“I am not a party planner!”: setting a baseline for event planners’ professional identity construction before and during COVID-19

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Abstract

Purpose – The event management (EM) industry has attempted to elevate the professional status of event professionals. Contributing to these efforts, this study explores the professional identity (PID) construction process of event professionals. To facilitate the relevance of the PID construction process before the COVID-19 pandemic, it includes the impact of COVID-19 on event professionals’ PID constructions.

Design/methodology/approach – Using narrative inquiry as the methodological approach, the study includes 18 semistructured interviews with event professionals before COVID-19 and additional 14 interviews during COVID-19. A narrative framework was developed to analyze the data.

Findings – The results include five significant themes highlighting the imperative role of agency in PID construction. Before the pandemic, event professionals pointed to self-driven pride and social-driven stigmatization as a part of PID narratives. Before and during the pandemic, profession-driven professional status recognition was significant. During the pandemic, situational reality-driven work skills and community-driven commitment became central to PID narratives.

Practical implications – The findings suggest the need for the EM industry to harness a collective PID. Specifically, given the community-building role professional associations played during the pandemic, associations can take part in leveraging a PID that connects core values.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the EM literature by using PID, a novel construct in EM research, to develop a baseline for event professional PIDs in changing environments; this functions as a platform for the EM profession to create a shared collective identity.

Keywords Event professionals, Professional identity, Narrative inquiry, COVID-19, Event management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

With COVID-19 continuing to rage, the spring of 2020 saw events of all sizes postponed or cancelled. According to the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA), by April 2020, 87% of 1,775 event professionals cancelled events due to the pandemic (Russell, 2020). With COVID-19 threatening the recovery of businesses that base their very existence on the gathering of people, the events industry quickly adapted and shared best health and safety practices for virtual events (Fox, 2020). In August 2020, states and local authorities began loosening bans on small gatherings, allowing event management (EM) businesses to reinstate service offerings in the USA. Industry-wide professional organizations responded by resurrecting the economic and societal value of events (Meetings Mean Business, 2020) and attempting to raise the professional status of event professionals in the changing environment (Meetings Professional International, 2020).

Despite the growing number of higher education institutions awarding EM degrees (Ryan, 2016), as an occupational group, event professionals still face difficulty elevating their professional identity. Contributing to these efforts, this study explores the professional identity (PID) construction process of event professionals. To facilitate the relevance of the PID construction process before the COVID-19 pandemic, it includes the impact of COVID-19 on event professionals’ PID constructions.

The author would like to thank Dr. Alana Dillette for her assistance with interviewing six industry professionals during the pandemic.
professional status. Researchers attribute this to the vastness of the industry (Harris, 2004), low barriers to enter the workforce (Silvers, 2012), unclear definitions of EM work (Jiang and Schmader, 2014) and limited collaboration between industry and academia (Brown, 2014). More significantly, Thomas and Thomas (2013) argue that the lack of a shared EM identity limits the ability to professionalize as a collective industry. The ambiguous identities of events may be due to them being multisegmented (e.g. venues, destination) and specialized (e.g. conventions, incentive travel). This makes it all the more important that the events profession identifies traits that enable a collective professional identity (PID) while still allowing room for the uniqueness of each specialized sector. Professions with specialization areas, such as teaching and engineering, demonstrate that a collective, overarching PID encompassing the specialized areas is crucial for elevating their professional status. For example, teachers subdivide into specialized areas such as biology or arts, elementary or high school or teacher administrators, and engineers might identify as software or biological engineers.

Given that identity is central to how people make sense of their surroundings, PID construction is essential for providing practical implications about what professionals consider as identifying factors of their profession (Pratt et al., 2006; Hotho, 2008). Through PID construction, people subjectively define themselves in their work and acknowledge how others perceive their work. Thus, the process of PID construction allows people to take active roles in negotiating their PIDs (Caza and Creary, 2016; Pratt, 2012) by building on the process of reflexively addressing “who I am” and “where I belong” in the context of work; by “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening and revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). COVID-19 presents an opportunity to reimagine grounded concepts in EM (Seraphin, 2020).

This theoretical lens of PID construction is critical for event professionals for at least three reasons. First, understanding how individuals negotiate their PIDs is crucial for advancing contemporary professions research, especially for occupational groups with ambiguous identities (Bayerl et al., 2018). Second, PID construction enables individuals to make meaning of their purpose and value, which in turn promotes psychological well-being and positive workplace behavior (Skorikov and Vondracek, 2011). Third, unlike other occupations in which PID construction of professional status is well studied (e.g. Best and Williams, 2018), no study has looked at PID in EM. Accordingly, the research question guiding this study is: How do individuals in the events profession construct and negotiate their PIDs? This paper explores both what matters to event professionals practically and how identities are constructed for event professionals theoretically.

