

Evolving Trend and the Hybrid Model for Event Management during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

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Abstract

Event management is a dynamic field that combines traditional project management ideas with cutting-edge technical advancements. To successfully plan events, one must constantly innovate and stand out. The event management industry has undergone a significant amount of change when compared to one or two decades ago. These changes are attributable to the outbreak of coronavirus in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on practically every element of human life since it began in the year 2020. Activities that require human gatherings have been cancelled, postponed, or held entirely virtually. In addition to the lack of face-to-face interaction, people have increasingly used virtual environments online, which have benefits such as more inclusion and accessibility, as well as a reduction in carbon emissions. On the other hand, new internet technologies cannot completely replace live events. Meetings in person offer new opportunities for socialization and are immune to issues with poor internet connectivity. They also create room for exchange of ideas, networking and new collaborations. In order to maintain these actions, a hybrid model for events management might be a solution that combines physical and virtual components. Virtual meetings would be most helpful for individuals who are unable to attend in person owing to the restrictions, while participants are free to pick their manner of participation. Meetings should include some in-person arrangements with full consideration of safety and preventative measures. This innovative method of event management can be taken into account as a component of a resilience system that was previously ignored and should become a standard practice within the scientific community.

Keywords: Pandemic, COVID-19, Hybrid Model, Event Management

Introduction

Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19), which is spreading globally, is affecting more and more people every day. according to Madray (2020); Hossain et al (2020) recent studies conducted

around the world reveal that the event industry has lost a maximum of \$666 million up until April of 2020 as a result of event cancellations that affected 85.9 million employments worldwide. Although companies use technology and measures like live chat, webinars, online discussion shows, podcasts, etc. to continue their services, they could not replace the revenue from big fat events or events at large scale in terms of money and people inducement. As a result, businesses are struggling to sustain themselves over the long term.

The severity of this epidemic is still being felt more keenly by the daily wage workers involved with the sector and the small and medium event organizations that lack the target markets or the platform to offer such services. Despite putting various policies into place to help different jurisdictions control the crisis, many countries initially misjudge the scope of this pandemic, even though a few nations are still far from having it under control by mid-2020 (Okoroiwu et al., 2021; Ohia et al., 2020). Nigeria, like other African nations, has experienced a portion of the pandemic's effects. According to epidemiological indicators, there were 2,288 fatalities and 188,880 confirmed cases in Nigeria as of August 26, 2021 (WHO, 2021). The pandemic and subsequent lockdown/border closure in Nigeria has had an effect on the food system, the economy, and poverty. Nigeria experienced a decline in remittances and export demand as well as a 23% GDP decline during the lockdown and an 11% decline in the agricultural food system as a result of restrictions on food services (Andam et al., 2020). Accordingly, this study was conducted to discuss the current status of events management post COVID-19 pandemic and propose a solution for removing the obstacles and advance efforts for planning effective and secure events amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Covid-19 Induced Constraints

Human gatherings of any kind have been restricted to stop the spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and have been replaced with alternatives like remote work, virtual or hybrid conferences, cancellation of many in-person social or religious events, and international travel (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Although the virus knows no boundaries, governments have decided to impose more restrictions and borders on people (NCDC, 2021). In situations of protracted worldwide disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic, such restrictive policies may be the only viable alternative in the near term, but they are neither cost-effective, efficient, nor even practical in the mid- and long-term, especially in low- and middle-income countries such as Nigeria. When crises like the COVID-19 epidemic arise, it is important to provide the citizens with basic financial, educational, scientific, emotional, and cultural demands. In contexts where underlying issues bear the simultaneous burden of pandemic and other frightening crises, this paradoxical dilemma of addressing both the emergency and people's needs can be worse (Takian et al., 2020; Islam, 2021).

Additionally, many nations' restrictions on the free movement of people, commodities, and services result in significant losses for businesses and sectors like aviation, entertainment, hospitality, and sports. It was estimated that there would be a global loss of more than \$4 trillion (Ozili, 2020). The lockdown measure implemented had an impact on consumer spending rates; from January 2020 to June 2020, the percentage change decreased from 59.2% to 41.1%, which has an impact on the productivity of the manufacturing sector in Nigeria (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2020). Statistics also show a tendency toward higher unemployment in Nigeria. Due to COVID-19, the population of unemployed persons was estimated to be over 39.5 million in 2019 and 2020, respectively (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

