular, how a pessimistic mindset brought on by uncertainty can stifle creativity and a willingness to change

(Li et al., 2022). We therefore seek out ways to develop optimism (or at least reduce pessimism and fear) in enabling creative thinking about the future. Adopting a pragmatic paradigm, we initially draw upon scenario planning methods (Spaniol & Rowland, 2018) to inform how the UK events sector feels about the future. We apply a similar approach to event management students to gain transgenerational perspectives and, third, we gauge future attendee perceptions through a qualitative survey. We use these scenarios as tools within polylogues. Polylogues are neutral, coordinated, physical spaces that facilitate multiple narratives that encourage sharing of contending perspectives (Sardar & Sweeney, 2016).

These techniques enable us to position future thinking by identifying fears but also the areas for optimism and innovation. The scenario method, and the data resulting from its use, illustrate the importance of escaping from the present (and the near future) if event professionals are to think creatively and establish coherent preparations for the future business of events.

As such our objectives are:

- to better understand how a future scenario method can enable long term thinking,
- to explore emotional reactions towards future thinking,
- to identify the differing effects of pessimism and optimism on future events thinking.

Our article starts with framing future thinking in organizations, positioning this within events research and exploring how emotions help navigate future thinking at an individual level. Following the methodology, our findings consider future thinking from three perspectives: current event professionals, future professionals (event management students), and potential attendees. Our conclusions outline our contributions to research and practice with recommendations for further research in this important area.

Literature Review

Positioning Future Thinking

Organizations often argue that future thinking is too difficult, speculative, risky, and not a priority.

The focus on strategizing a 3- or 5-year business plan tends to compete with the exploration of possible more distant futures. Organizations may also resist contemplating the future as it requires a rethinking of values and a reconceptualization of the organization's purpose and identity (Eisenbart et al., 2023). This can be perceived as a distraction from the day-to-day running of the business, particularly in micro and small businesses (Calver, 2020; Fischer & Dannenberg, 2021). The distant future is perceived as unwieldy and too complex. It is frequently positioned as unproductive, unmanageable, and lacking credible practical outputs. In addition, with the economic and social impacts of recent years, the effort to plan may be perceived as detracting from the present (Eisenbart et al., 2023). This is underlined by Pinto et al. (2021), who concluded that, despite COVID 19 forcing innovative and alternative working practices, this has not shifted a long-term reframing of future thinking and positions/practice remain entrenched in the past.

Futures research tends to involve a critical analysis of externalities, using PESTEL (political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal) models and drivers of change (Eisenbart et al., 2023; Spaniol & Rowland, 2018). Pinto et al. (2021) extended this approach, suggesting dystopic scenarios strengthen a three-dimensional approach to the positioning of future thinking. All of this can play a deep and influential role in the development of foresight within a process of change, and the subsequent planning for change. Drawing upon Sardar and Sweeney's (2016) "post normal times" (PNT), as possible futures become more complex, it is more appropriate for future thinking to embrace the "complexity, chaos, and contradictions" of current times. Moreover, explorations into futures ought to emphasize their dynamic and diverse nature, the chaotic potential, and the contradictory possibilities to develop foresight (Montuori, 2011; Peter & Jarratt, 2015). This is challenging and requires the ability to develop cohesive pathways, plausible outcomes, and multiple viewpoints.

To counter this, businesses generally confine scenario planning frameworks within their own bounded rationality (Fischer & Dannenberg, 2021). Such methods adopt horizon scanning, analyzing current trends and an exploration of drivers of change. However, Slaughter's (1990) seminal work argues that focusing on external drivers of change overlooks the role of the individual and their beliefs and attitudes in the process. These individual factors might limit creativity and the confidence to reach beyond the boundaries of one's own lived experiences. Allied to this, we argue that this organizational "monologue" provides a monoperspective that leads to narrow future thinking. In effect, leading to no fundamental change in behaviors or practice. As Fischer and Dannenberg (2021) stated, this "raises concerns about the extent to which popular opinion is the marker of plausibility" (p. 4) and thus becomes the dominant and hegemonic view to the exclusion of others. Such concerns are also noted in Shrikanth et al. (2018), where collective futures derive from semantic knowledge (media, imagery and press) and are thus prone to bias.