Literature review

The subjective and collective nature of PID construction

Outside hospitality and tourism management studies, research on PID construction is steadily gaining interest. A person’s PID is defined by how they and others attach meanings to membership in a profession and how they incorporate social identity components into their PID, such as self-categorization and self-assessment in and out of social groups (Tajfel, 1978). Thus, PID construction is an ongoing relational process involving individuals acting and reacting with others (Pratt, 2012; Hoyer, 2020) and combining self-understanding of one’s work with how others – peers, clients, or people outside the industry – perceive it (Bayerl et al., 2018). A PID encompasses shared narratives that determine “the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role” (Ibarra, 1999, pp. 764–765; Schein, 1978). This shared positioning of “who we are as a professional group” permits people outside
the group to assess the group’s professional roles and provides insights into career development pathways (Bayerl et al., 2018; Kasperuniene and Zydziunaite, 2019). This is significant because the interrelationship between self-understanding and others’ validation of professional roles is pivotal to facilitating positive and negative evaluations of individual PID construction (Ashforth et al., 2016).

Individuals develop a PID by subjectively exploring their personal experiences and discursive interactions. Rather than starting with a priori taxonomies of what one’s professional role should be, Bayerl et al. (2018) draw on a social constructivist approach in which congruent PIDs are formed cooperatively by combining narratives of individuals with similar professions. Work activities that require specialized education and skills become a unifying identity of a professional group (Caza and Creary, 2016). In this sense, PIDs become shared group identities for professionals with common characteristics who are bound by similar operational standards, values and goals. For instance, for police officers, personal attitudes, norms and values are central to building a PID, while for market researchers, the role of work is essential (Bayerl et al., 2018). Journalists place legitimacy and credibility as their core PID values (Grubenmann and Meckel, 2017). These discipline-specific studies promote agentic opportunities for professionals to self-define the attributes, norms and values associated with their work (Caza and Creary, 2016).

This role identity (the doing of work) both differentiates professions from one another and connects those with similar specialized skills and knowledge (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). In EM, professionals typically undertake work functions such as coordinating, producing, planning, bidding and servicing (Getz and Page, 2020). They are also broadly bound by the creative inputs and organizational capabilities that go into producing various event types (Van der Wagen and White, 2015). Furthermore, professional associations such as MPI (Meeting Professionals International) and PCMA include thousands of EM professionals globally who potentially can share PIDs under a “producer of event experiences” umbrella. Regardless of position titles and regulating bodies, individuals can negotiate their professional selves with others through PID construction narratives (Kasperuniene and Zydziunaite, 2019). As yet, little empirical evidence exists to lend insight into the what and how of event professional PID construction, despite calls for deeper investigation into professionalizing the events industry (Brown, 2014).

**Importance of PIDs for event professionals**

It is important for individuals to align “who I am” with “where I belong” (Tajfel and Turner, 1985) in order to conceptualize “who we are” (Kreiner et al., 2015) as professionals. Collective PIDs help identify “the extent to which one defines him or herself in terms of the work he or she does and the prototypical characteristics ascribed to individuals who do that work” (Mael and Ashforth, 1992, p. 106). Those whose self-definitions of their professional role link strongly with their profession might experience a “oneness” with the professional group (Caza and Creary, 2016). Under the social constructivist paradigm, individual workplaces improve when congruence occurs between a professional and their profession and between self-perception and other-perceived (Bunderson, 2001; Ibarra, 1999; Skorikov and Vondracek, 2011; Leavitt et al., 2012). In the fragmented events industry with no agreed education standards and lacking clarity of work definition (Jiang and Schmader, 2014), understanding how professionals negotiate their PIDs can provide a unified direction for contemporary career development (Bayerl et al., 2018).

Social identity theory argues that the processes of self-evaluation and self-categorization are integral to one’s identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979); feeling like a member of a profession can stimulate self-esteem, pride and well-being, especially when one’s professional roles are valued (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Skorikov and Vondracek, 2011). Recognized as a highly
stressful occupation, event coordinators note the tension, fear and stress it entails, pointing to
career growth potential, physical demands, meeting the public, competition, deadlines
and working in the public eye, among other factors (Straus, 2017). Skorikov and Vondracek
(2011, p. 693) posited that to fight against occupational stress in modern societies, an
occupational identity, which they define as “vocational, work, professional, or career identity”
incorporating “a strong, self-chosen, and flexible” PID construction will weigh in favor of
“occupational success, social adaptation, and psychological well-being.”

Having agency (the ability to self-evaluate and self-categorize) in crafting PIDs facilitates
group unity within a professional group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Lepisto et al., 2015) and
links to subjective well-being, such as feelings of life satisfaction and happiness (Jue and Ha,
2018). A case study in Hong Kong investigating career profiles of professionals in the
convention industry substantiated this correlation, noting that a positive subjective PID
supported career commitment and work satisfaction (Ladkin and Weber, 2009). Similarly,
Wang et al. (2020) noted that the construction of a PID positively influenced job satisfaction
and employee engagement for Chinese hotel employees.

