Exploring the Use of Virtual and Hybrid Events for MICE Sector Resilience: The Case of South Africa

Refiloe Julia Lekgau*
School of Tourism & Hospitality, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, South Africa, Email, rlekgau@uj.ac.za

Tembi Maloney Tichaawa
School of Tourism & Hospitality, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, South Africa, Email, tembit@uj.ac.za

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

This study departs from the premise that COVID-19 has fast-tracked the transition to the virtual environment in the global meetings, incentives, conference/convention, and exhibition (MICE) events sector. Using South Africa as a case study, the research explores the use of virtual and hybrid events in enhancing the resilience of MICE events. Adopting a mixed methods approach, data was collected from 19 purposively selected MICE tourism stakeholders (involved in the planning and organizing of the MICE sector) as well as 500 MICE event attendees. The findings reveal that virtual and hybrid MICE events ensured the business continuity of the MICE sector during COVID-19. Additionally, these events were found to be essential for information sharing and proved valuable in times of uncertainty. The study further found that these events provided substantial market opportunities for MICE stakeholders in the country. However, the study uncovered that certain sub-sector of MICE, as well as some key functions, cannot be easily replicated in the virtual space. Moreover, several challenges surfaced when hosting such events, including the matter of internet connectivity and the significant capital investments required for their execution. Overall, the study concludes that virtual events have emerged as a valuable tool for enhancing the resilience of MICE events to crises, and hybrid events are postulated to become a prominent feature in MICE events offerings in the future.

Keywords: Virtual events; hybrid events; MICE tourism; South Africa; COVID-19; resilience

Introduction

Events within the meetings, incentive trips, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) sector have become a major source of income for many destinations globally (Getz & Page, 2020; Séraphin, 2021). The growth and expansion of this event typology has evolved to include the exploration of virtual and hybrid platforms, which have become a frequent feature within the MICE event landscape (Pearlman & Gates, 2010; Simons, 2019; Sox et al., 2017). Indeed, some of the reasons cited for this growth include improved internet connectivity, the fast emergence of virtual platforms to host such events (including MS Teams, Zoom, and Skype) and the convenience related to virtual events (Hofstädter-Thalmann et al., 2022; Pearlman & Gates, 2010; Shi et al., 2021; Sox et al., 2014). Understandably, the use of such events was fast-tracked in 2020 with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ho & Sia, 2021; Séraphin, 2021). Dillette and Ponting (2021) elaborated that the quick switch to virtual events had been premeditated by the lack of face-to-face interactions as a result of COVID-19 regulations and the increased need for business interactions, and recovery planning amongst organisations.

In fact, some reports have shown that within the first couple of months into the pandemic, platforms such as Zoom and MS Teams had gained millions of users (Karl et al., 2022; Neate, 2020; Thorp-Lancaster, 2020). This was, arguably, a major change for the MICE sector, with Zeng et al. (2020) describing MICE tourism as having been traditionally a 'high touch, low tech' industry. In addition, Pearlman and Gates (2010) asserted that the MICE sector was (prior to the pandemic) slow to adapt to technological innovations. Nevertheless, there have been significant movements toward the effective utilization of virtual MICE events (Dillette & Ponting, 2021) and moving beyond maintaining the operations of the industry during distressing times, to providing an opportunity for the sector to reinvent itself (Dillette & Ponting, 2021; Séraphin, 2021; Séraphin & Jarraud, 2021; Sterioupoulos & Wrathall, 2021).

It has been suggested that the MICE sector is instrumental to post-COVID-19 global economic recovery (International Congress and Convention Association [ICCA], 2020; Orthodoxou et al., 2022). The current study draws attention to South Africa, which had identified the sector as a key growth area for the country's tourism development strategy (Rogerson, 2019). South Africa is one of the leading MICE destinations in Sub-Saharan Africa and is recognized as a competitive destination globally (Weru & Njoroge, 2021; Zhou, 2021). Similar to other parts of the world, the MICE sector of South Africa has relied on virtual events as an adaptation strategy to the pandemic in order to maintain operations (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). Moreover, this sector has been identified as important in restarting tourism recovery (Rogerson & Baum, 2020). Due to the sector's significance, it becomes imperative to explore its next development phase, as fast-tracked by the pandemic. The study concurs with the contention presented by Sox et al. (2017) that the emerging and rapidly evolving technological developments in the MICE sector require continuous investigation. Moreover, while there are studies in virtual and hybrid MICE events, albeit very few, investigations into this research matter have not yet been explored within the context of developing countries. Moreover, as these platforms have been used as a means to ensure the continuity of the sector during COVID-19, the study further examines the utilization of virtual and hybrid events as a means to enhance the resilience of MICE tourism in South Africa.

