MICE TOURISM DURING COVID-19 AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR THE NEW NORMAL

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The Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions (MICE) industry is considered the fastest growing tourism sector. MICE generates foreign exchange, increases trade and investments, provides employment, boosts local economies, and promotes destinations. The major key to its success is the strong collaboration with the travel, hospitality, and leisure sectors that provide products and services for the industry. Therefore, any disruption along its value chain may lead to significant losses for its stakeholders: organizers, participants, suppliers, sponsors, and host destinations. Although the industry is resilient, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) may be the definitive crisis that will reset any previous gains from a formerly robust tourism industry. This paper begins with a discussion on the impact of COVID-19 on MICE. Then it seeks to present the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) as the alternative platform used during the pandemic. Finally, it will attempt to identify areas for further research to proactively prepare for the MICE post COVID-19.

Keywords: *MICE Tourism, COVID-19, Business Events, Information and Communications Technologies (ICT), New Normal*

1.   Introduction

The Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions (MICE) industry is specifically designed for individuals and organizations whose main travel objectives are networking, lead generation, volume sales, sourcing, and knowledge transfer. In contrast, leisure travel focuses on recreational activities such as shopping, visits to friends and relatives, vacations, and other non-business purposes.

In 2019, the Global Travel Business Association (GBTA) forecasted that the overall business travel spending would reach US$1.7 trillion by 2022 (Skift, 2019). However, this prediction was based on the historical performance of the industry which excluded any possibility of a reversal due to a global pandemic. But the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) changed the MICE landscape. Since travel and MICE are inextricably linked, it is apparent that "tourism can contribute to the spread of disease" (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2020a, p. 15).

When compared to previous crises, the effect of this pandemic is unprecedented with no clear end in sight. Reports reveal that the most "recent global crises between the years 2001 to 2015 such as the September 11 terrorist attack and the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) … cannot compare to the unpredictability of COVID-19" (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020b p 3). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the impact of COVID-19 is five times that of the 2009 global economic crisis (WTTC, 2020a).

Table I summarizes the comparative impact of previous crises as compared with COVID-19 (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2020).

TABLE I
IMPACT OF CRISES ON TOURISM

Year	Crisis	Change in International Tourist Arrivals	Change of International Tourism Receipts (in USD)
2001	Sept 11 Terrorist Attack	+ 1 million	- 11 billion
2003	SARs	- 3 million	+ 50 billion
2009	Global Economic Crisis	-37 million	- 88 million
2020	COVID-19	- 850 million (best scenario) - 1 billion (worst scenario)	- 910 billion (best scenario) - 1.170 trillion (worst scenario)

Amidst the need for the MICE industry to pivot, this paper has two interrelated objectives. First, this paper seeks to present the impact of COVID-19 on meetings, incentive travel, conventions, and trade exhibitions. Since the industry operates in a high-touch environment, this paper also discusses how the industry stakeholders used information and communications technologies (ICT) to continue producing business events. Finally, the paper will seek to recommend areas of further research to help pivot MICE through the use of ICT and other event technologies in a post COVID-19 environment.

2.   Method

The review of literature was limited to constructs that are common to the meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions sectors. Research articles discussing the "novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and tourism" were also reviewed. To achieve this, published literature were identified using an online search of webinars conducted by experts and documents from tourism researchers and those published by organizations such as the WTTC, UNWTO, and UFI-Global Association of the Exhibition Industry, among others. Key terminologies started with "MICE tourism" and similar phrases (business tourism, trade exhibitions, conferences, and incentive travel) in conjunction with terms such as "event management," "co-creation," and "information and communications technologies for tourism."

3.   Results and Analysis

On December 31, 2019, an outbreak of pneumonia of unknown cause was detected in Wuhan, China. A month later, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a global health emergency due to a reported similar case in Thailand. But by mid-February, China declared that it had 80,000 cases despite the lockdown (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020). Around the same period, WHO named the disease coronavirus (COVID-19) and declared that it can be transmitted through "droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes" (WHO, 2020). On March 2020, 146 countries reported cases of COVID-19 that prompted WHO to declare it as a pandemic. By April 2020, travel restrictions and non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPI) such as social distancing, closure of educational institutions, and quarantines were imposed (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2020c, p. 2).