Historically, attempts to professionalize the events industry have been fragmented by
categorizing occupations by event types (e.g. corporate, incentive travel) rather than
establishing an overall concept of the EM professional (Getz, 2008). This has trickled into the
establishment of a vast number of professional bodies catering to every type of event
category (Bowdin et al., 2011). It is also reflected in textbooks focusing separately on business
events, conventions and exhibitions, venue management and festival management (e.g.
Davidson, 2019; Nolan, 2018) or grouping EM under processes such as risk management,
strategy management, human resources and operations, procurement, marketing and
logistics (Quinn, 2013).

Before COVID-19 put a halt to event operations, Jiang and Schmader (2014) anticipated an
exponential growth of meeting, convention and event planner employment by 2020. In the
face of the new situational reality, it is more imperative now than ever to reimagine the
advancement of EM. A significant way to begin this discourse is to establish a baseline of
event planners’ PID construction for a collective profession in a postpandemic world.

Methodology
This study uses narrative inquiry methodology. The focal point of narrative research is to
“bring order to disorder” by allowing people to share stories of life events and provide
meaning to them (Murray, 2015). An underlying principle of narrative inquiry is that by
attending to people’s individual life stories, the relationships and world context in which their
lives are situated become accessible for interpretation and analysis (Clandinin et al., 2017). By
focusing on selected aspects of their lives, people create narrative identities that then help
them learn more about themselves (Murray, 2015). The stories provide opportunities for
individuals to interpret and ascribe meanings to their identities. Narrative inquiry has been
adopted in tourism and hospitality research to understand leisure identities of canoe campers
(Brooks, 2017) and to decolonize tourism space by disrupting settler identities (Grimwood
et al., 2019). Both studies argue that narrative inquiry values storytelling as a means to shape
and synthesize participant identities. In this regard, narrative analysis is particularly
appropriate for studying careers (Cohen, 2006), providing an analytical tool to explore how
individuals define their own profession (Brown, 2015) and understanding how they realize
and redefine their PIDs by recounting their individual and social experiences (Slay and
Smith, 2011).

This study includes 18 interviews with event professionals before the COVID-19
pandemic. Between May and June, 2020, as the pandemic quickly affected event professionals
and their operations in the USA, 14 additional interviews were conducted to determine if the
pre-pandemic narratives remained relevant and to assess any changes in pandemic-influenced narratives. In total, 32 semistructured interviews with 30 event professionals are included (two prepandemic participants reinterviewed during the pandemic).

**Interview protocol**

Through semistructured interviews, participants drew on particular narratives of their choice to self-evaluate themselves into professional groups and construct their PIDs. Narrative interviews are a particular type of qualitative interview with “unstructured conversations that provide an occasion of narrating experiences and doing identity work” (LaPointe, 2010, p. 4). In line with the study question, *How do individuals in the events profession construct and negotiate their PIDs?*, the interview protocol facilitated a chronological storyline of participants’ work addressing salient themes in the PID literature such as: “How do you define your work?,” “How do you explain your work to others (within and outside the industry)?,” and “Were there any changes in how you describe your work over the years?” To strengthen the reliability of the interview protocol, a pilot study included two faculty members with over 20 years of event planning experience; each provided feedback on the interview protocol, such as question sequence and wording clarification.

**Interviews and study setting**

Purposive sampling was used to maximize the variance in work stories and grasp changing narratives over time. All participants are event professionals with more than ten years of experience in EM. Altogether, 35 EM professionals were recruited through snowball sampling. Thirty met the inclusion criteria of having event planning experience (vs venue management or hotel sales). Including interviews pre- and post-COVID-19, the study includes 32 interviews. The interviews were conducted in a conversational tone, starting with a discussion of their work status. Recognizing the importance of flexibility and open-mindedness to build rapport and enable interviewees to tell their stories in their own way (Kim, 2016), the author empathized with their challenges and encouraged them to speak more about their work experience in EM. Although the pandemic influenced the work of the participants, the interview questions remained consistent and focused on PID construction narratives to hone in on the changing nature of identity. Table 1 provides a summary of participant descriptions. Pseudonyms are used to protect privacy. All interviews were conducted via telephone or Zoom, audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim.

**Data analysis**

As Murray points out (2015), the narrative analysis process is not passive; researchers must be aware of assumptions and beliefs they inevitably impose on an analysis. For this reason, the researcher and interviewee become cocreators in the retelling of interviewees’ stories. The narrative structure chosen here broadly follows Murray’s (2015) approach to analyzing narrative accounts, incorporating first descriptive and then interpretative phases. Figure 1 provides the analytic framework of participant narratives underlying the development and discussion of PIDs. Organizing the interviews by before and during COVID-19 highlights the evolution of core traits that mattered to PID construction.