Additionally, the poverty rate rose during the lockdown by 8.7%, from 43.5% to 52.2%, meaning 17 million more people are now living in poverty (Andam et al., 2020). It is anticipated that the coronavirus pandemics and their unintended consequences will continue to affect human societies for an unforeseen period of time. Nearly every aspect of our lives has been impacted by challenges related to the pandemic, which continue to set new benchmarks for a "new normal." As the pandemic spreads, this new normal is changing to reflect the intricacies of contemporary living. The COVID-19 pandemic is complex, and Ravetz (2020), claims that the phrase "new normal" does not adequately describe it. It could be preferable to discuss resilience in the face of rising norms, reinforced by an extended awareness of evolving challenges and solutions, given the ongoing evolution of what the "new normal" may look like.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on events planning and management activities globally, including conferences and symposiums, much like it has on other large international meetings such as sporting events, and pilgrimage. Nearly all scheduled events including international conferences, symposiums, workshops and congresses for the majority of have either been postponed, cancelled, or held virtually since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO,2020). For the first time in its more than 70-year history, the WHO held the 73rd annual World Health Assembly (WHA) virtually and for a much shorter period of time than usual in May 2020, the most significant global political decision-making gathering for health (WHO, 2020). It takes more than just knowing how to work within the constraints of planning and coordination to effectively manage significant events during a pandemic. It will also demand that all interested parties engage in active participation. Since the beginning of this epidemic, the extent and rate of adoption of virtualization have increased tremendously.

Finding and Discussions

Virtual events have the advantages of being more inclusive and accessible as well as having a smaller carbon footprint. However, for the time being, in-person events still outperform virtual meetings, in part because of the following factors

Socialisation and networking: The simple fact that humans are social beings makes the social side of our existence is very important. Many people still find it awkward to substitute the emotional connection that comes with face-to-face or whole-body communication with internet interactions as a social phenomenon. In person interactions, for instance, social greetings have greater importance because it is easier to read body language and make eye contact (Katila et al., 2020). Socialisation and networking, which are among the most important outcomes of physical gatherings, may suffer greatly in virtual events. It would not be out of place to say that for many conference registrants, the main motivation is to form new collaborations, which is easier to do in person. Participants might ask questions via a chat box, and a host would then read the questions to the speaker. In this way, online gatherings offer a mechanism of sporadic communication. The chances for rich conversation and interchange that often occur in the hallways of symposiums, workshops, summits and conferences, during tea and lunch breaks, are also lost. To the list of benefits, you can also add tourism and social tours, which are more alluring when one can travel to and experience the novelty of a new nation or city. These social gatherings offer chances to share beneficial social experiences, probably strengthening friendships and team development. Overall, face-

to-face intercultural interactions and cultural exchanges help us better understand the significance of various cultures and the people way of life.

Internet connectivity inadequacies: High-quality internet services are not equally accessible throughout the entire world. In Nigeria for instance, only about 37% of of the 200 million population were already utilizing a mobile device to access the internet as of 2022. (www.statista.com). Consequently, lack of full internet penetration, poor connections, and insufficient infrastructure parties might aggravate the challenges associated with virtual events. The main objectives of an event may also not be accomplished due to bandwidth-based disturbances, thus making it difficult to bring together relevant subject matter specialists and other experts. In addition, learning and adhering to new online etiquette is required when adopting new platforms for virtual contacts (Wong, 2007). However, participants occasionally fail to suppress their audio, which usually causes unwanted disruption for the speaker. Although, participants may virtually raise their hands to signal that something is wrong with the entire system if there is a bad connection or electronic errors in specific locations, nonetheless face-to-face meetings hardly have such technical difficulties and other related issues.

Efficiency and formality: It is admissible that a virtual format for events can reduce registration and travel expenses while lowering carbon emissions, but, face-to-face conferences provide more formal participation from participants and a more fluid interchange of thoughts and practical information within the well-established, long-standing convention protocols that provide interaction, discourse, and open discussion because of the participants clearly distinct backgrounds (James, 1995).

Speed at which new ideas are generated: Virtual meetings offer the chance for equitable participation. Given that some individuals in each field are typically more prominent and have greater opportunities to give speeches in multiple webinars at the same time, which sometimes are the implicit criteria for presentations in virtual meetings during the COVID-19 era. However there is a potential risk of giving some people greater voice than other smart but perhaps not well-known contributors to the debate as those that they may be stronger communicators, with a high degree of language competency, hold influential positions, or draw more viewers may enjoy more privileges than the rest. Another important factor is that webinars are typically done in a brief period of time, therefore they may not offer enough time or modes to critique speeches. This may also reduce the possibility of hearing an opposing viewpoint during virtual meetings. Due to the fact that more virtual sessions are being held, there is a possibility of being led by a presenter who lacks supporting data. As a matter of fact, the proliferation of ideas and the accelerated rate of information flow do not imply that they are of high quality. Grossmann et al (2017) highlighted that careful consideration and open discussion of important concepts being provided in events are necessary for prudent information handling, which means that such activities may be better carried out more successfully in person than online.

