3 Considering the benefits and limitations of virtual and hybrid events

Dewi Jaimangal-Jones and Karen Davies

Introduction

The Covid 19 pandemic, by necessity, caused a rapid transition to and adoption of virtual and hybrid events by many individuals and organisations. Consequently, there have been significant technological developments for delivering such events and social acceptance amongst organisations and consumers of their value. As we return to a more 'normal' operating environment, many events have reverted to face-to-face, and others have chosen to remain/reinvent themselves as virtual and hybrid events. While this has presented some challenges and issues, it has also highlighted the range of benefits that virtual and hybrid events can offer both to organisers and attendees.

The pandemic has shown how virtual and hybrid events have a range of benefits in terms of efficiency and costs with less resources (time, money, infrastructure and labour) required to organise and stage them. Additionally, they facilitate access to a wider customer base by removing temporal and financial barriers such as travel, accommodation, and subsistence requirements (Chodor & Cyranski, 2021; Foramitti et al., 2021). Removal of such barriers can also facilitate social inclusion by reducing the time and financial commitments associated with event attendance which may prevent those with disabilities and lower incomes from attending. Furthermore, virtual events offer a number of opportunities for content creation as they can be recorded, thus providing a resource for those unable to participate in the live event. Another significant benefit is the reduced environmental impacts as they eliminate/reduce the need to travel, require no/smaller venues with a lower footprint for energy, catering, and other consumables (Klower et al., 2020). Indeed, many events such as information sharing and dissemination can be highly successful in a virtual or hybrid format (Pearlman & Gates, 2010).

While offering a range of benefits, virtual and hybrid events also present some challenges and disadvantages over their in-person equivalents. For example, reduced audience engagement, interaction, and screen fatigue can be issues that hinder the effectiveness of virtual events (Wreford et al., 2019). Virtual events can also limit communal experiences and socialization opportunities, as attendees do

not have the same level of face-to-face interaction and connection as they would at an in-person event. Additionally, virtual events may lack the sense of communitas and opportunities for escapism that some attendees may seek from event experiences, depending on their aims and objectives and participant motivations (Wreford et al., 2019). These challenges and disadvantages can be particularly relevant for organizations looking to achieve specific goals or objectives, such as fostering community or providing an immersive experience. However, given the global climate emergency and the need for more inclusive and accessible events, it seems imperative that virtual and hybrid events must be fostered and encouraged. The chapter aims to further explore the benefits and limitations of virtual and hybrid events and identify areas and priorities for the future development of successful virtual and hybrid events to maximise the benefits for all.

For the purposes of definitions, there are several different types of virtual and hybrid events in existence (Yung et al., 2022). Within this chapter we are using 'virtual events' primarily to describe virtual online events, i.e. entirely online events based around an online platform or app with a host organisation and an audience, often but not always with a facility for interaction between host and attendees. The term 'hybrid event' is used to describe events which combine online audiences with in-person attendance in an event venue, often but not always with a facility for interaction between host and attendees both in person and virtual. There is an additional category of virtual offline events, we define these as an event which is based around an online platform or app, which requires participants to engage online whilst undertaking physical activities in the real world e.g. virtual 5K. This chapter will begin by examining the organisational benefits and limitations, before moving on to considering those related to participants and attendees.

Organisational and participant benefits of virtual and hybrid events

Efficiency and financial benefits

First and foremost, from an organisational perspective, virtual and hybrid events offer many benefits in terms of efficiency. It's clear in the context of staging a virtual conference over a physical conference how such events may be organized in a shorter timeframe and require less logistical planning and human resource commitment. This makes them a more attractive option for organisations and sectors which are lacking in resources or for those seeking to launch a new conference in a lower risk format (Chodor & Cyranski, 2021). For example, third sector and public sector organisations may find it difficult to justify resources for expensive in-person events, but finding the resources for online events can be much more feasible and justifiable. Other costs, such as venue rental, catering, transport, equipment, and labour costs can be reduced (through a hybrid format) or eliminated (through virtual). These can generate significant savings as venue fees account for a substantial proportion of the budget, especially for large events in high-demand locations (Matthews, 2016). If met by event organisers, food and beverage costs can also be substantial and rise in correlation with the number of attendees.