Despite a lack of consensus in the positioning of future thinking, three methodologies prevail: "pragmatic," whereby organizations review current business; "progressive," where businesses explore beyond the current and near futures; and "civilizational," where there is an exploration of the futures landscape of society within the wider environment (Hines, 2021; Slaughter, 1989, 2009; Spaniol & Rowland, 2018). Slaughter's (1989, 2009) view is that most organizations fall into the "pragmatic" category rather than the civilizational. One could argue that today's issues—climate change, global pandemics, war, and economic crises—require businesses to reflect on the wider and more impactful global issues and take a more "civilizational" perspective (Bowden, 2021). Therefore, to transcend the "pragmatic" stage, we suggest organizations need to explore how to incorporate "space" away from the day-to-day to undertake a "civilizational" approach to future thinking.

Placing Future Thinking in Events Research

Assessing the future of events is nothing new. For example, Page et al. (2010) discussed scenario planning as a strategic methodology that evaluates the interdependence between transport and events within a tourism destination management framework. However, despite important policy commentary, the study is limited to methodological practice and the positioning of scenario planning as a forecast for the future. Backer (2014) explored future

thinking in event management but limited the discussion to operational aspects such as marketing, financial, volunteers, and sponsorships. Similarly, Jaimangal-Jones et al.'s (2018) special issue on event futures recognized past and present practices in shaping possible event futures but these are based on the here and now—for example, advances in technology to enhance audience experiences and the role of crowdsourcing as a funding mechanism. There remains, therefore, a need to understand the enablers of effective future thinking within the industry rather than ever changing "predictions" of what the future will be.

Unsurprisingly, recent studies into future thinking in events have focused on resilience in a post-COVID-19 era. Carswell et al. (2023) and Glyptou (2023) suggested resilience in events comes from adaptive planning based on social-ecological systems (SES). Adopting "systems modularity," Glyptou (2023) suggested that events expand into multiple audiences to compensate for the loss of other sectors. Likewise, Lekgau and Tichaawa (2021) argued that future adaptability and resilience of events will be dependent on how new markets are maintained using hybrid alongside a return to face-to-face audiences and, is likely to be more niche orientated. Similarly, Piccioni (2023) discussed how metaverse technologies offer opportunities for new market development at a time of global uncertainty. Piccioni (2023) referred to recrafting recruiting procedures and business requirements, such as digital project management, to enhance online communications during the pre, live, and postevent phases. Indeed, many event agencies offer full-service video production in response to online production elements of events. Allied to Werner et al. (2022), the blurring of industries now and in the future will enhance business continuity, and as noted by Glyptou (2023) reach new markets. From a consumer perspective, Hutte et al. (2022) suggested a structural change in audiences via an increasing acceptance of event-based apps designed to enhance the live experience and connect audiences beyond traditional liminalities of the live experience, while also bolstering event analytics for the event manager. It could be argued therefore that the global pandemic intensified and mainstreamed existing trends rather than stimulating strategic future thinking within the sector itself.

Although these studies offer insights into the governance of future events—for instance a polycentric system of governance—they do not position future thinking at the forefront of event management. Adding to this, Kwiatkowski et al. (2023) suggested the adaptive capacity of the event organization needs to be supported by an investment in knowledge exchange between community stakeholders. Yet the absorptive capacity of the event manager (see McTiernan et al., 2023) and positionality of future thinking at an individual level, as a conduit to such adaptability, is not considered.

Indeed, recommendations for future research are limited to audience interactions, without recognizing the positionality and importance of the event sector's orientation towards future thinking (Deng & Pan, 2023). In this study we look at the positioning of future thinking within event management strategy and how it may stimulate innovation and generate emotional resilience. We consider the emotional response to multiple perspectives and potentially disturbing futures, recognizing the need to overcome emotional barriers to enable an environment in which resilience can develop and creativity can flourish (Montuori, 2011).

Emotions in Future Thinking

The above discussion starts to raise some challenging questions around how to *do* "future thinking." It implies that there is skill and expertise in facilitating the process and extrapolating the complexities. This might involve spending more time exploring personal biases and dominant cultures in organizations as part of the future thinking process.

Personal biases and cultural domains are also debated in relation to the role of consumers in future thinking (Wolf et al., 2022). Similar to the capabilities of event professionals' future thinking, we could argue that individual consumers are ill equipped to envision future event features but may be able to imagine their future needs in relation to events. Enabling the consumer to articulate their predicted needs is a potentially rich additional strand and one that is often overlooked in the drivers of change methodology (Wolf et al., 2022). For example, they may state the desire to be able to get together safely and experience excitement and pleasure, without being able to detail how this might

happen within the design of an event. Evidently, there may be much to learn from such insights that could stimulate innovation and creativity within the organization (Raymond, 2003).