Travel restrictions, border controls, and involuntary quarantine resulted in the collapse of MICE tourism because the industry relies on a strong collaboration among stakeholders across the supply chain. Zhang et al. (2009) emphasized the role of both the public and private sectors in the design, production, staging, and managing of MICE events. These include tour and transport operators, caterers, and destination management companies, among other vendors, the majority of whom are small and medium-scale enterprises. Adding to the complexity of the fragmented nature of MICE is the challenge to seamlessly produce and manage events with minimal disruptions along the value chain. Unfortunately, COVID-19 NPI resulted in greatly reduced profits and revenues, temporary (or permanent) closure of businesses, and bankruptcies for some tourism-related enterprises. Statistics from WTTC forecasted as much as 197.5 million jobs and USD 5,543 billion in gross domestic product (GDP) may be lost due to COVID-19 (WTTC, 2020b).

To mitigate the impact of COVID-19, exhibitors and organizers either cancelled or postponed trade shows. The Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR) reported that 72.6% of events scheduled for the first quarter of 2020 were cancelled resulting in a 15.1% decline in industry performance as compared with the previous year (CEIR, 2020). In another report, the UFI-Global Association of the Exhibition Industry projected losses amounting to USD144.9 billion, as of the second quarter of 2020. In terms of its impact on global economies, full-time equivalent (FTE) job losses related to the exhibitions industry amount to USD 31.6 billion, USD 31.1 billion and USD23.6 billion, for North America, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region, respectively (UFI, 2020, p 1.). However, all these data need to be interpreted with caution because the pandemic continues to be a moving target.

Meeting and convention organizers, who were unable to guarantee the safety of participants, decided either to cancel, postpone or relocate their events. According to the Center for International Meetings Research and Training (CIMERT), 74 countries, located mostly in Europe and Asia Pacific, have either cancelled, re-scheduled or changed the venues of their meetings. Aside from the health and safety risks, travel restrictions and quarantine requirements compounded the challenges of conducting face-to-face meetings (CIMERT, 2020). There were some meetings that adapted the virtual or hybrid format as the alternative to live events (Congrex Team, 2020a). Virtual events totally rely on online technologies, while hybrid events combine both live and online platforms. The shift to these formats entail the right combination of technologies, staging and production skills, strong support from sponsors, and participant interest. Moreover, event managers must also be able to provide an immersive and engaging experience using technologies that will try to replicate human interactions.

On the other hand, tourism agencies explored the use of online platforms to feature virtual attractions. For example, the Ministry of Culture of India featured digital classes on Indian traditional art forms such as *Kathak, Kutiyattam*, theatre and puppetry; while Japanese artists showcased online *Kabuki* performances (Matcha, 2020; Panache, 2020). Ballet and orchestra performances as well as three-dimensional (3D) tours of natural and man-made attractions were broadcast through social media. Using a format that is accessible, these online tours

offered a glimpse of the cultural heritage of a destination. However, some authors argue against staging these activities which contradict the essence of authentic experiences that may result in the commodification of the culture (Cornet, 1975; Greenwood, 1977; Maccannell, 1973). However, these can be evaluated from this perspective: that the virtual platform can help promote and preserve intangible cultural heritage such as oral traditions, social practices, festivals, rituals, performing arts, and traditional craftsmanship (Cohen, 1972; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. 2019).

The previous discussions attempted to present the importance of using information and communications technologies (ICT) in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19. According to Buhalis (2003), ICT refers to:

> the hardware, software, human resources, and capacity to develop, program, and maintain equipment and applications…to facilitate the operational and strategic management of organizations by enabling them to manage their information, functions and processes as well as to communicate interactively with their stakeholders for achieving their mission and objectives" (p. 5).

Fuchs et al (2010) asserted that the further growth of tourism is inextricably linked to its ability to use ICT. The use of ICT and other event solutions empower MICE managers to focus on critical activities, while repeatable, redundant processes are undertaken using online tools. In addition, technology-driven MICE events can enable co-creation of the event experience that, in turn, may lead to more value for participants, sponsors, and suppliers. But prohibitive costs, lack of skills, technophobia, and security issues are cited as the most common barriers to ICT (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Kotze, Anderson, & Summerfield, 2016). However, the onslaught of COVID-19 shifted this paradigm. Webinars, teleconferences, and virtual exhibits have become the norm in 2020.