Literature review
Virtual and hybrid events

Events create spaces for individuals to interact and build communities (Getz & Page, 2016; Séraphin, 2021; Simons, 2019). Indeed, Getz and Page (2020) underscore that people need and want to meet and come together, and events serve this function. In particular, MICE events are created in order to foster and drive business-to-business interactions, with the available literature showing that there are several reasons for the attendance of such events, including social networking, education and opportunities to learn new trends within a particular sector (Cassar et al., 2020; Huang, 2016; Jung & Tanford, 2017; Kim et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2010). Indeed, Henderson (2015) conceptualises MICE events as sites for social and intellectual activity. Networking is one of the most highly rated motivations for attending business events, with Jung and Tanford (2017) explaining how networking includes building professional relationships, interacting with colleagues, friends, and individuals in the same professional space, and seeking opportunities to grow careers. Similarly, MICE events, particularly exhibitions and trade shows, have traditionally been places where major advancements and product developments have also been introduced (Lee et al., 2010; Rittichainuwat et al., 2020; Tinnish & Mangal, 2012). Huang (2016) continued to add that exhibitions also offer the opportunities for exhibitors to further extend their relationships with their clients. For a long time, these needs were serviced in a physical space, and Simons (2019: 146) highlights that

events have evolved from being traditionally place-bound to being nodes in 'location-independent social networks'.

The past few decades have been marked by remarkable advancements in technological developments, particularly those related to information and technology (Locke, 2010; Shi et al., 2021; Sox et al., 2014). As a result, MICE event organizers have looked for ways to incorporate more technology into these events (Sox et al., 2014). Typically, the MICE sector has incorporated technology in event planning and staging, as well as in enhancing the attendees' experience pre, during, and post-the event (Simons, 2019; Solaris, 2018; Sox et al., 2014; Talantis et al., 2020; Tanford et al., 2012). Regarding the former of the uses, Pearlman and Gates (2010) explained that technology offers organisers the ability to reduce costs, extend the event brand, build an event community and enable better tracking (of attendees) and data management. Regarding the event experience, research has slowly begun examining the use of virtual reality, augmented reality, and mobile applications and attendees' acceptance of such technologies (Abou-Shouk et al., 2018; Cassar et al., 2020; Locke, 2010; Simons, 2019; Talantis et al., 2020). For a long time, technology had been used to enhance the in-person event experience (Chuang, 2020; Sox et al., 2014). As opined by Cassar et al. (2020) and Talantis et al. (2020), the inclusion of event technology has now become a differentiating factor that could enhance the competitiveness of the event and host destination.

Virtual and hybrid meetings have been described as the newest genre in MICE events and are critical to the growth of the sector (Sox et al., 2014). However, there is a significant lack of academic literature on these types of MICE events, with those available focusing on the unique benefits of virtual events (see, for instance, Cakir, 2002; Pearlmann & Gates, 2010; Sa et al., 2019; Edger, 2002;). Specifically, it has been argued that virtual events are cost-effective, reach a wider audience, provide greater accessibility and are more environmentally friendly than traditionally hosted events (Pearlmann & Gates, 2010; Hofstädter-Thalmann et al., 2022; Sa et al., 2019). Notably, other studies examine the attendees' perceptions of virtual and hybrid events by comparing the views of different generations (Sox et al., 2014, 2017). More recently, studies have highlighted the fact that virtual events were a reactionary response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the inability of the sector to meet in-person (Dillette & Ponting, 2021; Ho & Sia, 2021; Hofstädter-Thalmann et al., 2022). The current study thereby contributes towards the literature by exploring the experiences of MICE event attendees at virtual events and examining the extent to which these events can increase the resilience of the MICE sector going forward.