Equally, on an individual employee level, any approach needs to help develop emotional resilience and release creativity. Resilience, it is argued, future proofs well-being (Mguni et al., 2012) as, without resilience, healthy individuals, or indeed organizations, may not be equipped to deal with future shocks. Pahwa and Khan (2022) see creativity as an antecedent to resilience but we would argue that, in future thinking, resilience is also an enabler of both cognitive and social creativity (Li et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2020; Metzl & Morrell, 2008). More broadly, resilient individuals are optimistic people who enjoy childlike curiosity and playful humor, useful traits for creatively thinking about the future (Siebert, 2006, cited in Pahwa & Khan, 2022).

Clearly any tool designed to encourage creative thinking about the future needs to develop emotional resilience to help overcome multiple, complex and uncomfortable futures (Montuori, 2011). It seems, this might be achieved through accentuating humor, positive mood, and optimism, as suggested by Li et al.'s (2022) study and characterized by "contending perspectives" found within polylogues (Sardar & Sweeney, 2016).

Despite the challenges of limited capacities, resources, and frameworks, future thinking is an important process for event organizations to explore. In engaging in this process, they can identify potential risks, enhance emotional resilience, and develop innovative solutions.

Methodology

Our research is qualitative but involves relatively large samples across three data collection methods, allowing triangulation to take place. The research strategy involved open survey questions, group discussions, and observer reflections. These are designed to generate data from three perspectives: current event professionals, future professionals (event management undergraduate students), and potential attendees.

To stimulate a sense of escapism and creative freedom in group discussion and reflection with both the current and future event professionals, we created four provocative future scenarios. These scenarios were set in 2050 to align the study with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework timeframe for thinking about future global issues. Each brief scenario was deliberately designed to be open to both negative and/or positive interpretation and was developed by drawing upon research from a variety of areas looking at potential future worlds. The scenarios were presented as a short title, an image, a summary statement, and a short descriptor (see Fig. 1 for an example). Further details of the scenarios and the development technique followed can be found in Ormerod et al. (2024).

The other three scenarios are summarized here as:

Awesome energy: Clean energy is abundant across the world. Cooperation and sharing of low-carbon technologies has helped to reduce inequality with free, clean energy now available to all.

Ruling robots
Artificial intelligence has transformed the human workforce
Advances in technology have disrupted workplace norms. Artificial intelligence (AI) dominates with 40% of current roles having been replaced by robots who are time and cost efficient and can complete tasks meticulously. AI is outperforming humans in most occupations, having moved beyond factories and manual work. Machines are so efficient they are now used in what were traditional white collar fields including accounting, legal services, and healthcare where they are capable of diagnosing diseases more accurately than humans can. Many citizens are reflecting on what new tech brings with AI moving beyond white-collar roles in society. Jobs that require creativity, empathy and interaction are becoming more attractive to the workforce, although there is still fear that ultimately these could become automated too.

Figure 1. Example scenario: Ruling Robots.

Immense movement: Complete freedom of movement is possible. Advanced neurotechnology enables interaction with other people and places by thought alone.

Retirement reworked: The retirement model is obsolete with citizens making lifelong societal contributions in different forms. Intergenerational respect and support have deepened.

Organizational Perspective

Data were gathered from the attendees of the UK and Ireland International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) annual conference. The conference was held in Glasgow in February 2023. ICCA members come from a diverse range of roles and organizations, but all are professionals within the events sector, and annual conference attendees were therefore an appropriate sample for this research.

Prior to this, we held a pilot focus group with four event professionals with similar characteristics. The structure, format, and prompts used in the larger study were revised as a result. This included not using all four scenarios with each group and adding in individual reflections at the end.

In the main study participants discussed one of the scenarios (randomly allocated to each group) in groups of three or four. They were asked to discuss first "How does this scenario make you feel?" and then "What will the events industry look like in this world?" They wrote their individual thoughts on sticky notes prior to discussing these with the group.

After approximately 40 min of group discussion each individual participant was given 10 min to reflect upon the discussion and to summarize this reflection in written answers to the following questions:

- What surprised you when thinking about the future?
- What surprised you on hearing other responses about the future?
- What will you remember from this discussion?

One hundred and twenty attendees took part in the 50-min workshop and 110 of these completed the three reflective questions. The responses to these three questions form the main data generated for this element of the research.

Future Event Professionals' Perspective

Involving future event management professionals was a vital part of the study and reflects Slaughter (2020) and Riedy's (2021) stance that future thinking needs to embody imagination, cocreation, and curiosity. From the pilot focus group, it was apparent that there were likely to be demographic differences in reactions to the scenarios and, although the 120 participants in the ICCA group discussion ranged from mid-20s to late 70s, we were missing the voices of young people who, we could argue, have more of a vested and creative interest in the future.