Virtual and hybrid MICE events have strong advantages. First, the platform enables event managers to reach more audiences through social media. These also empower participants to access events using mobile applications on their gadgets. According to Hootsuite & We Are Social (2020), there has been a "significant increase in digital activity, especially in countries that have the strictest COVID-19 lockdowns." Their research shows that, as of April 2020, there are 3.81 billion active social media users and 5.16 unique mobile users (para. 8). Although the rise in internet use can be attributed to available time

due to the flexible work schedules and lockdowns, 15% of respondents stated that "they expect to continue spending more time using social media after the outbreak is over" (para. 18).

Second, mobile applications allow participants to use any type of gadget and operating system to gain access to an event. It is also a sustainable alternative to venue-driven events. For organizers, these online initiatives reduce the costs of venue rental, catering, transportation, material supplies, and lodging, among other expenses (Hind, (2020a). Delegates, sponsors, and exhibitors have the opportunity to participate in the events at the comfort of their homes, with possible access to archived presentations at their most convenient schedules.

Technologies for online MICE events also "provide real-time feedback that can be used for continuous improvement" (Congrex Team, 2020b). Organizers gain access to post-event statistics on demographics, levels of satisfaction, topic preferences, and participant interest, among other critical data. These data facilitate adjustments that need to be made to further increase engagement. Furthermore, the shift from face-to-face events to online platforms caused relatively minor disruptions in schedules and venue preparation.

But despite the ubiquitous internet, virtual and hybrid business events may not fully replace the experience of face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, online events must provide an immersive experience for participants similar to well-produced television shows (Hind, 2020b). These take into serious consideration the limited attention span and varying levels of interest of the virtual audience. Therefore, to maximize engagement, event managers must bring in a team of professional staging, production, and entertainment suppliers whose fees may reverse any potential savings to be gained from hosting online conferences, incentives, and virtual exhibits. But Nuehofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin (2013) argued for the use of technologies "to create enhanced tourism experiences…intensify engagement, experience co-creation, and deliver a high value proposition to the tourist in the online world" (p. 549). Moreover, the authors recommend the full use of ICT as a way to differentiate experiences in a crowded tourism landscape.

The tourism industry, albeit one of the early adopters of ICT, needs to revisit the features and benefits of different event technologies. The respite brought about by the pandemic may be an opportune time to proactively conceptualize innovative business events that use ICT across the value chain. Technologies may be used to collaborate among stakeholders; digitize processes for registration and payment; integrate artificial intelligence, robotics, and

virtual reality for production; incorporate metrics using beacons, heatmaps, and online surveys; enable co-creation of immersive experiences; communicate through social media; and share critical data analytics for marketing and strategic planning; among other objectives. Thus, use of ICT may be used as a tool for better engagement, enhanced tourist satisfaction; and improved revenues and profits (Kavoura & Katsoni, 2013; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). In addition, a rigorous research agenda focusing on the multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary nature of tourism studies should be pursued to keep the MICE industry relevant (Tsiotsou & Ratten (2010). Aligned with this, a review of new business models, changes in participant behavior, the use of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, data analytics, as well as insights into engagement and co-creation are among key themes for further research.

Hind (2020b,) coined the term 'COVID Code" to refer to guidelines issued by tourism organizations that are designed to mitigate the rise of the pandemic. He recommended an assessment of these procedures anchored on two scenarios, "New Normal" and the "Future Normal." According to Hind (2020b), the former refers to "events hosted during the period where there is still no vaccine, while the latter are events after the vaccine is available." The distinction can guide stakeholders in selecting policies that may contribute to the "normalization" of the event industry. In a related presentation, Konar (2020) discussed the "New Normal" and the "New Future" where he outlined five strategies to pivot: "resolve, resilience, return, re-imagination and reform." Similarly, industry leaders from the World Travel and Tourism Council highlighted the need to encourage travel confidence through consistent policies across countries, development of new business models, targeted tourist marketing, and the support for domestic tourism, ahead of regional and international travel (Chapman, 2020; Guevara, 2020; Smith, 2020).