Resiliency and tourism post-COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has strongly re-emphasised the inherent chaos and uncertainty of the globalised world (Gössling et al., 2021; Hopkins, 2021). This study is grounded by the premise presented by Hopkins (2021) that crises (and disturbances) must be considered as a norm, rather than a deviation. This assertion has been acknowledged in the academic literature, and as such, there have been some movements beyond crisis management to resilience learning (see Ioannides & Gyimothy, 2020; Orthodoxou et al., 2022; Sigala, 2020). Resilience refers to the capacity of various systems to cope with and respond to exogenous shocks and disasters (Chowdhury et al., 2019). The resilience theory was originally developed in the natural sciences field and has been adopted into various disciplines, including tourism (Chowdhury et al., 2019). Generally, resilience has emerged as a tool to critically examine the survival and adaptation of tourism systems (such as destinations, sectors, businesses, and communities) in the face of a crisis (Hall, 2017).

The review of the literature reveals that there are two schools of thought to understanding resilience, the first views resilience as the capacity to return to a pre-crisis state

and the second understands resilience as the ability to relearn and acquire a new state (of operations) (Bhamra et al., 2011; Chowdhury et al., 2019; Clement & Rivera, 2017; Knight-Lenihan, 2016). The latter school of thought argues that a crisis can push a tourism system into a 'new normal' (Basurto-Cedeno & Pennington-Gray, 2018). It has been widely accepted that the pandemic has resulted in a major transformation and change in tourism development (Dahles & Susilowati, 2015; Duchek et al., 2020; Gössling et al., 2021). Within a socio-economic system, such as the MICE sector, resilience relates to the ability to continue providing services during a crisis (Burnard et al., 2018; Do et al., 2022). Indeed, while maintaining some stability, the system is able to incorporate changes in its operation in order to respond to the changing complex environment. This capacity further extends to the ability to innovate and ignite renewals during times of uncertainty and disaster (Kato, 2018). Cochrane (2010) views resilience as a loop, of which learning becomes an integral component. As such, the current study focuses on resiliency learning, which is preparing for the future and minimizing the vulnerability of tourism to future pandemics and crises (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2020), taking into specific consideration the MICE event sector of South Africa.

Methodology

Given the complexity of the COVID-19 induced environment, a comprehensive investigation of the use of virtual and hybrid events required the use of both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. A mixed methods research approach was thereby used for the current study. The study was divided into two phases of data collection in accordance with the two research approaches. The qualitative approach comprised the first phase and involved interviews with key MICE event stakeholders. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was utilized, whereby representatives of industry associations and event planners were approached based on their operation (within the sector) and experience in order to be interviewed. Thereafter, those interviewed were asked to refer other people who had the requisite information. More often than not, the potential participants had been individuals that worked closely with the initial participants identified. This process yielded 19 interviews that were held virtually, using Microsoft Teams. These interviews took place from February to May 2021. The interview questions were open-ended to provide for in-depth discussions and probing so as to explore the current shift in MICE sector towards virtual events.

The data collected from this phase of the research informed the second phase of data collection - the quantitative approach. The quantitative component of the study focused on examining the experiences and perceptions of MICE event attendees. This phase of the study occurred in May 2022, when in-person events were permitted in South Africa as MICE event venues could host up to 50% capacity. Surveys were distributed to the attendees of the 2022 Africa's Travel Indaba - one of largest MICE events hosted on the continent. A simple random sampling approach was utilized to ensure that every attendee had an equal chance of participating in the study. The survey utilized a 5-point Likert scale to measure respondents' experiences and perceptions of virtual and hybrid events. In total, 500 valid surveys were collected.

In terms of data analysis, the interviews were recorded (having obtained prior permission), transcribed and loaded onto Atlast.ti for the generation of themes. For the quantitative data, the Statistical Package for Social Package (SPSS) version 28, was used to generate descriptive statistics. The following section presents and discusses the results of the study.

Results and discussion
Profile of the MICE event attendees

Table 1 below illustrates the MICE event-related profile of the respondents. As shown in the table, the majority of the attendees were from South Africa (75%), and 15% of the respondents were international attendees. Amongst these international attendees, the majority originated from the African continent. Almost half of the respondents had attended the event as an exhibitor (47%), followed by buyers (17%) and tourism authorities (11%). The results further reveal that most respondents frequently attended events, while only 18% had never attended such an event before the pandemic. These results could offer a unique insight into the changes implemented during COVID-19, particularly regarding virtual and hybrid events, as the respondents not only offer various perspectives owing to their roles and geographic regions but furthermore owing to their pre- and during COVID-19 experience of events. Regarding their attendance of MICE events during the pandemic, 51% of the respondents indicated that they had attended events. It was also found that while the attendance had been spread amongst meetings, conferences, exhibitions and trade shows, and conventions, most of these events were attended virtually (54%), and some in-person (32%).