**Step 1. Descriptive phase.** Each narrative was summarized to feature significant topics and structured into a beginning, middle and end to highlight key issues within the text and linkages among narratives (Murray, 2015). Table 2 illustrates the subset topics connected
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position title</th>
<th>Type of organization</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>Professional certificates</th>
<th>Interview before (B) or during (D) pandemic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Third-party planning in luxury product launch</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>CIS</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>Assistant Director Event Coordinator</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>CMP, CED</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aria</td>
<td>Event Coordinator Senior Event Coordinator</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora</td>
<td>Regional Vice President</td>
<td>Software company</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>CMP</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audrey</td>
<td>Senior Conference Services Executive</td>
<td>Destination management company</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>CMM</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariana</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Healthcare research institute</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>Vice President of Global Accounts</td>
<td>Third-party planning in corporate events</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>Senior Events Manager</td>
<td>Information technology services</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>CMP</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camila</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Third-party planning in corporate events</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>CMP</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Third-party planning in social events</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>CMP, CMM</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Third-party planning in sporting events, political association events</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>CMM</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalilah</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Third-party planning in association events</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>CMP</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Vice President of Operations</td>
<td>Incentive travel</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Operations Coordinator</td>
<td>Software company</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>CMP, CMM</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Third-party planning in association events</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>CMP, CSEP, CMM, DES</td>
<td>B + D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Third-party planning in the music industry</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Director of Events</td>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>CMP</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khloe</td>
<td>Independent Contractor</td>
<td>Third-party planning in corporate events</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>CMP, CMM</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>Events Director National Sales Manager</td>
<td>Financial service</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>CMP</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Director of Accounts</td>
<td>Incentive travel</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Third-party planning in corporate events</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>CMP, CMM, DES</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Independent Contractor</td>
<td>Third-party planning in corporate events</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>CMP</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>Independent Contractor</td>
<td>Third-party planning in corporate events</td>
<td>18</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Participant descriptions (continued)
to the broader PID narratives, initial codes and superordinate themes derived from the data analysis.

**Step 2. Coding frame (see Table 2, Initial codes and Superordinate themes).** Next, a provisional list of 14 codes was identified using the qualitative data management software, NVivo R1 (released in March, 2020; QSR International, 2020). This initial frame captured the “overall meaning of the narratives and the various particular issues raised within each” (Murray, 2015, p. 94). Through an iterative and inductive process, three superordinate commonalities were identified that influenced PID construction of event planners before COVID-19. Interviews conducted during the pandemic revealed two additional superordinate themes. To develop these themes, similar codes were clustered together to create a coherent framework relevant to the research question. All superordinate themes inform what matters to event professionals’ PIDs and how they constructed their PIDs.

**Step 3. Interpretative phase.** The final stage involved layering the narratives with PID literature to interpret the stories. In line with the research question, the interpretation

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**Table 1.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position title</th>
<th>Type of organization</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>Professional certificates</th>
<th>Interview before (B) or during (D) pandemic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sofia</td>
<td>Executive Meetings and Events Manager</td>
<td>Aerospace technology company</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>CMM, CGMP</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarlett</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Third-party planning in corporate events</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stella</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>Third-party planning in corporate events</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>CMP</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Third-party planning in association events</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>CMP, CMM</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>Vice President of Conferences and Events</td>
<td>Professional association</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>CMP</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tessa</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Third-party consultant</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>CMP</td>
<td>B + D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>Director of Sales</td>
<td>Destination management company</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>CMP</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Figure 1.**

Analytic framework
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview time frame</th>
<th>Superordinate themes</th>
<th>Initial codes</th>
<th>Subset topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before COVID-19</td>
<td>Self-driven pride in event planning</td>
<td>Sense of achievement</td>
<td>Seeing an event come together</td>
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<td>Event comes to life</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Watching all the work happen</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Recognition of work skills</td>
<td>Clients are now wanting professionals</td>
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<td>Events are more refined</td>
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<td>Professionals are getting more creative</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Not anyone can do this work</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Economic and societal impacts</td>
<td>Million-dollar deals are made at events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social-driven stigmatization of work skills</td>
<td>Others’ misconception</td>
<td>People outside the industry do not care to understand my work</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Events do not magically happen</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tired of stigmas</td>
<td>Party planning is not my work</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>I plan conferences, not parties</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Avoidance in saying “events”</td>
<td>Prefer saying meetings than events due to stigma</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Professional-driven status recognition</td>
<td>Increase in professional expectations</td>
<td>Client expect certifications</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Recognition of certifications</td>
<td>Proposals include planners with certifications</td>
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<td>With or without certification</td>
<td>More professionals are acquiring certifications</td>
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<td>Respect for people with certifications</td>
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<td>Not considered a professional without certification</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Having certification allows people to speak the same language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before and during COVID-19</td>
<td>Profession-driven work skills</td>
<td>Adopt new technologies</td>
<td>Learning how to engage audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Content is more important than ever</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Experiential marketing is crucial</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Virtual events as new service offering</td>
<td>Losing clients to virtual event companies</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Forced to offer virtual events due to the pandemic</td>
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<td>Agency in community-driven commitment</td>
<td>Free webinars are helpful</td>
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<td>Professional associations are crucial</td>
<td>Crowdsourced information created communities</td>
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<td>Access to resources</td>
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<td>Networking with colleagues</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Passion for events</td>
<td>People in this industry make it worth everything</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>I love my work</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stronger together</td>
<td>The industry is resilient</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Everyone is in the same boat</td>
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<td>We can survive together</td>
</tr>
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Table 2. Initial codes and superordinate themes
focuses on how PIDs are constructed, how participants self-describe their work, how they interpret others’ perceptions of their work, how the profession influences the way they value their work and how the pandemic has changed both their work and perceptions of it. Each account includes theoretical content that reveals practical insights and builds theory.