Seventy-five event management students were invited to work in small groups (three–five) to consider one of the four scenarios. They were given 15 min per question, and considered the same two questions presented to industry: "How does this scenario make you feel?" followed by "What will the events industry look like in this world?". A further question asked them to consider "What recommendations would you suggest to ensure the events sector thrives in this scenario?". After each question the students were asked to record their discussions on large flipchart paper. Once the three questions had been asked and responded to, students swapped tables to another scenario, to read what had been written by the first group and annotate the flipchart paper further with their individual perspectives. These papers were gathered up and reviewed. Three weeks later the annotated flipcharts were randomly distributed between the same groups. Each group were then asked to reflect on the responses and annotate further with any additions or record any contradictory reflections. These final data sets were reviewed as part of this article.

Potential Attendees' Perspective

Rather than create a small number of discussion groups of consumers we opted for a wide scale survey to glean the future thoughts of potential attendees. This is in line with calls for future oriented consumer research (Wolf et al., 2022) and involved a wide-ranging largely qualitative survey of potential event attendees exploring their hopes and fears for events in 2050. The survey was sent to potential event attendees using a paid-for survey response

platform (SmartSurvey). While there are (de)merits in the use of such platforms, paid-for responses are frequently used within the research community to access high-quality, specific samples that are timely and cost-effective (Palan & Schitter, 2018).

After 3 weeks, data collection was stopped in SmartSurvey as we reached our prepaid threshold of 2,000 completed surveys. Survey data were cleaned to remove blank responses (43). Open-ended responses in the survey data were manually reviewed and cleaned to remove nonsense text, correct obvious typos, and spoiled responses; 1,543 valid responses remained for analysis.

This survey collected individual demographic information and included open ended questions that explored current levels of event experience and attendance. Moreover, we explored their individual hopes and fears for events in 2050 with an overarching statement: "Imagine you're going to a music, arts, sports or cultural event in 2050. . ." and then used follow up questions. For example: "Will you travel to get there, if so how?" "What type of accommodation will you stay in?" "How will you spend your time?" "Who will you go with?" We delved deeper into participants' imagination by encouraging them to let their creativity roam freely and "describe what their ideal event would look like in the year 2050."

Analysis

As the consumer survey posed more general questions about events in the future this was analyzed separately to the two scenario-based data sources. Due to the large number of qualitative responses NVivo (12 Pro) software was used to pull out areas of commonality. These are presented as word clouds with illustrative quotes.

The present and future event professionals' responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. A constant comparison approach was taken (Hancock et al., 2009), whereby the research team reflected on initial participant reactions to scenarios and answers to the questions across the stages. Thus, amending our approaches and enhancing consistency across the types of participants.

Codes were assigned to their responses and then themes identified. Responses recorded on the sticky notes and flipchart paper were analyzed

separately in relation to each scenario. The current event professionals' individual answers to the three questions were not linked to a specific scenario so were analyzed collectively. Findings are structured under the headings (1) Initial reactions, (2) Widening views, and (3) The role of creativity in future thinking. This final category reflects a collective voice as group discussions progressed.

Cumulatively, this analysis helps us to better understand how we might support future thinking and longer-term planning in the industry by addressing fears and leveraging optimism (Li et al., 2022). It also allows us to evaluate the use of scenarios as creative stimuli for strategic future thinking.

Findings and Discussion

Future Consumer Survey

The views of current and future consumers are vital for meaningful future planning; however, the consumer survey resulted in the least enlightening data. This underscores the limitations of merely asking consumers in isolation what they want in the future, as it failed to elicit the intended imaginative responses (Raymond, 2003). Indeed, many did not move beyond what is already available or in development reflecting a monoperspective based on popular opinion and the media (Fischer & Dannenberg, 2021). However, their responses did indicate the enduring values that are likely to lead to future demand on a broader scale.

When considering "What is the biggest change you'd like to see by 2050?" a pattern emerges of life changing for the better for people ("standard of living," "climate," "economy," "healthcare") with less poverty and pollution, a more equal society, reduced global warming, and a better environment overall. Figure 2 visualizes the analysis of responses as a Word Cloud, based on the frequency that the top one hundred terms were used.

For example, R23 referred to "I'd like to see better income equality, more support in society, better quality of life" while R46 picked up on themes of poverty and the environment "It would be great if we could solve the problems of climate change and the disparity in wealth." Some respondents used the opportunity to highlight hope for the future and putting people first. For instance, R1459 noted,

Figure 2. Life changing for the better.

"Society not afraid to try new norms to support individuals and communities as the priority, not the economy (e.g. universal basic income (UBI), renewable energy sources, different approach to employment)."

