1 From pixels to possibilities: Innovations within virtual and hybrid events

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Introduction

Virtual events, despite the perception of being a contemporary phenomenon in the wake of Covid-19, have been used for more than 40 years, with a proliferation since the early 2000s when digital technologies rapidly evolved, enabling easier and quicker access to online platforms. Whilst this digital revolution has had a significant impact on all aspects of professional and personal life, the evolution of the events industry to fully embrace the technology has been slower than predicted (McLoughlin, 2014; Sadd, 2014). The Covid-19 pandemic was an unintended catalyst for intensifying the development and innovation of virtual events (Brown, 2021), and in a post-Covid world virtual events and hybrid events are continuing to establish themselves as crucial components of the events mix.

The world has changed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, affecting most businesses, and personal habits. As a result, the events industry (among others), is having to evolve and innovate in order to maintain its social and economic value. Despite lock-down restrictions being lifted globally there were noticeable reductions in attendance at many events and festivals, due to reservations about mixing socially (to avoid infections), and due to decreases in disposable incomes in the aftermath of Covid-19 and more recently in the global cost-of-living crisis. For the events industry, that rely on attendance and socialisation as a core characteristic of events (Getz & Page, 2020), this reduction in attendance represents another major challenge in the immediate and long-term future of the sector. However, the events industry is a highly resilient and innovative sector, and the solutions to these social and financial constraints again lie within the remit of virtual and hybrid events, as well as the potential within the metaverse for creating and experiencing events.

This chapter, therefore, will examine the development and growth of virtual and hybrid events, explore concepts of innovation and how this applies to events, highlight how the industry has evolved in the wake of Covid-19, and outline

some potential for future developments with events. This will also aid in setting the scene for the rest of the book which explores many of these themes in depth. Finally, a range of definitions are outlined to aid the reader.

The growth of virtual and hybrid events

The incorporation and use of technology have been fundamental components within events for decades (Bowdin et al., 2011), and as the quality, capabilities and ease of technology has improved, so has the dependence on embedding technology to enhance event experiences. Furthermore, virtual events are not a new genre but have existed for nearly 40 years since the development of video-conferencing in the early 1980s as a meetings platform (Sox et al., 2017b). Since the early 2000s the advancements in technology, web-based applications and platforms, and mobile applications, have further transformed the event industry, as event professionals are able to create more meaningful event experiences, engage more directly with their target audience, and increase profitability (Raj et al., 2017). Initially, virtual events began to build traction as a viable events form within the meetings and conferences sector, and this was due to innovations in reducing the size and speed of the data being transmitted (Nolan, 2018), the increasing ease of use, and the reducing costs associated with using these platforms (Rogers, 2013). However, other sectors within the events industry have been slower to embrace these virtual or hybrid opportunities.

Notwithstanding the technological advancements over the past 20 years the growth of virtual and hybrid events has been relatively slow, which is due to several reasons. Firstly, and most critically, the atmosphere, ambience, and interactions at a live/in-person event are difficult to duplicate online (Getz & Page, 2020). Attendees at virtual and hybrid events are more reluctant to engage directly with other online participants, which in turn reduces the event experience (Sadd, 2014). Another issue is aligned to how we use technology personally and professionally, and whilst this is embedded within our normal lives and routines there has been a reluctance to use this technology to 'attend' an event in place of the traditional live/in-person event experiences, particularly pre-pandemic. This is linked to another concern which is focussed on a potential lack of confidence and skills from both event professionals and attendees in using/how to use technology for events (Sox et al., 2017a). This is further compounded by the potential costs associated with creating and delivering online events (such as set up costs, platform and application costs, hardware, and software requirements, and so on). Finally, the socialisation and networking that live/in-person events offer are difficult to replicate online (Nolan, 2018). The has meant that the potential that virtual and hybrid events could offer pre-pandemic was not fully realized by the event industry, with the exception of the business events (or MICE) sector (Davidson, 2019).

Furthermore, virtual and hybrid events have many detractors, with Getz and Page (2020: 51) outlining that events are "*social in nature, and that is because people have a need to be together – to socialize, celebrate and do business*" and that these components cannot be substituted via technology. This is reiterated by Sadd (2014: 216) who noted that despite the progress, technology "*cannot yet allow for total*