

Best Practices for Virtual Events During the Covid-19 Pandemic - Focusing on Attendee Engagement

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a severe hazard: not only to human health but also to the economy on both a national and a global level. The pandemic has particularly affected the event industry, which relies on mass gatherings. This research aims to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on the event industry and propose best practices for virtual events in terms of attendee engagement. A qualitative research approach was applied to generate insights from industry experts in real contexts in Vietnam. The study drew on interviewees with four participants engaged in virtual events: two from the event industry, and two from the education sector. This research focuses on three key elements to enhance the level of attendee engagement in virtual events: the four realms of experience, storytelling and attendee objectives when joining a given event. The study also highlights the relationships among these three critical elements while offering theoretical contributions and suggesting best practices.

Keywords: virtual events, attendee engagement, best practice, COVID-19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION

Getz (2008, p. 403) defined events as “an important motivator of tourism”, which “figure prominently in the development and marketing plans of most destinations”. According to Richards and Palmer (2010), meanwhile, events play a significant role in globalisation processes in terms of culture; they are crucial facilitators of urban growth and have become a means of exchanging certain cultural, social and economic values. Events are critical resources that attract various groups of attendees based on different event types, their uniqueness, and their promoted values (Hernandez-Mogollon, Folgado-Fernandez, & Duarte, 2014).

In late December 2019, an outbreak of pneumonia from an unknown source in Wuhan (Hubei province, China) – later called Coronavirus (COVID-19) – was reported by the Chinese Health Authorities. Jamal and Budke (2020, p. 182) considered the COVID-19 pandemic “the first real global health emergency experienced by many members of today’s society”. Indeed, the COVID-19 outbreak has led to unprecedented new interventions and severe consequences, such as national and global lockdowns, the implementation of social distancing measures, quarantine and isolation, and restrictions on mass gatherings. Consequently, the event and tourism

industries have suffered a significant downturn from the pandemic (Mohanty, Dhoundiyal, & Choudhury, 2020).

Numerous domestic and international events have been cancelled or postponed to prioritise human health and impede the spread of the virus. As such, virtual events have become a potential solution for event organisers during the pandemic (Seraphin, 2020; Madray, 2020).

Consumer experiences in virtual environments are a leading factor in the success of the consumer market in several industries, such as event organising; the concept has been much explored in marketing theory (Klaus & Maklan, 2011). According to Getz (2008, p. 404), “much of the attractiveness of events is that they are never the same, and you have to ‘be there’ to enjoy the unique experience fully; if you miss it, it’s a lost opportunity”. Communication and event experiences are critical considerations in virtual events because they can add interest and value to attendees and the hospitality and tourism industries. Furthermore, creating positive online experiences for attendees is essential for the success of an event (McGillivray, 2014). Kharouf *et al.* (2020) suggested that a good online experience can produce positive behavioural intentions towards the event. The authors proposed three factors affecting consumers’ online experiences: interactions between or among attendees, effective communication, and online engagement.

This research explores the opportunities and challenges of utilising virtual platforms as a new strategy to improve attendee experiences and discusses how event organisers can focus on attendee engagement during virtual events. The study aims to answer the following research questions.

1. What elements affect attendee engagement in virtual events?
2. How can event organisers maintain and enhance attendee engagement during virtual events?

The research offers practical implications by assessing how to improve attendee engagement when substituting virtual events for physical events during the COVID-19 pandemic to comply with social distancing measures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is an event?

For the tourism industry in general, Getz (2008, p. 403) defined events as an important motivator of tourism that figure prominently in the development and marketing plans of most destinations. Events have been categorised as instances that are organised only once or infrequently for a certain period, allowing attendees to enjoy social experiences outside of their daily lives (Jago & Shaw, 1998). Getz (2005) noted that these occasions, which are organised to present various experiences based on cultural, social, and entertainment factors and go outside the scope of usual everyday experiences, are called special events or planned events. Events are also regarded as occasions whereby individuals can present their personality, conduct ceremonies, and celebrate with others (Raj, Walters, & Rashid, 2017). As observed by Fletcher, Dunn and Prince (2009, p. 52), the frequency and types of events are increasing every day and include, for example, “sport and recreation events, professional meetings, conventions, fairs,

festivals, expositions, fundraising, corporate, community, marketing, and entertainment events”.