Table 1. Respondents' events profile

Respondents' events profile	In %
Geographic region	Domestic MICE attendees (75%); International MICE attendees (15%)
Region of international attendees	Africa (84%); America (6%); Europe (5%); Australia (4%); Asia (1%)
Role in the event	Exhibitor (47%); Buyer (17%); Tourism authority (11%); Event organisation team (7%); Media representative (6%); Event volunteer (3%); Other (8%)
Frequency of attending MICE events pre-COVID	Once a year (18%); Twice a year (19%); More than three times (46%); Have never attended before the COVID-19 pandemic (18%)
Attendance of MICE events during COVID-19	Attended MICE events (51%); Did not attend any MICE event (49%)
Types of events attended	Meetings (35%); Conferences (28%); Exhibitions & trade shows (28%); Conventions (7%); Incentive travel (2%)
Mediums used for attending events in 2020 and 2021	Fully virtual (54%); In-person (32%); Hybrid (14%)

Virtual events during COVID-19

The effectiveness and utility of the virtual and hybrid mediums for MICE events depends, in part, on the ability of these structures to fulfil the core functions of MICE events, which relate to networking, information sharing, sales, and professional development. The shift to virtual events therefore required the examination of attendees' perception of the effectiveness of virtual mediums in this regard. Accordingly, Table 2 below breaks down the respondents' experiences of virtual MICE events during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2. Respondents' perceptions to online events (n=500, in %)

Experiences in MICE events during COVID-19	Mean	SD
Online and hybrid events were important for information sharing and maintaining business continuity	4.11	0.989
Online events experiences were only a plaster until the regulations allowed for live/in-person events	3.44	1.301
Online events do not provide the same opportunities for networking and forming professional ties	3.88	1.196
Online events have proved essential in times of uncertainty	4.11	1.002
Online events cannot fully replicate the functions of MICE events (e.g., making hard sales)	4.07	1.128
Online events opened new opportunities for my business/profession	3.52	1.222
Hybrid events will be the most preferred form of MICE event in the future	3.63	1.306

Largely, the findings reveal that virtual events were key to ensuring the business continuity (mean = 4.11) of the MICE sector and, therefore important during times of uncertainty (mean = 4.11). Such findings support the previous work of Dillette and Ponting (2021), Hofstädter-Thalmann et al. (2022), and Ho and Sia (2021) which similarly found many MICE event sectors had no other options than to transition to virtual events. Indeed, many of the participants agreed that one of the initial changes seen in the MICE sector of South Africa had been to quickly offer MICE events on virtual platforms. Further broadening on this, one participant explained that this shift to virtual events had come from the examination of global trends and the changing needs of their clients. One statement encapsulating such views is presented below, from an exhibition planner:

> So it is not just in South Africa, but now internationally as well, the same process has been happening because we work very closely with our international counterparts all over the world. And we've been in many sessions to look at what the global trends are versus the local trends and they are very similar in terms of [clients'] needs. So it's looking at those trends and saying, 'Okay, how do you fulfil those needs?'. And how do we bring these two audiences together from an attendee perspective and exhibitor perspective, and now online? The virtual space became the big thing and the big way of doing that.

While the impact of COVID-19 on the events industry has been receiving scholarly attention (Grix et al., 2021; Horky, 2021; Séraphin, & Jarraud, 2022), the current findings show that the regulations adopted for COVID-19 had changed the MICE sector needs of both the sector and other clients. Virtual events therefore served as a necessary means to comply with regulations and ensured that the functions of the MICE events still continued when restrictions prohibited travel and gatherings. Further, many participants agreed with the importance of virtual events to ensure that the core function of MICE events (the need to meet and foster relationships) continued for businesses, associations, and even governments. In this regard, one meeting planner expressed the following:

> That was why we said 'well let's embrace the virtual events'. Because we need to keep connecting people. That's what it's about. You have to keep those connections and relationships going. Because if you let that dry up completely, then how do you start up again, when the world does resume?