Survey respondents were given the freedom to articulate what their perfect event would look like in 2050. A content analysis of word frequency, focusing on the top 100 words used, highlighted that the respondents were focusing on "live" events, where they could physically go and be present/attend was important. Attending/spending time with family was a common theme to emerge, mentioned more than twice as much as attending with friends. Although respondents were given the freedom to let their "imagination run free," it is notable that most chose not to use this freedom and provided a very limited response. Figure 3 presents a Word Cloud of the most frequently mentioned terms.

However, a number of respondents provided insights that picked up on the themes of protecting the environment and bringing people together at the live event. For example, R26 noted, "A community based event that doesn't require travel, in a safe and sustainable community," while R246 focused on the "live" aspect, noting, "I enjoy the live authentic experience of a music concert being physically present with other people wishing to enjoy the same experience," a view echoed by R787 who was keen to highlight audience involvement in the event itself, "A social event and environment where performers and people at the event all have a chance to participate or contribute and a more interactive experience rather than a passive observer."

The impact of events on the environment remained a theme for some. For example, R51 noted, "An event that is carbon neutral, full of plastic free items, no harm is done to the environment because of the event" while R652 noted, "I would create an event that is entirely sustainable and eco-friendly and make sure everything . . . used is eco-friendly."

Figure 3. Events in 2050.

Environmental concern remains in the minds of future event attendees. Once more, this concern represents a transference of present-day views projected into plausible event futures (Fischer & Dannenberg, 2021). How this stimulates innovation and creativity in the resilience of event futures is up for debate. Clearly a reappraisal of environmental risk at events remains at the forefront of attendees (Zebardast & Radaei, 2022).

While technology was not particularly prominent, which may be surprising given the experience of accessing events online over recent years due to COVID-19 (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2021; Piccioni, 2023), some respondents highlighted that it would still have a purpose. For example, R17 highlighted "A theatrical experience in a large venue that is also streamed and the recording is available to purchase afterwards so we can relive it again and again." Further, R56 noted a push-back from technology

and underlined the value of attending live, noting "Real people having real experiences none of this digital stuff that's just slowly killing all of our communication channels and stopping people from being in person." This view was also highlighted by R99, noting the hopes (and fears) of technology and the impact of this on events, "I hope we still have live music and theatre and that it isn't replaced by technology, but technology could definitely enhance the experience of live events, so I hope there's a symbiosis between live and tech experiences. I think meeting up in person will still be really important." Further, R184 noted the relationship between technology and family experience, "Something inclusive for all the family, something that can be enjoyed by all ages so that families can connect as there will undoubtedly be more device usage so it would be good to take this away and really connect as a family away from screens."

Some respondents chose to highlight how technology could enhance the event experience and open opportunities to different experiences, with R127 noting, "A mixture of artists, both dead and alive. Live performances from those alive and realistic digital versions of those dead."

In considering the future, a monoperspective was apparent (Fischer & Dannenberg, 2021). For example, there was agreement that future events represented a "collective" value, reinforced by "live" experiences. This future thinking may have been exacerbated by global pandemic experiences and mainstream consumer interactions with live and meta-verse experiences (Piccioni, 2023). Notwithstanding, this dominating viewpoint reflects optimism towards thinking about the future. Indeed, Li et al. (2022) suggested such positive emotional attachment to a future state of mind enhances a pathway to future practice (Wolf et al., 2022). In this case, future event practices should craft a sense of community (albeit transient) through enhanced immersive experiences.

Reflecting on the survey method it seems apparent that greater insights from consumers could have been gained by developing collective viewpoints via the scenarios. This would provide participants with the opportunity to interrogate narratives (dystopian or utopian) to support potential systemic changes that could be further developed and implemented within the sector (Pinto et al., 2021; Slaughter, 2019; Yeoman et al., 2021).

Scenario-Generated Responses: Present and Future Event Professionals

Initial Reactions. Many events professionals were surprised by how close 2050 felt and some acknowledged that they had not given a lot of thought to the future. For example, one reflected that, "2050 is not so far away and it has made me really think about what might happen." Similarly, another noted that "27 years is in actual fact not far away. We as an industry need to be doing more now." Events professionals noted they "actually don't really think about the future" and that the workshop exercises had enabled them to think further ahead as often all their time is spent in the present.