Bladen *et al.* (2017) posited four central characteristics of an event: temporary happenings, displays of ritual/celebration, uniqueness, and gathering of people. With regard to the first characteristic (temporary happenings), events are momentary, with defined beginnings and endings, and are thoroughly planned using event programmes or schedules (Bladen *et al.*, 2017; Getz and Page, 2019). In terms of the second characteristic (displays of ritual/celebration), scholars have argued that the need to hold an event is based on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Bladen *et al.*, 2017). Humans are on a journey to fulfil their potential through the five orders of need (physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualisation needs). Self-actualisation needs are considered to be the main factor inducing motivation to organise events. According to Goldblatt (2013), the first two characteristics may be regarded as fundamental matters that make an event special. The third characteristic is uniqueness. It is impossible to imitate an event entirely, although there could be similarities in size or form; the event’s contents, human factors, and programme scenarios are the leading features adding to an event’s uniqueness (Getz & Page, 2019). Moreover, the experiences created from a specific event are only available once and cannot be easily recreated (Getz & Page, 2019). Attendees experience the same events differently as they have distinct reactions to an event’s touchpoints. Meanwhile, attendees’ experiences will be diverse in different events regardless of contexts and programmes because their expectations, feelings, and behaviours are continuously refreshed. Hence, events become more attractive and unique (Crowther and Orefice, 2014; Getz and Page, 2019). Finally, regarding the fourth characteristic (gathering of people), mass gatherings are defined as events that concentrate many people within a specific area for a particular goal over a certain duration. These gatherings can be a single event or a set of different events (e.g. sports events, music events, conferences, and exhibitions) at various venues (World Health Organization, 2021).

Shone and Parry (2019) proposed five additional characteristics: perishability, labour intensiveness, intangibility, ambience, and personal interaction. Firstly, the uniqueness of an event makes it perishable as it cannot be repeated in the same way. The perishability characteristic of events could be considered a service experience, contributing to the enhancement of authenticity (Shone and Parry, 2019). Secondly, turning to the intangibility characteristic, Richards and Palmer (2010) argued that the culture of a host city constitutes an intangible part of events. Shone and Parry (2019, p. 18) noted that “the activity is more or less intangible” within an event, and it is essential to make the experience more tangible in order to enhance attendees’ favourable impressions and memories. Thirdly, regarding labour intensiveness, Sage HR (2017) referred to human resources as playing a central role in running an event smoothly and successfully. The level of labour intensiveness depends on the degree of complexity and uniqueness of a specific event. Event managers can predict the number of staff needed based on event types, the number of guests, service types, working experience, the quality of current staff, venue layout, and duration for preparation and completion (Shone and Parry, 2019). Fourthly, ambience is regarded as one of the most significant features predicting event outcomes (Shone and Parry, 2019). Creating positive customer experiences and customer loyalty relies upon several factors within a physical context related to atmosphere or ambience. These factors include, for instance, food, drinks, lights, and sounds (Pullman and Gross, 2004); social factors, such as staff–staff, staff–guests, and guest–guest interactions; and design factors,

including spatial layout, architecture, decor elements, functionality, signs, symbols, and artefacts (Heide and Gronhaug, 2006). Thus, the atmosphere is defined as “the emotional response to the entirety of stimuli in a particular environment” (Uhrich and Koenigstorfer, 2009, p. 59). Lastly, in terms of the fifth characteristic (personal interaction), there should be a consideration of the essence of interactions between attendees as well as their connection with the physical surroundings when designing and creating event experiences (Berridge, 2012).

Unlike the manufacturing industry, staff in the service industry have frequent, direct contact with customers, thereby determining the quality of the experience. Event attendees are also involved in the process of creating the experiences by interacting between themselves, with the atmosphere, and with other attendees. Therefore, it is crucial for event managers to recognise that event success depends broadly on the actions and reactions of attendees (Shone & Parry, 2019).

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the event industry

According to Sauer (2021), the virus named SARS-CoV-2, later referred to as COVID-19, led to a pandemic causing respiratory illness. Jamal and Budke (2020, p. 182) considered the COVID-19 pandemic “the first real global health emergency experienced by many members of today’s society”. The pandemic has had severe consequences: the World Health Organization (2021) reported that, as of March 3rd 2021, there were 114,428,211 cases and 2,543,755 deaths globally.