Findings
Prior to retelling the event professionals’ stories, the author considered the influence of their own positionality as an academic researcher with a focus on PID and the ultimate constructor of the narrative. Similarly, the discussions acknowledge that both the interview context and the particular questions asked influenced the interviewees’ representations of their PIDs. Thus, each story is partial, but significant, encompassing selected and relevant facets of the event professional’s lived experience. Participants presented their broader engagement with PIDs in various ways relating to each participant’s values and experience in work. Work profiles, such as type of event professional, did not yield differences in PID narratives.

Before COVID-19: self-driven pride in event planning
Self-driven pride in work manifested in two significant ways: personal values and specialized skills. Some participants associated pride with the personal passion that led them into event planning. For Emily, hosting an event where people gather to achieve a social mission influenced her work satisfaction:

One of my conferences is on social work in hospice and palliative care. So, at the breakouts, they’re talking about end of life, funeral services . . . what’s actually happening in that room is so significant that the pens do not matter. At the end of the day, what happened in that whole meeting is face-to-face interactions. So, for me, yeah, I totally feel like I’m having a contribution and a big part of society, aside from just a paycheck.

This thought of societal “contribution” as something greater than a “paycheck” showcases how work influenced the self-understanding of her PID while reinforcing the connection between self-values and professional roles. Some participants associated personal values of helping others as a part of their PID. Tim shared:

I’ve gone the extra mile to help people even though they’re not really expecting it. I think that’s something that everybody should try to do, is always offer a helping hand. . . . You know you’re trying to get a room on New Year’s Eve in Las Vegas and you know it’s impossible and you do not even want to try, but I think if you show you’ve gone the extra step. . . .

Tim voiced his ethical standards when it comes to work, demonstrating the intertwined relationship between his values and work practice. Such congruence constructs positive PIDs, leading to a higher commitment to the profession (Bayerl et al., 2018).

Other participants displayed self-driven pride through the ability to control and execute complex projects. Tina explained:

A lot of us [event professionals] are accused, rightly so, of having control issues. That’s good, but it’s really about understanding where those are useful and where they’re not. . . . Stuff happens. I have to be able to respond effectively and efficiently to that and not say, “That cannot happen it’s not on my form.” So, it’s a level of flexibility that enables them to move and think quickly on their feet.

Other participants shared pride in their specialized job skills by depicting multitasking and stakeholder management. Aurora commented:

We just get to touch and feel so many different facets of the industry, from all the vendor sides, to the hotel side, to the customer side. It just felt great. . . . Not everyone can do that.
Professions research attributes specialized skills that are unique to a profession as a necessary component for an occupational group to be elevated to professional status (Freidson, 2001). Whether event planning as a specialized skill can lead to raising the profession’s status is yet to be seen. However, it is clear that participants took an agentic role in constructing positive PIDs by narrating personal values and specialized skills during the interviews.

Before COVID-19: social-driven stigmatization of work skills

The narratives revealed frustration at the social perception and stereotyping of event planning from those outside the events industry. Ariana explained:

[When people ask what I do . . . I do not try and glorify it “cause by all means it’s not” . . . I love what I do, but I try and explain to people what my job is, and some people get it, and some people are, “Oh, she’s a party planner.” “No, not really.” I try and explain as best as I can to people what I do. I’m proud of what I do. I love my work. I love the people that I get to work with on a daily basis. I love . . . the relationships that I’ve built in the 11 years. . . . Yeah, I think honestly there’s people in my company that do not know what I do. Even our CEO does not realize how much work goes into what we do.

Twenty-two participants stated that “party planning” was a common stigmatizing misperception of their work by people outside the events industry. Natalie specified:

So, there’s always been kind of a question [about my work] and I think even some of that is internal to the CEO. Because I cannot tell you how many times I’ve been referred to as “the professional party planner.”

Participants actively negotiated their PIDs by removing party planning from their work description. Abigail commented:

Part of being a true professional is that I did not just plan my company’s Christmas party. You kind of also get the full goals and objectives and marketing and the strategic components of it. It’s not just, did you plan your nephew’s birthday party? That’s more of something that is a necessity, a logistical, “We’ve got to plan his birthday party. Let’s make it happen.” Do I consider them [party planners] part of the industry? No, not really.