The need to retain connections between people has become more important as the global economy has been heading towards a recession. As such, the importance of the sector in bringing together professionals for gathering insight on adapting to the pandemic as well as for recovery planning has been emphasized. This ties back to events being spaces for intellectual activity (Henderson, 2015), however, it is important to note that such views arise from the event organisers. In contrast, the findings from event attendees suggests that while these event formats are crucial for continuing the MICE event sector, the respondents of the study felt that these formats did not deliver on certain key functions of such events (such as making hard sales) (mean = 4.07), particularly networking and relationship building (mean = 3.88). The extant literature on MICE events generally identifies networking, searching for (and acquiring) new products/services, and information sharing as the major reasons for the attendance of these events. Accordingly, the results of the study thereby demonstrate that the use of virtual platforms for MICE events had been largely for information sharing, rather than fully continuing the functions of events.

In fact, speaking to the exhibition sub-sector, some participants lamented that virtual platforms had not supported one of these platforms' key functions - direct sales. See, for instance, a response from an exhibition planner:

> In an exhibition space, it's about selling. Do you think that if I want to sell you a car now, worth a million rands, will you buy it? Chances are no, regardless of how well I pitch or sell that car. However, if we meet in person and the car is right next to you, and I demonstrate to you and say, here's my 1 million rand car that I'm selling to you.. So firstly, you're going to see this person who is selling to you - your sales person. You're going see how I conduct myself and kind of create your own perceptions about me as a sales person. You'll ask 'is she even an honest person, is she worth me even listening to her or do I switch off the minute she comes in wearing baggy clothes' Because, how can she sell 1 million rand cars looking like that'?

The above quotes highlight the importance of perceptions and non-verbal communication in the practice of making sales in exhibition spaces. The participants thereby explained that these virtual platforms fall short in this regard, compared to traditional in-person events. Such findings coincide with those of Mainela and Ulkuniemi (2013) on the vital role played by personal interactions in the marketing and selling activities in exhibitions as the facilitators of business to business interactions. Notably, the respondents representing this subsector point out the development of trust that occurs within the exhibition space and the inability of virtual spaces to replicate this process.

Interestingly, there was some agreement that virtual events are temporary, and a fixture of the COVID-19 period (mean = 3.44). This could suggest some discontent with these platforms as some of the participants (mostly organizers) cited an increase in virtual fatigue amongst the attendees of the virtual events they hosted. A few studies (such as Bailenson, 2021; Fauville et al., 2021; Hawthorne et al., 2019) that have looked into virtual events have noted virtual fatigue and the limited engagement provided as strong reasons for in-person events to dominate post-COVID-19, particularly for those events planned with productivity outcomes (that is, engagement, networking, sales objectives etc.).

Having respondents who had attended MICE events pre- and during COVID-19 created the opportunity to gauge their preferences for virtual versus in-person events. As shown in Table 2, the majority of the respondents preferred in-person events compared to virtual events - for exhibitions (94%), incentive travel (88%), conventions (86%) and conferences (82%). Interestingly, for meetings, 41% of the respondents indicated that they preferred virtual events. Such findings highlight the importance of understanding the characteristics of different MICE event components as meetings which typically occur more frequently and are centred on the exchange of information may be better aligned with the current use of virtual platforms.

Table 10.2: Participants' preferences between virtual and in-person MICE events (*n*=500, in %)

	Virtual	In-person
Conventions	14	86
Meetings	41	59
Conferences	18	82
Exhibition / trade show	6	94
Incentive travel	12	88

While there are some aspects that they are lacking, virtual events have proven their significance to the MICE sector landscape during COVID-19. However, their drawbacks have led to the incremental increased use of hybrid events. In fact, the respondents were of the view that hybrid

events will become the most preferred option going forward (mean= 3.63) as they integrate both in-person and virtual features.

New opportunities from virtual events

A theme that surfaced in the interviews was the new opportunities that emerged from using virtual events, which had been backed up by the respondents (mean= 3.52). These opportunities ranged from the ability to host more shows/events to growth in potential markets. Speaking to the former, one trade show organizer had mentioned the following:

> When it comes to your conferencing side or your exhibition side, a lot of people have scaled into virtual events. And we've now run 17 virtual events for [the] Africa showcase. So we would normally be doing our international marketing roadshows. In the States in September, we took that online, Australia last year, October, we took it online; we did UK, Ireland online; we did a Europe show in November online. And then at the end of March, we had four road shows in one essentially. We did four markets across Europe, in one week.