A perceived lack of time to consider the future is clearly an enduring barrier (Calver, 2020; Fischer & Dannenberg, 2021; Hines & Gold, 2015). This supports the view that "pragmatic" and "progressive" future thinking within organizations can often prevail. In order to transcend this approach, as advocated by Slaughter (1990, 2012, 2020) and reinforced by Pinto et al. (2021), broader "civilizational," "integral futures," and "dystopic" perspectives need to be incorporated into "futures discourse" at the forefront of future thinking. This also requires a high degree of emotional intelligence, imagination, and creativity to move beyond the conventional pragmatism in future thinking if we are to respond to the "complex, chaotic, and contradictory" world we find ourselves in (Sardar & Sweeney, 2016).

Drawing from Sardar and Sweeney (2016) the intention was that all four scenarios were designed to be provocative yet as neutral as possible, allowing a free flow of discussion between positive and negative emotional responses. Indeed, both events professionals and future events professionals responded to the future scenarios with a range of emotions. In particular, "Awesome energy" and "Retirement reworked" evoked mainly positive feelings, while "Immense movement" and "Ruling robots" conjured negative reactions. As Li et al. (2022) argued, positivity and optimism are precursors to creativity and resilience; therefore, scenarios that evoke such a response are likely to be more effective in stimulating imaginative discussions of the future for events. Examples of the emotional responses to the scenarios can be seen in Table 1.

When asked what surprised them when thinking about the future, there were again a variety of responses. Event professionals' positive reactions included excitement towards the scenarios and what they might mean. For example, one attendee described being surprised by "how exciting it is. Challenges and change are an intrinsic part of the events industry." Optimism was also present among some attendees. "It seems optimistic, but also fills me with hope and determination to make it happen, so many different scenarios and ways of looking at it (positive and negative)" and "it gave me optimism and determination to preserve the human/personal element of our industry, by finding the good in each scenario."

Certainly, participants valued human connections, mirroring findings of the consumer survey

Table 1
Common Responses to the Four Scenarios

Scenario	Common Responses to How Each Scenario Made Respondents Feel
Awesome Energy	• Excited • Happy • Hopeful • Optimistic • Relieved
Immense Movement	• Apprehensive • Concerned • Overwhelmed • Nervous • Scared
Retirement Reworked	• Inclusive • Positive • Sense of belonging • Sense of community
Ruling Robots	• Concerned • Sad • Scared • Uncomfortable • Worried

whereby "collective value" at future events dominated. Indeed, a lack of "collective value" contributes to negative emotional reactions. For example, one attendee noted how anxious they felt about "a world where human contact could be so limited" and another how "grim" the removal of more human-to-human elements made them feel.

In contrast, feelings of anxiety were common as were fears of the unknown and uncertainty about the future, with it seeming scary "when you don't have the answers." As one participant summed up, "we all find the unknowns for our industry daunting." Contemporaneously, some attendees felt a mix of emotions and could see both opportunities and threats as possibilities with their emotions fluctuating between "exciting to absolutely terrifying."

As a result of the varied emotional reactions to the scenarios it is perhaps not surprising that attendees were often amazed by others' contrasting opinions. Observations by the researchers during the workshop also noted the atmosphere in the room changed from more subdued surprise and fear to more lively optimism as the session developed. This sharing of different viewpoints was seen as valuable, for example, one event professional noted that it was "great to see so many perspectives—I think there's also a level of optimism for some, that

I don't necessarily share." Another reflected how it was interesting that some people seemed to be very positive about the opportunities ahead while others only mainly focused on concerns.

Widening Views. There was a mixture of agreement and disagreement during the discussions. While some participants reported that their group had very similar thoughts and feelings about the scenario they had been presented with, others noted that there was a surprising variance in responses with views very different from their own. One possible reason for this, highlighted by participants, was age, with a divide in opinion between generations and the feeling that "age played a part in people's attitude towards the future."

The group dynamic presented a unique situation where members could influence others' thinking. Indeed, there were specific examples of discussions altering people's initial reactions and making them feel more positive about the scenarios. For example, one event professional reflected, "the scenarios provoke a negative/fearful response . . . but the more they are discussed the more accepting you can be. . . ." Others noted that the session had shown them "the importance of challenging my own views and looking for the positives," as well as being surprised at how others' views could change their own mindsets so quickly.

For example, with the Immense Movement scenario, though there were few positive feelings initially, the events professionals discussing this scenario recognized there could also be benefits to this changed world such as positive effects on climate change and greater accessibility to events. Similarly, the future events professionals were also able to identify potential benefits during their discussions. These were linked to this scenario such as sustainability, more freedom, flexibility, and escapism.

Likewise, with Ruling Robots, while there were still reservations within the discussions, benefits were also identified by the events professionals. These included the ability to innovate and enhance event experiences, increased accessibility, and efficiency as well as the automation of menial tasks. Additional possible positive repercussions recognized by future event professionals were increased

productivity, reduction in human error, and better value in terms of cost.

