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Is anybody there? The importance of social interactions at virtual events

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Introduction

An event is a space and an occasion allowing people to gather and engage in activities of similar interest (Cudny, 2014). The event also significantly creates group solidarity and a sense of togetherness and belonging (Derrett, 2000; Getz, 2010). According to Richards (2015: 2), events have long been integral to the social fabric of society (historically and contemporarily); they are “*spaces of social interaction*”; and social interaction is one of the most critical elements of a successful event. Similarly, Collins (2004) advocates that the contemporary characteristics of the interaction in offline and online events can be explained by the interaction ritual chain, which presents the shared experience usually linked to interaction before, during and after the event. The interaction ritual chain is appropriately explained in context to event sociology which deals with group assemblies, gatherings, and crowds, who share a focused attention and emotional state; thereby, it refers to the collective producing of a temporary reality (Kjolsrod, 2013). In addition, the in-person experience leads to the ‘ordinary’ characteristic interaction in the event space (De Geus et al., 2016; Getz, 1989; Jago & Shaw, 1998; Morgan, 2008; Richards & Palmer, 2010).

In 2020, the world faced the global pandemic of the Covid-19 virus, which stopped people worldwide from travelling and other face-to-face activities to avoid transmission of the virus. This phenomenon changed our way of gathering in social networks, either for work or socialising, from the physical to ‘new’ virtual interactions. Digitalisation has therefore been essential in creating virtual spaces and events for people to retain social networks and enable them to interact throughout the pandemic and beyond. These interactions among event participants can be in terms of both formal and informal interactions, which are important elements in creating the event atmosphere. The informal interaction in particular is seen as a major factor that brings a sense of socialisation to the events, as this helps participants to bond and make meaningful connections. According to Lee et al. (2001: 1), “*social interaction can provide excellent value to its participants. It holds whether the interactions are casual (i.e., of a single or small number of occurrences) or committed (i.e., of a repeated nature).*”

In the MICE industry (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions/Events), the virtual space has become an alternative event platform that allows many people to gather from different locations simultaneously, reducing the cost of travelling and pollution (emissions and overall carbon footprint) for the event activities. Through this, the virtual space provides a platform for gathering, sharing, and interacting with others irrespective of distance. However, there are challenges in designing virtual event settings that enable interaction among the event participants, such as the inability to read body language or create natural connections. Similarly, Lee et al. (2001) pointed out that the social interaction value in the physical world can be found through the stages of sharing experiences, endorsing behaviour, surfacing tacit knowledge, sharing information, recommending options, and providing companionship or support. In contrast, social interaction is limited in the virtual world, including the inability to see and interact with other attendees and contributors, which undermines the sense of enjoyment of, and value derived from, the event experience.

This chapter explores the social interaction phenomena in a virtual conference through the three main sessions: oral presentation, questions and answers session (Q&A), and socialisation session in a conference, explored below. The author has participated in and observed numerous international conferences, including those organised on a virtual platform during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the experiences of being the presenter and audience in a virtual conference platform differs significantly from attending in a physical / in-person event, especially in networking and forming collaborations, due to the limited informal encounters among the virtual participants. The author has identified significant elements of a virtual conference that contribute to social interaction characteristics. This has been developed and presented in the form of a comprehensive framework of social interaction phenomena in the virtual event environment. Furthermore, the framework explains the relationship between crucial virtual space characteristics, the existing interaction, and the virtual social interaction phenomena.

Theoretical concepts

Conferences during Covid-19

MICE business is one of the largest event sectors that bring significant economic benefits to the host destination (Chiang et al., 2012). Each element of the MICE sector delivers differing types of events that have specific characteristics and sizes/scales, and attract audiences both domestically and internationally, and provide knock-on effect benefits. For example, MICE attendees may extend their stay at the event for leisure purposes, or bring family/friends with them, providing an additional event tourism economic and social impact (Davidson, 1998). This chapter is focused specifically on conferences, which according to Rogers (2003: 395), are *“event[s] used by any organisation to meet and exchange views, convey a message, open a debate, or give publicity to some area of opinion on a specific issue. No tradition, continuity or periodicity is required to convene a conference. Although not generally limited in time, conferences are usually short duration with specific objectives”*.