In addition, the quote above indicates that the sector may have more opportunities to run more shows/events within a short span of time, owing to the minimal travel arrangements involved. This forms one of the major advantages of virtual events frequently cited in the literature (Hofstädter-Thalman et al., 2022; Pearlmann & Gates, 2010; Talantis et al., 2020). These cited studies aver that the minimal travel translate to lower costs for delegates to access the event, with Pearlmann and Gates (2010) going further to point to this advantage as being particularly important in times of economic and health crises where professionals may not be able to travel.

Moreover, the participants further explained that the virtual events had brought forth new market opportunities for the members of the MICE sector. The new market opportunities arising from the hosting of virtual events stem from the fact that the sector has begun marketing their virtual offerings to a wider market. One conference organizer stated:

> It makes our world a little bit bigger, because like I said earlier on, we now are not just targeting South African clients, we're now targeting international clients, and they're paying dollars, which is much better. And they're more open to the idea of charging higher rates for people to attend virtual events... We would never have in the past targeted internationals, we would have always stuck by South Africans. But now, because of this, it's sort of opened up our scope a little bit.

In addition, the use of virtual events offers wider market opportunities and some MICE venues have begun upgrading their digital infrastructure to remain competitive in the global market. In several previous studies, state of the art technology and AV systems had been a key attribute of event planners in their site selection process (Abou-Shouk et al., 2018; Locke, 2010; Shi et al., 2021; Sox et al., 2014; Talantis et al., 2020). Accordingly, while the pandemic has fast-tracked the adoption of virtual and hybrid events, the benefits derived from these event formats led to more exploration of how they could be used alongside in-person events. Interestingly, many of the participants noted that the pandemic had reset the nature of competitiveness in the global MICE sector. For example, a convention organizer had the following to say:

> After we had attended the show, we had a post-workshop with the organisers and they were sharing their experiences. And one of the guys said something so key, he said more than ever field has been levelled. It is not about how we best show up at the show. And through that, markets that have never looked at us… it [COVID-19] is a press start for everyone. It gives us an opportunity to start looking at other markets.

Evidently, the widespread impact of the pandemic and the effect of lockdown regulations on MICE operations have led to a more levelled competition in the global sector. The bidding for MICE events had become increasingly competitive prior to the pandemic (Elston & Draper, 2012; Marais et al., 2017). The participants elaborated that since the MICE industry is in its recovery stage, there are opportunities for developing destinations such as South Africa to reposition themselves within the global market strongly. In this regard, destination marketing and imaging becomes important, as is evidenced by the SAT's representation and marketing of the country in several international MICE events.

Changes in supplier relationships

Emerging in the interviews with much of the participants is the notion that the hosting of virtual events had changed some supplier relationships. For a long period of time, the MICE sector of South Africa had focused on in-person events. An earlier study had found that planning a fully virtual event had required significant learning for MICE event planners (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022). In terms of supplier relationships, for many of the participants, this had meant understanding the virtual platforms available and conducting an examination of which of the platforms had worked most effectively to suit different client needs. For instance, an exhibition organizer offered the following:

> There are so many technology suppliers around and they can offer you the world. There are different virtual platforms that I've come across. I don't know how many clients have presented virtual platforms to me that I could use it as the answer to all my solutions as an organiser. But not everyone is equal. And only if you do your homework properly, you see the flaws in each system. And you've got to meet them, you've got to explore it, you got to try the back end, you got to trail and you've got to get your team to trial it. You possibly have to even present it to some of your key clients, your key partners, and get them to trail it to see how comfortable they are to be 100%, because it requires quite a large investment to invest in this and it can go horribly, horribly wrong. The last thing you want is to be hosting an international event, and your technology fails you, you know, and this event is now pivoting on this technology, this platform and it lets you down.

The importance of technology suppliers, as underscored above, had been noted to translate to the reputation of events. Understandably, technology (and its successful execution) has been flagged as a core aspect in MICE event planning (Locke, 2010). Indeed, not only does the above quote illustrate the change in the planning considerations of the MICE event planners, but more so, it emphasizes how fundamentally important the technological aspect is to the success of the event. This augments earlier views of technology as emerging as a strong point for competitiveness in the global market.