As noted by Paital, Das and Parida (2020), the pandemic has led to the promulgation of guidelines concerning the restriction of mass movement and physical contact between individuals (i.e., social distancing measures). It is estimated that more than 90% of the world’s population has been influenced by restricted international travelling and, for some countries and territories, even by domestic travelling (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2021). Meanwhile, there has been a tremendously negative impact on service industries, especially the cultural, tourism, and travel sectors (Morgan, 2020). Events have the congenital disadvantage of high vulnerability to internal or external turmoil; furthermore, the development of events has been severely affected by COVID-19 in terms of volume, size, and scope (Mohanty et al., 2020). Numerous events have been cancelled or postponed due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, partial or full lockdowns, and state emergencies (Madray, 2020), while events with mass gatherings (e.g., concerts, meetings, sports, and weddings) have been restricted during the pandemic (Gössling et al., 2021).

With regard to human resources, the current pandemic has become a personal crisis for anyone working in the global tourism industry. Many tourism and hospitality businesses (e.g., hotels and restaurants) have already dismissed a considerable number of their employees to cut costs (Gössling et al., 2021): in fact, up to 75 million employees were faced with job losses in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, leading to a potential loss of up to \$2.1 trillion in GDP in terms of travel tourism in 2020 (Škare, Soriano, & Porada-Rochoń, 2021).

Three alerts related to mass gatherings and attendee interactions have been generated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021). Firstly, the more a person interacts with many people at a gathering and the longer the interaction is, the greater the potential risk of COVID-19 spreading. Similarly, the higher the degree of community transmission in the

gathering area, the higher the risk of spreading COVID-19. Finally, the scale of an event or gathering should be planned and limited based on safety regulations and guidance enacted by governments.

Regarding future trends, Seraphin (2020) and Madray (2020) have suggested that virtual events would be a solution for the event industry to cope with and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Barometer (2020), in terms of consumer behaviour within the event industry, 84% of visitors and exhibitors have utilised one or more digital channels to use services since being forced to adhere to lockdowns and social distancing measures during the pandemic. 2020 saw an increase from 91% in June to 94% in September in the number of people willing to attend at least one event organised on any digital platform. A survey conducted by PCMA Convene (2020) on business related to events professionals indicated that 87% of interviewees withdrew from their offline events; 66% of these events were delayed due to COVID-19, and 70% of companies switched their offline events to virtual events. Hence, digital events are projected to prevail over live or offline events.

Virtual events

Background and Definitions

Scholars such as Seraphin (2020), Madray (2020), and Rubinger *et al.* (2020) have suggested that virtual events could be a solution for the event industry to survive during the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Sox, Crews and Kline (2014), virtual meetings have increased in number within recent years and, despite the popularity of face-to-face events, could provide excitement and innovation to the event industry. Wreford, Williams and Ferdinand (2019) observed that the increasing advancement of technology helps to create innovative approaches to organising planned events, such as virtual reality events. In short, a virtual meeting is, as defined by Rubinger *et al.* (2020, p. 1464), "one that is meticulously curated by event organisers and is viewed, and participated in, by attendees remotely with no brick-and-mortar or conventionally planned events". Meanwhile, ("What is a virtual event?," 2020) asserted that virtual events could imitate physical location-based events with the support of online/virtual platforms, allowing an individual or an organisation to hold several types of events (e.g., global conferences, trade shows, product launches, or recruitment fairs) from their home or office using a laptop or even a smartphone with internet connectivity. In addition, as mentioned above, event gatherings can be a single event or a set of several events; therefore, while virtual events can be added as a section of content in large events, they cannot be considered as a complete replacement of physical events (Howard, 2020). There are several types of virtual events based on different event organisers' unique purposes. ("9 Types of Virtual Events Being Hosted in 2021," 2020) predicted that nine types of virtual events may become popular in 2021: virtual conferences, webinars, online trade shows and exhibitions, virtual wedding ceremonies, online music concerts, virtual careers fairs, virtual onboarding fairs, virtual university fairs, and virtual benefits fairs.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Virtual Events