In observing the groups, we saw that interactions between small group discussions within a larger context can help people move beyond their own individual viewpoints and become more open-minded. Indeed, the methods employed allowed the different reactions to be shared and participants to become aware of the multiple perspectives in the room of 120 participants. This evidences the value in a polylogue approach where external views are brought in to play rather than a narrower discussion within the organization (Sardar & Sweeney, 2016).

This reflects a position whereby a deeper, emotional-based future-orientated conversation is enhanced when applying a more three-dimensional methodology (Montuori, 2011; Riedy, 2021; Slaughter, 2021). Moreover, such considerations reflect Mguni et al. (2012) and Metzl and Morrell (2008), whereby polylogues invoke wider emotional resilience in future thinking and overcome or challenge initial pessimism and fear. As one attendee summed up: "listening to others is so important. When faced with a problem or worrying scenario it is good to hear other sides and it made me more optimistic."

Role of Creativity in Future Thinking. As demonstrated above, small group discussion in a wider group context stimulated debate, bringing additional viewpoints to the table. As well as collaboration with other events professionals, adaptability, flexibility, and a sense of creativity were also recognized as important. Allied to this, the need to "think outside the box" also emerged.

Drawing on Pahwa and Khan (2022) we observed that the group setting allowed time to discuss the scenarios, which enabled creativity of thought. Indeed, events professionals were surprised by some of the creative responses from their peers and underlined the value of "the innovation" and "diversity of thought" shared in the room.

Events professionals also described how creativity could provide a more positive take on things for them with there being "some really good, creative responses that made me feel more optimistic," and people thinking creatively to "put a positive spin on a potentially difficult situation." These alternative ways of thinking were evident in both the event professionals' and future event professionals' discussions. Examples across each scenario can be seen in Table 2.

Applying findings from Hines and Gold (2015) and Hines (2020) to the event professionals' responses, it is evident that collaboration and a shared sense of purpose accentuates future thinking. For example, when asked what they would remember from the session creativity was often

Table 2

Alternative Viewpoints to Negative Reactions to the Scenarios

Scenario/Group	Negative Reaction/Concern	More Positive Alternative
Awesome Energy		
Event professionals	Impact on employment, loss of job roles	More focused, adapted workforce
Future event professionals	Cost involved to set up/invest in infrastructure needed	Less pollution and decrease in severe weather events
Immense Movement		
Event professionals	Breakdown in human interaction and relationships	Easier team integration and connectivity
Future event professionals	Isolation, reduced social interaction	Greater accessibility for people who may not be able to attend physical events
Retirement Reworked		
Event professionals	How events and conferences fit into a four-day week when currently do not fit into five	Four-day week is a positive - better work/life balance, could improve recruitment
Future event professionals	Limitations on jobs for the younger generation	Regenerating skills from older generation
Ruling Robots		
Event professionals	Lack of human interaction, difficult to create a customer relationship with a robot	Programming the robots to deliver operationally could free up team for other tasks such as enhancing customer experience
Future event professionals	Taking away/replacing jobs and opportunities	Taking away risks from humans

referred to. For example, one participant stated the session had highlighted "creative ways to interpret new situations" and another noted it had enabled them "to think creatively and have the time and space to do so." This also underscores the merits of group discussion as opposed to methods which rely solely on individual responses to provocative future scenarios.

We contend that the techniques employed in this study facilitate purposeful polylogues and multiple perspectives that encompass a variety of views compared to individual monologues. This approach also appears to help surmount potential obstacles to future thinking that are bounded by an individual reasoning (Bowden, 2021; Li et al., 2022; Shrikanth et al., 2018).

Conclusions

In addressing the objectives, we conclude that the scenario method, used in a polylogue setting, helps to develop optimism and creativity. We also found that emotional reactions to uncertain futures can limit creativity and that optimism can be developed through group discussion of potentially threatening scenarios.

Our article has three significant contributions. First, we have established the lack of meaningful long-term future thinking within the events industry as the industry reacts to seismic changes in the present. Similarly, events academia has failed to explore new approaches that might overcome some of the barriers to future thinking (Carswell et al., 2023; Glyptou, 2023; Werner et al., 2022). To reduce this gap, our article draws on the perspectives of present and future event professionals using polylogues stimulated by provocative scenarios that free thinking from the issues of the present. We contend that, rather than predictions that are bounded by individual bias, opening minds to a range of potential scenarios fosters a willingness to engage. Consequently, this enables a more creative discussion in accepting a readiness for uncertain futures (Li et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2020; Metzl & Morrell, 2008). Thus, being immersed in "challenging" far future scenarios liberates participants from present worries, freeing up the imagination and a willingness to explore creative responses (Pinto et al., 2021; Slaughter, 2020).

