Hybrid Festival Visitors' Experience Using the Event Experience Theory in the Post-COVID-19 Era

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The festival events sector has undergone a significant transformation with the rise of hybrid events, which blend physical and virtual components. This evolution has been notable since the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated innovative approaches to event organization. The pandemic acted as a catalyst for the widespread adoption of hybrid events, reshaping the industry landscape and setting new standards for attendee engagement and experience. Structured interviews were conducted with 105 attendees from two major festivals. These interviews were designed based on the Event Experience Theory (EET), which provides a framework for understanding the dimensions of event experiences, including sensory perception, emotional engagement, cognitive involvement, and social interactions. The findings of this study contribute to the conceptualization of hybrid events experience. From a managerial perspective, research findings inform event organizers on effectively navigating the landscape of hybrid events with the aim to ensure event viability and attendees' satisfaction.

Key words: Hybrid events; Festival; Event experience; Pandemic; Technology; Inclusion

Introduction

The festival events sector is widely recognized as a thriving and ever-evolving sector, distinguished by its organization of live gatherings that foster communal engagement and offer a wide range of cultural, artistic, and positive encounters (Getz & Ziakas, 2023). Glyptou (2023) studied the implications of crises and turbulence to destinations and the events sector proposing that the viability of events is based on the way uncertainty is managed. The global COVID-19 outbreak has greatly impacted societies across the world, leading to a swift and disruptive transformation with substantial and unfavorable impact on the events sector as well. Event managers had to avert significant financial loss amounting to £8.6 billion since March 2020 and demonstrate resilience and adaptability. Virtual events replaced 485 festivals canceled in 2020 in the UK with an estimated £110 billion revenue in 2022 anticipated to grow to over £510 billion by 2030 (Grand View Research, 2022). The question,

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however, is how can event professionals capitalize on virtual and hybrid events postpandemic to create exciting event experiences. The pandemic as a phenomenon has attracted the attention of scholars in their respective disciplines. For example, in their study, Getz and Page (2020) investigated the effects of external disruptions, such as disease outbreaks, on the event sector; they confirm that the event sector is susceptible to disruptions, such as pandemics, due to its reliance on in-person attendance and social interactions. Séraphin and Yallop (2021) and Litvinova-Kulikova et al. (2023) investigated the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism and event sectors, highlighting the widespread cancellation or postponement of events worldwide and the resulting economic consequences. The events sector has undergone a notable transformation in response to the diverse challenges it has encountered due to the pandemic. Following the successful containment of the COVID-19 pandemic, the event sector has incorporated both virtual and physical elements to develop a new concept as a prominent solution, referred to as hybrid events. The aforementioned innovation stands for a noteworthy advancement within the sector, making it the most significant advancement that has occurred during the past few decades (Chibaya & Zhou, 2023).

Michopoulou et al. (2019) stated that "events are intricate, cognitive, and affective experiences whose significance, value, and worth both at individual and societal level direct behaviors and as such they require further in-depth investigation" (p. 492). *Hybrid events* are events that combine in-person and virtual aspects and have gained considerable attention over the past few years, particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Getz & Page, 2016). Glyptou (2023) suggested that the new modes of event delivery offer the setting to explore multivariate and multilayered event system dynamics. For the purpose of this study, the perspective of customer experience when attending a hybrid festival after the pandemic has been explored with focus on the Event Experience Theory (EET). de Geus et al. (2016) defined the EET model as:

> an interaction between an individual and the event environment (both physical and social), modified by the level of engagement or involvement, involving multiple experiential elements and outputs (such as satisfaction, emotions, behaviours, cognition, memories and learning), that can happen at any point in the event journey. (p. 277)

Hybrid events, within the scope of this study, pertain to a dynamic integration of traditional face-to-face festival experiences and digital aspects. These occurrences surpass the limitations of physical locations, enabling individuals to actively participate in-person as well as remotely via virtual platforms (Chodor & Cyranski, 2020).