Moreover, the hosting of events online further means a change in the needs of certain suppliers. Some participants aver that some departments have become lesser of a consideration while others grew in significance. Many of the participants concur that the food and beverage

department had not been a major consideration in fully virtual events. In fact, some interviews with hotel venue suppliers highlighted that food and beverage operations had taken a major dive due to the focus on virtual events. One such supplier stated:

> So, you look at your F&B, your food and beverage structure, you know, it was very lean, because that's where the majority of MICE business obviously contributes. So we kept that quite lean. And it's still lean in most of our operations today, because it's one way of being able to keep the cost down, while the business is not is not coming in.

While the above strategy was more prominent in the first two years of the pandemic, where most MICE events had been held virtually, it remains relevant in the present use of virtual events. While the inclusion of technology has been known to affect relationships between event planners (Bueno et al., 2020), the study found that virtual events (and to some extent, hybrid events) affect several suppliers within the event industry. As alluded to above, the requirements (particularly in terms of services) for the physical space decreases. Similarly, much of the venue suppliers and MICE planners also noted an increase in collaboration with AV suppliers in order to deliver virtual MICE events. This is evident in a quote below from a venue supplier:

> So like I said, we've got two AV suppliers, audiovisual suppliers, that provide us with AV, and they are specialists in what they do. And we've also got an ICT team, the inhouse team that are upskilling themselves to become more aware of what can and cannot be done, what platforms to use, and what streaming devices and what cameras are used in studios. So it's like, a Super Sport studio. And it's been a learning curve. It's not just about the camera facing the person, it's about the light behind them. There are so many different things to take into consideration when you're doing a virtual event, because you actually broadcast around the world.

One reason for this collaboration, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, had been to leverage technical skills and knowledge that had not yet been pronounced in the MICE sector. Accordingly, AV suppliers became a major player in the MICE sector during its dependence on virtual events to ensure continuity. Therefore, the study found that the various shifts within the supplier relationships may be dependent, to a certain extent, on the level of expertise and knowledge held in the industry regarding the hosting of virtual events. Another supplier of the exhibition subsector had also indicated that they had been forced to refocus their activity to other sectors, such as supplying stands for retail sectors, as a way to survive the pandemic's impact on the MICE sector. The change in the supplier relationships could have some substantial impacts on the economic contribution of the MICE sector to the economy – more so when considering that MICE events are often described as intersecting with several sectors of the economy, in the staging of an event.

Connectivity challenges

Many of the participants noted that while virtual events had been an instrumental method to maintaining the operations of the sector and continue to meet MICE needs of key markets, the hosting of these events faced substantial connectivity challenges in the country. For instance, an AV supplier described the situation as follows:

> One challenge we are facing is connectivity. Because you could have the most brilliant studio set up at a venue, a world class studio, but if that person sitting at home doesn't

have fibre connectivity - they've got LTE and it's buffering - they're not going to have a good experience. And then some people can't log in to the browser, chrome or safari. So a virtual conference is actually more work than a physical conference. And that is what many organisers and big corporates are realising, [that] there is a lot of legwork that goes into it. There's always somebody that is going to come back and say, 'Oh, that was terrible. I couldn't view the video in good quality or I couldn't log on'. But these are factors that are completely out of you as an organiser, or you as an AV person, to control. Because if you have sent out 500 invites to log onto a virtual platform, how are you going to manage all of those five hundreds connectivity issues? The screen resolution issues in one person can't connect to the audio, but they don't realise that they just need to change the settings on the computer for example.

Clearly, connectivity issues that the MICE planning team faces are generated both from the host and delegate's sides. Unfortunately, connectivity issues largely influence the perceived execution of virtual events. Accordingly, MICE sector members had been challenged with learning and adapting to virtual events while ensuring that they are delivering the same level of quality for their clients. Accordingly, this had been dependent on the virtual platform used which had to be adequately researched. For instance, some participants had mentioned that the traffic as well as various streams used in the virtual event (that is, simultaneous sessions) also affected the effectiveness of the platform, which was something that they had to quickly learn and incorporate into their consideration process when deciding on platforms to host events.