Pearlman and Gates (2010) stated that virtual events could provide distinctive benefits for both event organisers and attendees. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, technology was being increasingly used for virtual events and gatherings without travelling. In the context of the pandemic, the use of virtual events has been effective in adhering to movement restrictions, as well as enabling event organisers to boost revenue, reduce cost, expand branding and brand

community, keep track of attendees, and be proactive and reactive to any crisis (Bladen et al., 2017). Pietro, Virgilio and Pantano (2012) and Porpiglia *et al.* (2020) also noted the advantage of web-based technology connecting attendees without them having to travel. Honavar (2021) highlighted those virtual meetings would be complementary to physical ones due to their ability to eliminate unnecessary travel; they may, in addition, democratise education, encourage social and gender equity in education participation, and bring uninterrupted access across time zones in friendly environments. Moreover, virtual events can reduce carbon footprints and pollution caused by human travelling and mass movement (Roos, Oláh, Ingle, Kobayashi, & Feldt, 2020). Finally, Wreford, Williams and Ferdinand (2019) suggested that applying virtual reality within virtual events could help attendees to repeat and develop their impressive memories. This application would generate more positive and stronger feelings towards the event and its activities while simultaneously allowing access to those who may be physically unable to attend.

Nevertheless, virtual events also have some critical disadvantages. Firstly, virtual events cannot provide as much richness as physical events in terms of face-to-face interactions (Bladen et al., 2017). Porpiglia *et al.* (2020) claimed that it is practically impossible for online platforms to create the same human contact, inspiration, and emotions as traditional events, while Honavar (2021) argued that virtual meetings are impersonal and faceless and prone to technical problems and parallel interruptions, thus diminishing attendee attention. Critics have also stated that the opportunities to build more networks and strengthen relationships would be reduced because online platforms cannot imitate human contact, affection, and emotions (Porpiglia *et al.*, 2020; Honavar, 2021). Furthermore, event companies would have to contend with a significant shortfall in capital to sustainably survive in the long term in response to the use of advanced technologies (e.g., live chats, webinars, and online shows). Although these technologies facilitate the ability to maintain services in general, they are unable to generate as much financial revenue and attention as physical events. Lastly, some small- and medium-event companies have faced operational challenges due to insufficient investment in and conditions of virtual transformation under pressure from the COVID-19 pandemic (Madray, 2020).

Engagement in Virtual Events

Engagement has been described as one of the central factors influencing attendees' experiences of an event (Wood and Masterman, 2008; Geus, Richards and Toepoel, 2015). Event experiences require some degree of active involvement (Geus et al., 2016). In a virtual context, Kharouf *et al.* (2020) proposed that engagement allows for the creation of attendees' positive experiences, while Pine and Gilmore (1999) asserted that creating experiences is not merely about amusing customers but rather about engaging them.

Higgins and Scholer (2009) classified consumer engagement as a state in which consumers are involved, occupied, fully attracted, or immersed. The more individuals are engaged, the more value is added to the service provided, and vice versa. Vivek, Beatty and Morgan (2012) proposed a similar definition of engagement, describing it as "the intensity of an individual participation and connection with the organization offerings and activities initiated by either the customer or the organization" (Vivek, Beatty and Morgan, 2012, p. 133). In the event industry context, and especially in virtual events, audience engagement is regarded as the degree of engagement or involvement that could be used to evaluate event experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Psomadaki, Dimoulas, Kalliris, & Paschalidis, 2019). In addition, Kharouf *et al.*

(2020) showed that enabling consumers to engage with the online content of mega-events would help to enhance audience experiences, and Kraj *et al.* (2020) proposed that engagement in the virtual world would reflect the concentrated interest as well as emotional responses to an experience; it has connections in the way that event content influences viewers or attendees. Although according to Slater (2003), the presence of attendees could be determined by engagement levels, a person can nonetheless be in attendance without any feelings of involvement. Maintaining an online audience's engagement in the same way as a live event is a considerable challenge for event organisers: not all matter is appropriate within the virtual context and can easily create distractions for remote audiences (Crowther & Orefice, 2015). Copans (2020) showed that about 50% of event organisers consider live engagement one of their biggest challenges when holding virtual events. Despite the usefulness of techniques and tools applied in virtual events, organisers have indicated that most virtual event platforms do not possess features that focus specifically on engagement elements.