Participants considered the social-driven stigma of party planning almost as dismissible work and not the job of “a true professional” (Abigail). This PID construction process of disregarding party planning establishes a double stigmatization, as event planners subjectively differentiate themselves from party planners, which is a subset of the events industry. Rees and Monrouxe (2018) caution against building an overly rigorous PID as it can trigger a “them” and “us” mentality that negatively affects professional groups. The case of party planning stigmatization presents an intriguing contrast to the type of “dirty work” usually accorded with social stigma status in PID construction, such as garbage collectors or exotic dancers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014; Slay and Smith, 2011). Although party planning is not dirty work, the social stigmatization of EM skills notably influenced participants’ PID narratives.

Participants actively resisted the trivializing meanings of others, instead showcasing the dynamic negotiation between self-driven pride and socially driven stigma. Dalilah provided insights into how she sees her passion mediating others’ stereotyping:

You have to have a passion for this. I have so many people who look at me and they go “You’re crazy, why would you wanna do that?” And it just sort of gets in your blood, I guess. I love doing it and I’ve been successful at it.
This internal negotiation demonstrates how event professionals battle to correct these social perceptions. This struggle can be emotionally taxing and disheartening for professionals and potentially turn a self-driven positive PID into an unstable status.

Before and during COVID-19: profession-driven professional status recognition
Prepandemic, participants repeatedly referenced their professional certificates. Eighteen participants have a CMP (Certified Meeting Professional), accredited by the Events Industry Council (EIC) to recognize event professionals’ experience, body of knowledge and professional standards (EIC, 2021). Six have a CMM (Certificate in Meeting Management) accredited by MPI to enhance event professionals’ business management, leadership and meeting management skills (MPI, 2021). EIC and MPI state that receiving their certificates leads to promotions and raises. Many interviewees agreed that these credentials are perceived by the profession as a necessity for elevating their PIDs and career opportunities.

Tessa contended:

CMP helps when you have companies sourcing an event planner. Maybe it’s the first position they’re posting or whatever, they may look for a CMP because that makes the planner legitimate. And then also, planners that run organizations, if they have a CMP it makes a difference between the candidates because of it. . . . I think they’re more likely to look for the CMP.

Participants felt that others in the events industry valued professional certifications and made them feel more “legitimate” in their work. Camila shared:

CMP is, you join the club and it’s an elite club. If you have a CMP, I know what you know. If you are in meeting planning and you do not have a CMP, you’re an unknown.

Events-related credentials certainly instilled a sense of self-esteem in PID constructions; it also led to drawing boundaries among event professionals. According to professionalization research, traits such as professional credentials can be indicative of an occupational group moving toward gaining professional status and societal recognition (Friedson, 2001). Khloe experienced public recognition due to her credentials:

People have perked up and gone, “Oh you’re a CMP. That’s pretty impressive.” Then another [event] I’m doing right now she [the planner] also made the comment that she thought it was great that I was a CMP.

For Stella, professional certification was a way to get rid of social stigmas:

I think most people want to get their CMP to be a recognized professional, and not a quote, unquote, “party planner.”

Participants noted that accrediting bodies advocating for professional certification and professional associations facilitate ways for individuals to elevate their professional status and belie the popular images of industry outsiders who stigmatize event planners.

Thomas and Thomas (2013) found little evidence of the professionalization of event planning in the United Kingdom due to the large number of professional associations catering to different specialized areas, such as conventions and incentive travel. The current study presents a different perspective from the USA, with participants emotionally leaning into professional associations to positively self-construct their PIDs. Especially during the pandemic, professional associations played a significant role in creating a collective. All pandemic-era interviews discussed the role of MPI, PCMA, SITE (Society for Incentive Travel Excellence), other webinars and crowdsourced information as a way to define “who we are” as a profession.
During COVID-19: situational reality-driven work skills

Prior to the pandemic, participants mentioned the impact of situational realities on their work in terms of technology platforms that enhance event–audience experience and collect and analyze audience-related data. For some time, technology has been recognized as crucial for shaping and capturing the pre-, during- and postevent experience, and event managers have had to navigate highly technical programs and applications to maximize event design, on-site and online networking and feedback (Martin and Cazarre, 2016). With COVID-19, technological boundaries of how events are conceptualized, produced, experienced, assessed and valued are expanding. In the aftermath of stay-in-shelter guidelines and government prohibitions of larger events, the abrupt halt of face-to-face events fast-forwarded event production onto virtual platforms. This triggered a variety of changes in participant narratives. For Amelia, changes were made in her service offerings:

... a virtual event still needs the professionals to assist in planning because it’s certainly not as easy as it sounds. But obviously, in-person events will maybe not be taking place for the next 18 months or so. So, in terms of how I describe my role, I might not have too many changes, but I would certainly want to expand upon our capabilities and ensure that people knew we’re event producers that can certainly play in the technology realm.

