

7 The digital disruption

The chapter focuses on technological innovation in the events industry. Especially in our time, technological tools have enabled innovation in management processes, staging, settings, and communication activities. Recently, the scientific and practitioner debate has been devoted to creating entirely digital events. The chapter presents different types of events with other applications and intensities of digitization: hybrid, digital, phygital, or in environments created in the metaverse. Beyond passing fashions influenced by the pandemic and post-pandemic period, the chapter reflects on the most effective ways forward, considering scientific studies confirming that the most effective formula is an integration of the physical event with supporting and enhancing virtual events.

At the end of the chapter readers should:

- Know the various types of digital and virtual events that can be organized using the most advanced technologies.
- Know how technologies are used in event management to improve its management and implementation processes.
- Understand how to exploit the most advanced technologies for event communication and the event experience.
- Know some methods for planning experiential events with high technological innovation.

From physical to virtual: the digital transformation of events

Chapter 6 anticipated issues concerning the use of the latest, most innovative technologies in the management of event communication and enhancement of experiences. However, given the centrality that technological innovation has assumed in the event sector, it is important to investigate this issue further. According to Ryan et al. (2020), the event market is in full transformation. This process is stimulating a profound and renewed production of types of events that go beyond the traditional definitions, such as mega or local, B2B or B2C, free or by invitation. This transcendence derives from structural changes, such as the collapse of spatiotemporal boundaries and increased hybridization of categories such as public and private, business and consumer. Such categories increasingly need to be united and meet in different but overlapping environments so that participants can benefit from the combination of offers. Thus, organizers are looking for management solutions to cut costs and make events more sustainable and effective.

To date, there have been no systematic studies with a broad scope that allow us to estimate the actual impacts of new types of events because there has not been time to conduct such in-depth analyses. For example, cases of phygital events

that integrate physical and virtual experiences in a complementary way are still rare and do not allow for comparative studies. The implications of new types of events are, however, a prominent issue that is being investigated to understand, for example, how economically efficient it is to combine digital and virtual events with physical ones. The question is, "Do these types of events increase the returns of physical events in terms of visibility and economic sustainability, or are the costs of updating the relevant technologies for each edition higher?"

The costs are still very high, and, especially for small events with reduced budgets, it is often impossible to access certain highly sophisticated technologies. Similarly, some technologies require continuous updates to remain effective in building valid and attractive experiences for participants. Events in which each edition must innovate its offerings do not always satisfy the conditions required to guarantee these continuous changes. The expertise of professionals who know how to make the most of these opportunities and manage innovations from a technical point of view is also required to ensure the innovations' efficiency during the events (Salama, 2021).

The first studies on the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for events, especially during the lockdown period, highlighted how technologies have been an essential support for guaranteeing forms of relational continuity and providing alternative solutions to traditional events held in person (Miles & Shipway, 2020; Weed, 2020; Seraphin, 2021; Lei et al., 2023). However, these studies have also revealed a widespread nostalgia for live, physical participation. They thus confirmed the ideal role of the event as an opportunity for face-to-face aggregation and socialization, even in the post-pandemic future. The authors confirmed that the events of the future must continue to enrich their offers with innovative solutions that exploit digital opportunities in various ways: face to face, online, digital, and hybrid. But the reflection in progress is much broader. It concerns not only the sphere of relationality or that of staging the event, but all the procedures for optimizing management processes. Although electronic tools and devices of various sizes are nothing new in the events sector, there is no doubt that the acceleration of their use is engaging the scientific community and industry professionals in the search for unprecedented perspectives integrating accessibility, applicability, and the extension of experiential potential for participants. In the scientific field, there are still few studies that present advanced theoretical models on the subject and fewer that examine successful cases of technology implementation (e.g., Ronft & Beck, 2023; Simge et al., 2023). The stage of exploratory analysis in progress demonstrates that the advanced application of technology, especially in the exploitation of integrated innovations, is still under development. It is more advanced in certain types of events, such as sports, conferences, and weddings, and in the exhibition sector, especially in fairs, museums, and archaeological sites. It is also under development in events that have stable organizational structures and organizers that can plan the introduction and use of the most advanced technologies, set up investment strategies, carry out proper maintenance, and update event offerings through the continuous updating of the software for and use of the latest generation of technological devices. In general, observation of the use of some applications reveals a trial-and-error process, but there is still a lack of full harmonization among the innovative solutions with respect to the overall objec-