Scholars and industry experts alike have proposed several practical ways to aggregate attendee engagement in virtual events. For instance, Pine and Gilmore (1999) described four realms of experiential values identified by different levels and different forms of customer engagement. These realms are divided into participation levels (i.e., which can be passive or active) and relationships between customers and environments (i.e., which can involve absorption and immersion). Passive attendees are those who do not directly influence the implementation of an event, while active attendees have personal effects on the event that may, in turn, become a part of their experiences. Whether it reflects absorption or immersion, the environmental relationship is another element connecting attendees with the event. The authors defined absorption as "occupying a person's attention by bringing the experience into the mind" and immersion as "becoming physically/virtually a part of the experience itself" (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, p. 46). The combination of these four dimensions further classifies four dimensions of an experience: entertainment, educational, escapist, and aesthetic. The entertainment dimension occurs when attendees passively absorb the experiences by, for example, watching a performance or listening to a song. Educational experiences arise when a person absorbs the event while participating actively via physical or mental interactive engagement and, consequently, there is an increase in attendees' skills and knowledge (Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007). In contrast, escapist and aesthetic experiences are more concerned with the immersion of visitors. Escapist experiences refer to events involving the active involvement of attendees (e.g., artificial activities, travels to unusual destinations; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2003), and escapism can be displayed in both real and virtual events (Oh *et al.*, 2007). Aesthetic experiences also occur when attendees are immersed in an event; however, the attendees are less active than those involved in escapist experiences (Musa, Najmin, Thirumoorthi, & Taha, 2017). Oh, Fiore and Jeoung (2007, p. 127) argued that these four realms of experiences are "not only a conceptual fit but also a practical measurement framework for studies on tourist experiences". These experiences can develop stronger engagement amongst event visitors by creating a close connection between attendees and the event providers (Hayes & MacLeod, 2007).

According to Richards, Marques and Mein (2014), another practical means of engaging and interesting attendees is the use of storytelling. Green (2018) defined storytelling as a way to communicate something about an event visually, verbally, or through written communication. The most effective form of event storytelling is virtually disseminated and introduced during

the opening of the event and used throughout the whole event. A good event story should include “a call to action”, setting the events industry apart from other businesses. It should transform an audience’s emotional reaction into something more. Additionally, offering engaging content or stories for attendees in virtual events can draw their attention and reduce the distractions inherent to the internet (Tavares, 2020).

Moreover, Hede and Kellett (2014) suggested that event organisers should identify a specific level of engagement for different stakeholders involved in a virtual event as well as their particular interests; as such, such parties can interact better with each other and the boundary between them can become blurred. The prior studies have classified event stakeholders as belonging to several groups, such as community groups, event associations, governments, attendees, shareholders, and sponsors of the special event (Hede, 2007; Richards, Marques and Mein, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

Research design

In this study, an interpretivist paradigm was applied to conduct data collection. The purpose of the research was to rely as much as possible on the views of attendees on the situation being studied (Creswell, 2009). According to Creswell (2013, p. 44), “qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem”. When applying a qualitative method, researchers tend to collect individual stories and sentiments via interviews to detect how the attendees have personally experienced the situation (Creswell, 2009).

Scope of the research

Purposive sampling was used in this research. The sample comprised four attendees: two event organisers from the event industry in Ho Chi Minh City, who have had experience in organising both physical and virtual educational events, as well as one lecturer and one student from Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, who have experience in both traditional and virtual classes. The research was undertaken to analyse how the event organisers and attendees adapted to and overcame the COVID-19 pandemic, its effects on the event industry, and how they used virtual platforms effectively to create successful events during the pandemic.

Table 1: Profiles of in-dept interviewees.

Socio-demographics	Outcomes	Number (N=4)
Age	20 – 30	3
	30 – 40	1
Sex	Male	1
	Female	3
Education Level	Undergraduate	1
	Bachelor	2
	Doctor	1

Source: Created by the authors

Data collection

This research conducted in-depth interviews with event organisers and attendees. Interviews, which can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, are frequently used to collect data in qualitative research (Robson, 2002). In this study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to refer to predefined areas of interest with cues that could help to guide the conversation (Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012). There were two separate group interviews for the four attendees. The first interview group encompassed two experts in the event industry, while the second interview group comprised a lecturer and a student with considerable experience in virtual teaching and learning. On average, each interview lasted around 30 minutes, with draft questions asking interviewees about their perspectives and experiences of both physical and virtual events. Audio was recorded with the approval of all interviewees for further data analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Experience realms

Hayes and MacLeod (2007) posited that the four realms of experiential values facilitate the creation of a link between event attendees and event organisers; these dimensions can, therefore, increase the degree of engagement within an event. The responses related to this element include the following:

The event organiser must determine which category of the event is held because, with different types of events, the engagement degree of attendees will also be different. For example, within a conference, people actively join to exchange and gain additional information and useful knowledge in a particular area. At that time, they will actively interact with each other so that the exchange of information can be more effective. (Respondent 3).