Potential solutions for events: - Meetings in person cannot entirely be replaced by virtual ones for the aforementioned reasons. University students favor human teachers more than robots, thus the robots are less popular. Another illustration of this may be how, when e-books were initially made available to the public, many people were eager to try them and

even replace printed books with them. Nevertheless, physical books still hold a special allure for many readers, and they are still preferred by many to reading from electronic devices (Singer, and Alexander, 2017). Publishers who provide both printed and electronic editions that meet the needs of both categories of users—e-book readers and readers of printed books—are typically more successful. Similar to this, using a hybrid model that allows for both online and in-person involvement may be a smart way to plan and manage events as the COVID-19 pandemic's emergent normalcy takes shape.

Modern Event Management Trends: - In today's events market, a hybridization of the virtual and physical worlds is becoming more prevalent. It is easily accessible and affordable for the general population thanks to modern technologies (Islam, 2021). From the moment an event is conceived until the organisers gather participant input or the event is over, artificial intelligence has been involved. Today, crowd sourcing is commonplace at events like concerts, flea markets, and exhibitions. People now anticipate having brainstorming sessions in natural settings rather than established locations like stadiums or convention centers. Instead of taking place in party plots or banquets anymore, wedding ceremonies are often held in forts, forests, and religious spaces. Event form and development are being determined using real-time data (Islam, 2020).

According to a study by Parida (2021), IoT-based smart contracts are successfully and efficiently enhancing the customer's services. Applications based on artificial intelligence are not a replacement for people, claim (Khatri & Pandey, 2021). These help people conduct commercial operations without making mistakes. Artificial intelligence, according to Wankhede, et al (2021), is the most demanding technology in the sector. Bhalerao et al (2021); San et al (2020) came to the conclusion that using Industry 4.0 technologies, e-commerce, and social media platforms will help mitigate pandemic uncertainty. These technologies help event management planners gain a competitive edge and remain viable in the market. According to Patil and Kumar (2021), social media and digital marketing are used frequently to aid businesses in enhancing their various company operations. Few motivating elements for the implementation of artificial intelligence in businesses have been found by (Kumar & Kalse, 2021). The usage of cloud computing-based applications by both small and large businesses has a favourable effect on business and society overall (Srivastava & Khan 2018). Prasad et al (2013), admit that cloud computing is the future of the event management sector in terms of computing power, scalability, services, etc. However, it also raises certain worries about ecosystem security and privacy. It is important that organizations fortify their cybersecurity measures. As the amount of work done from home increases, cloud computing services are rapidly adopted, and security professional teams are working remotely, the security of the organization's system becomes more and more of a concern. As a result, cybersecurity professionals and tools are essential to the seamless operation of event organizations in these critical times of this nature.

Kumar et al (2019) study found that Internet of Things (IoT) is producing a lot of data and offering business solutions. Using big data analytics, several business issues can be resolved using this data. It therefore means that automation tools which can be employed when functions are repetitive in nature, will assist the event companies in Nigeria to compete globally at this point in time.

Emerging Standards for the Hybrid Model:- Determining new healthy standards is an essential step towards the emerging normal condition in organising events ,meetings and

conferences as the world adopts emerging normal protocols for various gatherings. Nigeria, as part of the global order is not to be insulated from this arrangement. In order to prevent and control illness in a variety of settings (such as workplaces, schools, mass/religious meetings, and sporting events), the WHO has established several sets of guidelines (WHO,2020). Such recommendations could be altered for use in planning and managing events. We suggest a four-fold technique below

Risk Assessment and Mitigation: To consciously assess the likelihood of infection transmission and make the most decisions to mitigate the potential governing factors in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, perform risk assessment prior to planning for a congress (McMaster et al 2020). According to WHO recommendations, the following meeting data should be gathered: the meeting's date and location (country and city), the number of attendees, the percentage of high-risk groups, international participation (number of foreign attendees, their countries of origin, and their COVID-19 status), the status of restrictions and health prevention measures in the host nation, social events, and preventive techniques used during the congress. Assign a score to each risk, classify it as very low, low, moderate, or very high, and then decide how to mitigate it (WHO 2020).

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, individuals were aware that assessing the likelihood of risk is essential before engaging in any activity. The sensible course of action is to move forward with a plan in mind when the danger is low. But when it comes to safety, the concept of risk is the most important thing to take into account. The number one goal in a post-pandemic environment must always be safety (BIA et al., 2020).