On the side of the virtual attendees, many participants point to the network challenges that hinder the satisfactory experiences at these events. These challenges are primarily tied to network bandwidth and connectivity in certain areas. Unfortunately, the successful transition to remote working, and subsequently virtual events, is dependent on the digital infrastructure available. This has placed South Africans at a great disadvantage considering that there are many areas in the country with poor connectivity (Chetty & Motala, 2021) which naturally limits the number of participants able to adequately experience and access these events. Many of the participants involved in organizing virtual events underscored how poor connectivity had negatively impacted the perceived quality of the event from an attendee's point of view. Once conference organizer said the following on the matter:

With a lot of us sitting at home, you need to be sure to have decent Wi-Fi. Because if your Wi-Fi bandwidth isn't strong enough, you are going to have a rubbish experience. So people are also quite prone to blame the organisers if they don't have good connectivity. But someone used a very good analogy. When you [are] driving your car, your car isn't going to go anywhere if you don't put petrol in it. That's the same thing. If you want to attend a virtual conference, make sure that you've got decent Wi-Fi in order to get the best experience.

In addition to the above, event organizers are further faced with the challenges to connectivity arising from 'load shedding' in the country. Load shedding refers to the rotational electricity measure taken to prevent complete black outs in the currently. It is infrequent and is often implemented when the country's sole electricity supplier encounters challenges (Eskom, 2021). This therefore creates much uncertainty over event planning. Whereas some MICE professionals, specifically planners and venue providers, accounted for this challenge by using generators, load shedding has been noted to provide a significant barrier for MICE stakeholders based in South Africa. This I illustrated in the quote below, from a trade show organizer:

How do you supplement that, in the case of load shedding, which means that your attendee can't go on [to the event platform] if they are in South Africa. So then they [attendee] can't go on, and exhibitor now also can't go on. So, the question is… is there a backup space, for example, where maybe at the virtual event, others are at the face to face space, there is a room for example, where exhibitors can hire a workstation, where they can have an individual running their back end of the virtual space, for example, where you have a generator that's able to sustain them?

Interestingly, the above quote may suggest that for the South African context, the move to strictly virtual events may not be completely feasible. This thereby suggests that hybrid events may constitute the widely used medium to host such events. The combination of virtual and live events reduces the risk associated with the two, in that it caters to delegates that may not be able to physically attend (due to travel restrictions, distance to be travelled, or COVID-19 related concerns) and well as balances out (to a certain extent) the digital divide prevalent in the global South.

Conclusion

The current study sought to explore the use of virtual events in the MICE sector of South Africa. The study findings reveal that these forms of events were effective in maintaining the operations of the sector during the pandemic. However, the study also found that these events still require much development in order to ensure active engagement and interaction amongst virtual attendees so as to fulfil the core function of these events. Moreover, the use of virtual events generates a change in the supplier relationships within the sector, as the study found the emerging need for new technological suppliers, the development of stronger relationships with AV partners as well as a change in the needs of and expectations from onsite suppliers. However, when considering the use of virtual events in South Africa, one major limitation is the poor connectivity in many parts of the country as well as the deteriorating electricity supply leading to an increase in the frequency of load shedding which places a strain on attendance capacity. As a result of the benefits and drawbacks of virtual events, hybrid events have emerged as one of the commonly used mediums to host events. However, while these virtual and hybrid events will continue to be used in a post-COVID-19 world, the findings suggest that there is a need to limit the frequency of such events in order to avoid virtual fatigue and cognitive overload experienced by virtual attendees. In terms of building resilience, the study argues that virtual and hybrid events are important in minimizing the vulnerability of MICE events in the likelihood of another crisis that prohibits or puts a strain on in-person meetings.

The theoretical contribution of this study is tied to its focus on an emerging development in the MICE events sector within the context of a developing nations as well as the inclusion of the resilience theory. While there is a burgeoning amount of research into virtual events, much of it is either focused on technological acceptance and trends (Pearlman & Gates, 2010; Sá et al., 2019; Sox et al. 2014, 2017; Talantis et al., 2020), and there hasn't been much empirical research into the experiences of MICE event stakeholders with virtual and hybrid events. Further, the existing studies that have explored virtual events, or even the increasing use of technology in events, are based on more established and developed MICE destinations. Accordingly, the focus on South Africa sheds some light on the utility of such events within the specific context of developing countries. Moreover, the current study is one of the first to incoperate the resilience theory to examine how MICE events have adapted to events. The study thereby demonstrated the MICE sector's adaptation to COVID-19 and the building of resilience. Additionally, the study also revealed the new phase of event hosting in the MICE sector, which has a greater inclusion of virtual components.

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