Offline events will have better engagement because attendees will be able to see people's faces and see the expressions of those around them. In contrast, engagement in an online event must depend a lot on the nature of the event. (Respondent 4).

There was a consistency between the experiences of the academics and the event experts. Indeed, most interviewees agreed that the realm of experience or the nature of the event would affect the practical implications of encouraging attendee engagement within a virtual context. Event organising can be regarded as a service delivery industry, which is mainly based on customer experience.

Representatives from the event industry suggested that it is necessary to consider the type of experience that a virtual event brings to attendees. From there, the organisers can identify whether they can retain attendee engagement or whether they need to implement other approaches.

Storytelling

The findings highlight that both event organisers and event attendees emphasised storytelling in virtual events. In other words, when focusing on attendee engagement, it is necessary to thoroughly prepare the event content, especially in virtual events. In line with Richards, Marques and Mein (2014), who discussed the role of storytelling in enhancing attendee

engagement, each participant noted the significance of storytelling. While Respondent 1 affirmed the similar contents between online and offline settings, Respondent 2 discussed how the role of storytelling could be used to hold a virtual event effectively:

One significant consideration for effectively organising a virtual event is the content of the event. Actually, storytelling plays an important role because it will ensure that the event content is fully conveyed to the attendees and control the duration of the programme. (Respondent 2)

Meanwhile, Respondent 4 discussed the importance of content in an educational context, observing that “In an online classroom, if a teacher prepares and deliver the lesson content appropriately, the degree of engagement will increase, and the lesson will be more effectively transferred to students”.

These responses are consistent with the findings of Tavares (2020) concerning how storytelling can help to sustain and increase the degree of engagement. Notably, Respondent 3 asserted that storytelling could be applied to the pre-event period to gradually attract attendee attention and increase engagement, claiming that “All event attendees need to prepare and learn about the event’s content in advance to ensure effective participant interaction”.

The purposes of different stakeholders when they attend an event

Different stakeholders’ roles were highlighted by Respondent 2, who noted that

Before organising a virtual event, the event organisers will give some options to the speakers and the guests, such as whether they want their event to be held privately or publicly. For a concrete example, a private webinar session will ensure the amount of interaction among the pure audiences, but the number of attendees will be limited, and the presenter’s mood will be affected when attendees can join in or out of the event. Conversely, the live stream form will only have one MC and the speakers, and the audience will follow directly through Facebook; thus, it can solve the problems mentioned above of a private webinar, but the engagement of attendees during the event will be limited. In addition, the online form will be less risky than offline because the event organiser will not pay much attention to the number of attendees, and the mood of the speakers will not be affected much. For example, for an offline workshop, when the number of attendees cannot cover all audience space, the speaker will be negatively affected because they will see it through their own eyes. Meanwhile, if the event is organised online, they will not know exactly how many people are joining, so their mood will not be affected much. In fact, from attendee perspectives, after the online event happened, they did not give feedback on their engagement degree or their moods during the event. For example, with the IU Job Fair online held in 2020, students participate with the purpose of finding jobs and applying to the vacancies of their choice, so the element of engagement does not play as much importance as in other events. (Respondent 2)

Meanwhile, according to Respondent 3, “From the participants’ perspectives, everyone has a specific goal when they come to an event, whether it’s an offline event or an online event”.

These responses are in line with the work of Hede and Kellett (2014), who identified the specific interests of different stakeholders involved in a virtual event. Interviewees indicated that the event organisers were more focused on the mood and performance of the speakers and the guests rather than on attendee engagement. Nevertheless, this is the same for attendees who are more concerned with their personal purposes when participating in the event. They are more interested in engagement when it may help them achieve their goals.

The relationship between the three elements

According to Respondent 2, in offline events, “attendees can interact directly with each other”. However, in online events, this interaction depends “on the nature of the event”; some “will allow attendees to interact at the same time, while others will ask people to leave comments below, and these comments will be answered after the event ends”. This response suggests that depending on the intent of the attendee, the event experience and the level of attendee immersion or absorption can be defined differently. More specifically, although the virtual event mentioned in the interview belongs to the educational realm of experience, which, for Pine and Gilmore (1999), occurs when attendees are actively involved, attendees can still be required to participate passively in order to ensure the purpose and the mood of other attendee groups.