There is also a strong indication that a unified MICE leadership will push for business events in destinations declared COVID-free and are therefore capable of managing safety, health and risks for participants and organizers. This initiative echoes the general sentiment of MICE stakeholders that there is a need to jumpstart before the end of 2020.

The messages are clear: The tourism industry is resilient. The MICE and special events sector will rebound. This paper argues for further research on themes that cut across the MICE industry. These topics include, but are not limited to big data, smart tourism, authenticity, participant journey, new roles in MICE, staging and production, new business models, and impact analysis. Refer to these topics and questions that that may stimulate research interest (table II)

TABLE II
FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA FOR MICE TOURISM

Topic/Theme	Research Questions
Big data analytics	How can the public and private sectors collaborate on the design, research, and results of data analysis?
	How can stakeholders of MICE sectors access big data analysis to implement innovative solutions?
	How can destination management organizations use big data analysis to customize solutions for their respective venues and locations?
Smart Tourism	What should be the priorities of event destinations in order to compete with smart cities?
	What are the criteria for selecting mobile applications, software, hardware equipment to enable seamless integration of processes and activities in MICE?
	In what ways can artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented reality, beacons and other new event technologies influence event management?
	What security protocols should be implemented in an era of interconnectivity?
	How can participants leverage the use of ICT to generate leads, sell to volume buyers, network, and communicate brand value?
Authenticity	How can virtual and/or hybrid events engage incentive visitors?
	In what ways can event managers avoid commodification of the tourist experience?
	What safeguards will be required for travellers and providers of incentive tours?
	Which touchpoint areas can be used to enhance the experience? How will these be achieved in hybrid and/or virtual events?
Participant Journey	How can a low-touch, high-technology strategy impact the behavior of delegates, exhibitors, and incentive tourists?
	How will different international travel guidelines affect the arrival/departure of stakeholders?
	How can social media, mobile applications, chatbots, and other communications media assists MICE participants?
	How will the experience economy differ in the new normal?
New roles within the MICE industry	Who will monitor the safety and hygiene protocols for the event? How will this committee implement the policies for events that are hosted in an indoor/outdoor locations?
	With guidelines issued by different organizations, who dictates the policies to be followed by suppliers and vendors, e.g. transport, catering, etc.
Staging and Production	Will a quarantine area be a required space in convention venues?

	What will be the required protocols for ingress, set-up, break-down, and egress of suppliers?
	How can event managers integrate artificial intelligence, robotics, and virtual reality in the design and management of business events?
	How can hybrid events replicate the live experience?
New Business Models	How will MICE managers design sponsor packages that deliver value anchored on the low-touch scenario?
	How will sponsors evaluate the success of events if the quantity of delegates and visitors will be limited due to the need for physical distancing?
	How can companies offer physical goods as part of a sponsorship campaign? How will these products undergo the sanitation and hygiene tests?
	With physical distancing to be implemented in MICE, how can participants maximize their investment?
	What are the new business models that micro, small and medium scale tourism enterprises develop to compete in the new normal?
	What are innovative ways of seamlessly collaborating across the supply chain?
Impact Analysis	How will sustainability be implemented alongside strict travel protocols?
	What green practices can be used alongside safety and hygiene procedures?

4. Conclusion

Despite the disruption brought about by COVID-19, this paper argues that stakeholders can gain from the use of ICT when the technology is matched with objectives of sustainability, engagement, and collaboration. The scope of this paper was limited by the available literature on the internet. It also specifically focused on the use of ICT for MICE as a sector, not as individual events. But its exploratory nature offers insights into the use of ICT, not just as a stop-gap solution, but a continuing process towards enhancing value for all MICE stakeholders.

To remain relevant in the dynamic, interconnected, fragmented MICE environment, stakeholders must revisit the guidelines issued in response to the pandemic. The "COVID Code" can be used as the basis for re-designing strategies for the new future of MICE tourism and special event management. This may refer to an optimal combination of face-to-face and virtual techniques for competitive advantage that may result in improved revenues and profits. Research using the frameworks of the liberal arts, education, business and the social sciences may assist in the development of a more robust industry. This paper also presents areas of possible research in preparation for a new era of MICE tourism. This seeks to initiate a broader research agenda with more rigor through the development of new conceptual frameworks, innovative formats, and replicable business models that may help stakeholders navigate MICE post COVID-19.

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