Similarly, other participants said that even if overall professional roles may not have changed, they felt the need to include the provision of a new skill set, virtual event production, as part of their service offerings. This was necessary for business survival. Bella said:

I guess I explain myself the same ... I do let them [clients] know that we are morphing and changing as a global meeting planning company, and I do talk about the virtual, that we have these virtual offerings now, and as long as I’m going to be in this position as a third-party meeting planner doing what I do, it’s important that I offer all the different resources and different things that we have for our clients because every client’s different, has different needs. But again, I think the virtual is a big part of it.

With moving onto virtual platforms, participants recognized a shift in audience experience. In a follow-up interview, Emily stated that with technology-based event production, her focus is moving toward event content rather than client emotions:

I feel during the pandemic the ability to connect emotionally has declined. Virtual and digital events are a great way to deliver content and information, but are much harder to feel emotion, camaraderie, and group bonding. As an event planner, I feel I have focused even more on what is being delivered and the bite-sized messages, and how they are received by the variety of attendees and their personal environment.

Situational factors of the pandemic influence how work is delivered while emphasizing what is delivered. These changing work experiences highlight the important role of situational realities in event planners’ PID construction. While the need to include situational reality in PID construction was recognized (Lepisto et al., 2015), the pandemic has made it more salient. In responding to client needs during the pandemic, events are turning to virtual and hybrid models (face-to-face with health and safety measures) rather than cancellations, reinforcing the value accorded gathering in planned events.

During COVID-19: agency in community-driven commitment

Pandemic-era interviews revealed that the crisis is shaking the very identity of the industry; yet, event professionals remain united through passion and resilience. Amelia summed up the collegiality of the industry during the pandemic:
I'm so thankful for our industry and for being all in this together. And that I know we're kind of all remaining as flexible as possible. And we can try something and have a little bit more Grace if it does not work. So, we're kind of working through this all together and figuring it out as we go.

The unpredictable landscapes of the industry ushered in by the pandemic harnessed professionals and organizations to unite for survival. This type of group membership formed during the pandemic fortified distinct individual values and attitudes, such as passion and resilience toward the profession (Caza and Creary, 2016). Furthermore, in line with Hotho’s (2008) study on professions and PID construction, findings here suggest that individual professionals can be change agents to curate identities of their profession. By coming together as a profession, sharing information and resources within and across organizations, many participants agreed that the events industry is resilient and “we’re going to get through this and it’s going to be okay” (Melissa).

Emily predicted that the pandemic will cause new business partnerships to thrive:

So, every call I've been on with a [virtual] platform, they're asking what my company does … because while they provide that frame, they do not provide the planning, and they do not provide the strategy, and they do not provide the build, and they do not provide a lot of that stuff. So, I actually think a lot of partnerships are going to come out of that. … There's two already, specifically, that I've talked to that said, “Here's our website and I'm going to change it to add some digital stuff in there, but hey if you run into somebody who calls you and has zero clue send them to us.” We can be their partner. So, I think there's going to be some good partnerships that I'm looking forward to out of this.

The sense of agency in evaluating what one does for work and associated passions, despite the pandemic, was more stable than expected. Bella added “I'm optimistic. I'm excited to see where this industry ends up. I think we still have a lot more to learn as we go.” These positive individual PID narratives are redefining what event professionals mean to each other and how it defines the profession, amplifying community-driven collective PIDs. As Clara stated “We're all kind of maybe in different situations, but still in the same boat.”

Discussion and conclusions

Conclusions

This study explored the process of PID construction through evolving narratives of event professionals before and during COVID-19. It provides insights into how event professionals are negotiating PID construction narratives in the unexpected, unprecedented and changing circumstances incurred by the pandemic. By underscoring the PID construction process of event professionals, the study raises the value of PIDs in EM. Although each narrative was unique, the interviews revealed both overlapping and discrete dominant themes before and during COVID-19. The two dominant themes that only influenced PID construction before the pandemic are self-driven pride in event planning and social-driven stigmatization of work skills. Interviews conducted both before and during the pandemic revealed a common theme of profession-driven professional status. Interviews conducted during the pandemic pointed to two new themes: situational reality-driven work skills and community-driven commitment. Therefore, core characteristics of the PID construction process include: 1) self-laden values in pride for events, professional certifications and adapting new skills; and 2) profession-laden values in professional recognition and collective community. Examining the changing narratives during the pandemic uncovered the additional characteristics of resiliency and the significance of events as an industry sector.

Theoretical implications

This study adds to current EM literature by scoping and defining PIDs of event professionals. Adopting theoretical constructs of PID development, an underresearched area in EM, the
study conceptualized how PIDs evolved, quickly adapting to the changing environment of the COVID-19 pandemic. Event professionals are taking a crucial agentic role in establishing positive PIDs as they negotiate among the individual, others outside the industry and those within the profession in a new situational reality. Figure 2 depicts an emergent model of the PID construction process for event professionals.