Venue and environmental sanitation: - The congress venues should be cleaned and sanitized to prevent the spread of disease because COVID-19 can remain on and spread through the air and surfaces. The WHO recommendations (2020), which include that all staff members in charge of venue preparations should get sufficient training about cleaning procedures and the use of effective disinfectants, are applicable here. To effectively sanitize all surfaces and lower risk to attendees and event organizers, disinfection products' ingredients must meet standards (WHO, 2020). Dedicated staff are to maintain health and safety protocol carefully and keep an eye on the disinfection procedures. It is also important to provide participants with easy access to hand sanitizers at different locations in the venue. There is also need for establishment of physical distance requirements when setting up the conference rooms' seating, with a minimum distance of 1.5 meters between participants interacting during session breaks. Finally, lunches and snacks are to be served in environmentally friendly, disposable containers.

Participants protection and disease prevention: According to WHO recommendations for proper personal protection equipment, each group should have its own unique needs taken into consideration (such as those of high-risk groups with comorbidity, those over 65, and children (WO,2020). No participants with signs of COVID-19 infection should be allowed to attend the event for the sake of disease prevention and control. The Centers for Disease Control (NCDC) also recommends quarantining and closely monitoring everyone who has close encounters with COVID-19 patients within the previous 14 days. If any of the following conditions are met, the close contact is defined: a) caring for a COVID-19 patient at home with the help of first-degree relatives; b) having at least 15 minutes of contact with a COVID-19 patient from a distance of less than 6 feet; c) having direct physical contact with a COVID-19

patient; d) coming into contact with respiratory droplets from a COVID-19 patient after they cough or sneeze, (NCDC, 2020). Since asymptomatic people could be disease carriers in this situation, fulfilling one's social obligations is essential to breaking the chain of disease transmission.

Each participant will be evaluated based on symptoms and body temperature at the time of entry and need to present a recent negative COVID-19 test result. The delegate won't be permitted to attend the actual event if there is even the slightest suspicion. All attendees should be provided with personal safeguards (particularly medical face masks), and enough hand sanitizer should be available throughout the meeting. All participants must adhere to maintaining a safe interpersonal distance when speaking with others, and they must also submit contact information throughout the congress in case contact tracing becomes necessary.

The hybrid model: Planning a hybrid model and holding concurrent virtual sessions may benefit symptomatic participants as well as international speakers and participants who are unable to attend the congress in person because of travel and quarantine restrictions that the host nation may have put in place at the conference location. Local participants, however, will not be subject to such limitations and could gain a lot from the option of either digitally or physically attending such activities. This hybrid paradigm might include of small-scale, locally located hubs with participants online and virtually, along with lectures that are accessible to larger audiences. Although social interactions are more effective when taking place in person, online attendees can still gain from social interactions by using a social portal, where speakers can virtually log in and communicate with both actual and virtual participants.

The arrangement of the virtual portion of events must be further improved concurrently with the adjustment of the criteria for live events. Virtual events are still the only practical solution when the borders are blocked and the air travel is disrupted. It is vital to transition to the virtual reality medium in order to avoid and prevent some of the limitations of virtual scientific events that have been stated above (VR). VR has a lot to offer, from simulating the event's actual presence to simulating coffee breaks and other informal events when it is feasible to have more in-depth "face-to-face" conversations. In order to enhance the experience of the presenters and listeners during the event, a highly specialized app is also required to handle the lectures and events. One of the key components of event gatherings is connecting the participants, which these apps will aid in doing. On the other hand, despite the appearance that this kind of event planning necessitates complex and advanced technology, it is currently possible to view VR content with the aid of a smartphone and cardboard or plastic glasses. The best internet connection, which the government of Nigeria is yet to provide, remains the biggest barrier.

Recommendation and Conclusion

As the COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic has shown, every event or meeting must take into account the sociological dimensions in the post-normal environment following COVID-19. They are essentially just as significant as human biological problems. Symposiums, seminars, conferences etc have significant roles in advancing knowledge and expanding networks for improved collaboration. Bridging the communication gap between experts and solution providers around the world is perhaps the most crucial component of such gatherings, as it will encourage business networking and advancement.

The world is currently experiencing one of the biggest obstacles to socioeconomic development in recent memory. Even in times of crisis, such as pandemics, it is still important

to have events, but they must still be held in accordance with safety regulations. A hybrid programme that allows for both in-person and online participation must have plans for emerging standardization. Virtual communication may be helpful, but it cannot adequately substitute face-to-face communication for the majority of body language, which is used by people from many high-context cultures. Many facets of interpersonal contact may be lost in translation if body language and the social context are not taken into consideration. The COVID-19 disaster demonstrated the necessity for resilience in numerous systems, such as the financial and health systems, in order to prevent disruption and collapse brought on by unforeseen events. Although COVID-19 poses a serious threat to our daily life, there is little doubt that this is not the final shock of this nature. It is important to emphasize that neither this human crisis nor this pandemic will be the last in our lifetimes. Therefore, it is essential to accelerate our learning curve right away to get ready for potential pandemics.

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