Respondent 3 spoke of engagement levels in the classroom:

[The] engagement level depends on the type of student, and it will directly affect the lecturer's mood. When engagement isn't good, different ways are used to communicate better and increase engagement, such as asking questions and assignments in class or after class and asking students to read and discuss in groups about the lectures before class. (Respondent 3)

This comment underpins the importance of storytelling or the event content to obtain the purpose of attendees but as a speaker. In this case, the lecturer can tailor the effectiveness of class activities to deliver knowledge to students.

These findings suggest that the four realms of experience, storytelling, and the purpose of different parties participating in an event should be carefully considered to allow organisers to control and enhance attendee engagement in virtual events. In addition, responses reflect a relationship among these three elements, which indicates the importance of identifying the nature of an event when considering best practices in organising virtual events based on the degree of attendee engagement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Answering research questions

This research set out to build upon the theories and ideas demonstrated in the literature review. Two research questions were created to guide the study and identify the best practices for future virtual events to enhance engagement.

Question 1 - What elements affect attendee engagement in virtual events?

While there are many factors influencing the degree of attendee engagement in virtual events, this research has highlighted three particularly prominent elements: realms of experience, storytelling, and the intent of different stakeholders involved in an event.

The first element defines experiential realms as a form of attendee engagement (i.e., whether attendees join an event either actively or passively); event professionals also refer to this element as the nature of the event. Responses signified that attendee engagement could be controlled by understanding the nature of the event and the kind of experience.

Storytelling, meanwhile, was defined as the event content and the event programme and can be applied in all phases of a virtual event (e.g., pre-event, during event, and post-event).

The significance of stakeholders' intentions underlines that every event participant has their own purposes, and these purposes can be the same or different. Thus, they may affect interactions within the event.

Question 2 - How can event organisers maintain and enhance attendee engagement during virtual events?

Event organisers and event attendees were interviewed to examine the actual effects of the three aforementioned elements on attendee engagement. The interviews suggested that each aspect brings a specific set of values to attendee engagement. Event organisers can either use realms of experience or identify the stakeholders' intentions to decide whether they need to increase the degree of engagement or not. If participants are actively involved in the event, the degree of engagement should be emphasised and raised to create a memorable experience for these attendees and vice versa. If, conversely, attendees do not engage well with one other, engagement could be enhanced by modifying the event content.

Furthermore, there are two types of relationships among these three elements that reflect the best practices for virtual events. Storytelling depends on what the realm of experience is and induces engagement between and among stakeholders based on their different objectives towards the event. Thus, engagement is, perhaps, unnecessary during the whole virtual event; it depends primarily on the event objectives and speakers' self-interests.

In summary, this study emphasises the importance of experience realms, storytelling, and the different intentions of stakeholders involved in virtual events. It proposes that a combination of these three elements can enhance attendee engagement in virtual events.

Theoretical contributions

This research makes theoretical contributions concerning attendee engagement in virtual events within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings are consistent with those of Hayes and MacLeod (2007), Hede and Kellett (2014), and Tavares (2020) and may also lead to practical implications. This research not only acknowledges the importance of experience realms (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), storytelling (Richards, Marques and Mein, 2014), and the involvement of various stakeholders in virtual events (Hede and Kellett, 2014) but also illuminates the connection among these elements. Further research should replicate this study on a larger scale to provide more robust theoretical explanations of how these three elements can connect to affect attendee engagement in virtual events.

Best practices to enhance attendee engagement

The planning phase of a virtual event is critical because it involves designing and creating content for the event. If event organisers seek to maximise attendee engagement, they should focus on developing appropriate and compelling content for their virtual events. Attractive and appealing content can help organisers to engage their attendees and, in turn, increase experiential values when participating in virtual events. If, for instance, during a webinar, attendees play a minigame in the middle of the event, their engagement and interaction level can be increased; meanwhile, the speaker's mood will be relatively unaffected. In addition, allowing for introductions and small talk at the beginning of the event may enable attendees to get acquainted and initially build relationships with each other. In contrast, if it is unnecessary to increase the degree of attendee engagement, the organisers can simply consider the nature of the event and find an appropriate way to maintain a moderate degree of attendee engagement.

Limitations and further research directions

This research dealt with time constraints and a lack of in-depth interviewees from a wide range of occupations related to attendee engagement within virtual events.

The research explored attendee engagement within virtual events in education only. Further research should expand the research context to fully explore attendee engagement. Moreover, quantitative research approaches should be considered to build on and support the existing and new theories.

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