Before the pandemic, PID construction among all categories of event planners was influenced by self-pride in event planning, social stigma of work skills and recognition through professional certification programs. Work pride correlated with the ability to exercise personal values and specialized skills and have professional credentials recognized. Some participants actively drew a line within the profession separating those with credentials from those without, potentially harming efforts to create a collective PID. Therefore, differences in credentialing among professionals pose a threat to collegiately in an already multifragmented industry by creating an “us” versus “them” mentality (Rees and Monrouxe, 2018). Substantiating previous research, this study demonstrates that PID construction is a mix of self-narratives, “what I do for work,” and “how others perceive my work” (Pratt, 2012; Hoyer, 2020). Here, the inextricable connection between self- and others-perceived work intensified when event professionals actively rejected party planning as part of the social conception of their work skill. This rebuttal created a boundary influencing how event professionals (re)define their PID narratives. It also set boundaries against those who focus on party planning as an occupation. Ibarra (1999, p. 779) states that “identity construction is not just a process of producing possible selves but also one in which people select and discard the possibilities they have considered.” This points to the event professionals’ autonomy to self-regulate and negotiate their PIDs.

The situational realities of the pandemic challenged event planners to adapt quickly to new work environments (e.g. working from home) and service offerings (e.g. virtual). Without articulating changes in what they do for work, PID narratives identified new skill sets for planning and managing virtual events. Acquiring new skill sets to meet changing client expectations and technological advancement is not new; however, the pandemic may influence this work for the long term if hybrid events (face-to-face and virtual) and increased

Figure 2.
PID construction process
health and safety measures become the norm in a postpandemic world. Therefore, the study supports Lepisto et al.’s (2015) call to further investigate the role of situational realities in the PID construction process. During uncertain times, event professionals leaned into their work colleagues and together, as a community, took an active role in constructing positive PIDs, with professional associations becoming a platform for virtual gatherings to share resources and information. The others-laden values of togetherness were strong during times of change, liberating individuals from oppressive elements during the pandemic.

According to Giddens (1991, p. 54), the construction of identity is “the capacity to keep a particular narrative going.” This study shows that event professionals do more than keep a narrative going; they actively renegotiate PID narratives to move into positive PID construction, even during a pandemic that shakes the core of the industry. Per Figure 2, this study further supports the relational nature of identity work as individuals construct PIDs through an interplay of claiming and granting identities (Lepisto et al., 2015). In other words, event professionals claim some aspects of the profession’s identity (e.g. professional status through certification) and also grant other identities (e.g. producers of virtual experiences). At the same time, event professionals reject socially laden stigma (e.g. party planning) through agentic negotiations. Through the lens of PID construction, this study argues that agency in an agentic professional person can unravel the complex nature of social context and develop positive PIDs.

Practical implications
This project promotes the development of PIDs through narratives. As LaPointe (2010) suggests, careers developed by narratives can refine the particulars of a profession. In this vein, ambiguous professions, such as EM, can engage in identity discourse that empowers event professionals, is not hegemonic or constraining and enables PID construction to elucidate new ways of understanding the profession. These identities can form a baseline for professionals and the industry to build a collective identity not threatened by within-profession segmentation of service offerings or credentialing; that enables students studying EM to explore existing PIDs and academics to build EM curricula that reflect real-life PIDs. It provides space for the passionate and committed voices of event professionals to significantly influence the creation of new public-facing PIDs and dismantle inaccurate, socially constructed perceptions of EM.

Communicating a clear EM identity also benefits clients, enabling them to determine professional capacities and service suitability. Given the unifying role of professional associations during the pandemic, they should be leveraged to harness a collective PID. As event professionals find common ground through professional associations, they can represent the industry as a whole and fortify the emerging professionalism of the events industry. To demonstrate their value to communities and societies, the events profession must come together to (re)imagine and (re)define, beyond adaptation, who they are and what matters to them as a professional group.

Limitations and future research
Every narrative is a partial accounting of a more complex reality. These narratives focus on senior event professionals with 10–42 years of event planning experience each; the degree of PID development depended on participant memories. With increases in EM programs across the globe, future research should include PID construction by EM students and young professionals as well. Most participants in this study focus on event planning for corporations, conventions and professional associations, which may have influenced their attitudes about the industry subset of party planning. Therefore, future research should explore if PIDs differ depending on the type of experience an event professional provides. It
must also be noted that interviews conducted during the pandemic were overshadowed by day-to-day challenges that caused participants to focus on everyday impacts of COVID-19 rather than on reflexive changes in their PIDs. Future research should take a longitudinal approach to studying changing PID narratives before, during and after the pandemic. For instance, professional roles in March 2020 when lockdown measures were enforced in the USA may differ from later dates when reopening guidelines are operationalized. How professionals view their PIDs over a wider period of time may assist in identifying formative PID criteria for the events profession. Also of interest is how gender may influence PID construction. Of the 30 participants here, only four were male; while this small sample did not point to gender as an influential factor in the PID construction process, it is worth exploring in the female-dominated events industry. This paper supports recent efforts to segment EM as a research domain away from hospitality and tourism management and into a separate field. This could set a platform for career training and education institutions to focus on specialized skill sets and help create a shared identity within the profession.

References


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