Second, our findings support Montuori's (2011) notion that emotional responses, facilitated in this study by polylogues, help overcome multiple, complex, and uncomfortable futures. *Initial Reactions* and *Widening Views* characterized the contending perspectives associated with future thinking (Peter & Jarratt, 2015; Sardar & Sweeney, 2016). What is evident is that the facilitated polylogues encouraged humor, positive mood, and optimism within our participants. The group interactions lead to a certain level of emotional congruity (Slaughter, 2020; Yeoman et al., 2021). Our participants further developed the emotional intelligence needed to shift perspectives and gain an appreciation of intricate future considerations, moving beyond the conventional.

Third, group creativity played a vital role in shifting participants' initial pessimism towards acceptance and optimism in event future thinking. Thus, creativity enables optimism and, optimism and resilience enable creativity (Liang et al., 2020; Mguni et al., 2012). Through the group, pessimism turns to optimism and an environment of collective resilience is created. This emotional movement then forms the foundation on which creativity in
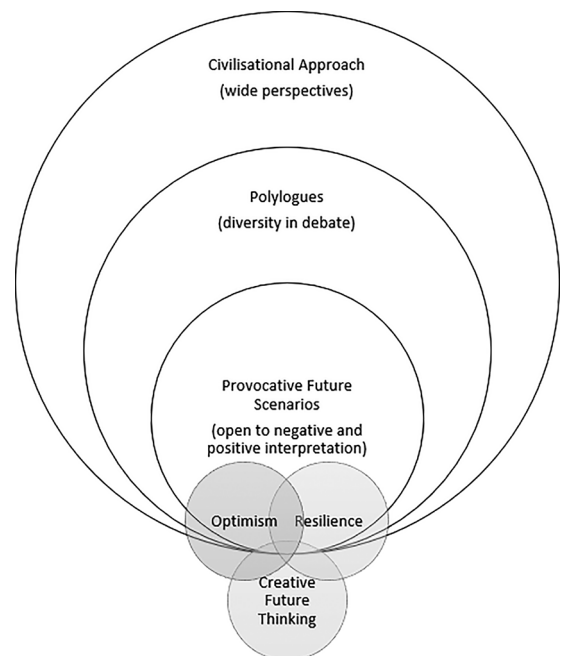

Figure 4. A civilizational approach to creative future thinking.

future thinking can flourish (Mguni et al., 2012; Pahwa & Khan, 2022).

Our findings suggest event professionals would benefit from a collective civilizational approach to future thinking using provocative scenarios to stimulate creativity. A civilizational approach should encompass wider contexts and representation facilitated by those that can manage an emotional transition that moves individuals from pessimism and fear to resilience and optimism about the future. Figure 4 summarizes this approach.

In summary our research shows that both optimism and openness enable greater creativity when thinking about the more distant future and that this is enabled through polylogues that take a wider civilizational approach.

Limitations and Further Research

Although our main approach was successful in overcoming emotional barriers and enabling more creative thinking about the future, we recognize that the event attendee component told us relatively little. While we gained a baseline understanding of future expectations of events, and this provided a context for the study, the findings were bounded by current thinking and past experience. The consumer view is important, and we therefore recommend extending the scenario polylogue approach to groups of potential event attendees.

Arguably our findings are limited by a cross-sectional approach to our data collection. For example, we claim that far futures are complex and often contradictory and, as such, a cross-sectional viewpoint remains a concern when considering the changing emotional cognitions related to future thinking. Moreover, the capacity to absorb future thinking within a process of change is constrained by fear, pessimism, current resources, and the general business of the present. Therefore, we look towards employing a longitudinal case study method in any further research, whereby we will track the process of change within event strategies, event attendees, and event professionals over a longer period of time. Adopting a longitudinal methodology may offer an opportunity for event organizations to cofund a residential retreat, supported by research sandpits, where event professionals can experience a deeper appreciation of possible futures, the emotional space

to apply thinking to innovate practices, and the confidence to implement (and evaluate the impacts of) such practices.

Finally, our current research reflects a monoperspective, limited to current and future event professionals. We argue that this needs to be expanded further to include stakeholders within the supply chain, a wider consumer base and those with a vested interest, such as regional representatives. Although we attempted to replicate small scale polylogue by creating discussion groups that were not all from one organization, when using this technique in an organizational setting it is imperative to involve a range of roles internally and to bring in external voices. A wider acknowledgment of possible future scenarios across the industry may help generate an acceptance of future thinking and its position within a process of change.

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