A review of event management studies since 2021 reveals a focus on the facilities provided and the operational changes in event delivery. For instance, research by Séraphin and Yallop (2021) and Litvinova-Kulikova et al. (2023) highlighted the evolving strategies and practices in response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Estanyol (2022) studied the use of digitalization on events and proposed the need to redesign events with the use of social media and live streaming to implement risk management. Similarly, Van Winkle and Kullman (2022) interviewed festival organizers in Canada and proposed a change towards organizational sustainability, innovation, and adaptation with the use of technology. Beckman and Shu (2024) studied the experience of a festival with a focus on health and safety attendees' perceptions. No current studies have been identified to focus on attendees' hybrid event experience. This research study seeks to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the organization of hybrid festivals, specifically examining how the shift to hybrid events has affected attendees' experiences and perceptions. It specifically examines how these changes relate to the EET.

Literature Review

Festivals and Attendees' Interaction and Experience

The domain of festivals is a complex and diverse field that encompasses a variety of events, such as music festivals, cultural festivals, and arts festivals. The significance of cultural and economic integration within diverse regions is pivotal, as festivals serve as a stimulant for tourism, facilitate the progression of native expertise, and promote

community involvement (Chodor & Cyranski, 2020). The festivals sector is distinguished by its emphasis on providing immersive and experiential interactions that unite diverse audiences in commemorating mutual interests and enthusiasms (de Geus et al., 2016). Getz and Page (2020) defined festivals as social gatherings that exhibit a cohesive thematic concept and an extensive range of preplanned activities. The events being referred to are typically arranged within a designated location and are limited by a defined duration; their success (or failure) depends on the visitors' satisfaction, their perceived value, and their interaction during the festival (Azara et al., 2023). Liu et al. (2017b) added that festivals rely on the interaction among all social actors and stakeholders beyond the physical and temporal boundaries of the setting. Event experiences are created and influenced by factors that are within and beyond service providers' control (Liu et al., 2017a). If any of the participants perceive they have not benefited from such engagement and interaction they may feel dissatisfied. Hence, it is important to explore the relationship between attendees' experience from the event, their motivations, and their level of engagement at any given event context (Azara et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2017b). Very little is known of the implications derived from the lack of engagement and interaction on the event experience, especially after the pandemic with the increase of hybrid events (de Geus et al., 2016; Litvinova-Kulikova et al., 2023).

Hybrid Events

According to Goldblatt (2011) the definition of an event varies among individuals. As the definition becomes more intricate, its practical application in the real world may become challenging. Therefore, it is advisable to adhere to a straightforward understanding of the term "events" rather than developing a convoluted concept. On the one hand, both academic researchers (e.g., Nordvall et al., 2014; Sá et al., 2019; Simons, 2019) and professionals in the event sector have repeatedly highlighted the importance of real-time interaction and the communal aspect of events such as festivals. The President of ICCA, James Rees, expressed this view eloquently when he stated that the physical experience, the sense of being a

part of an environment, and the creation of valued relationships through face-to-face interactions are incomparable and priceless (International Congress and Convention Association [ICCA], 2020). On the other hand, different scholars provide definitions of events including the word "hybrid." They state that hybrid events emphasize their multifaceted character and technological integration. For example, Bressan et al. (2019) defined hybrid events as "events that combine live face-to-face attendance with online participation through virtual platforms" (p. 244). In a similar vein, Bellotti et al. (2018) defined hybrid events as "events that take place at a physical location but also leverage virtual presence and technology to enable remote participation and engagement" (p. 49). Hence, hybrid events are events that integrate technology with conventional event practices to offer novel experiences to attendees and serve as a platform for disseminating information to them (Getz & Page, 2020). Event managers and organizers "are facing increasing pressures for experiences differentiation and value generation" (Azara et al., 2023, p. 160). Hybrid events must be properly prepared to captivate attendees regardless of their physical presence. The level of interactivity between two systems is positively correlated with their mutual influence, resulting in a wider and more substantial effect on the overall occurrence (Simons, 2019).

Event Experience Theory (EET)

Experiences play a major role in events and attendees' satisfaction, but measuring and contextualizing the meaning of event experiences remains underresearched (Biaett & Richards, 2020). Most studies refer to experiences in a nondirect way, by quantifying elements such as satisfaction and intention to revisit (Richards, 2019). Event experience has been associated with enjoyment, memories, negative emotions (de Geus et al., 2016), levels of engagement, and friends or family opinions on the experience of the event (Hixson, 2014), or the social dimension to experiences (de Geus et al., 2016; Richards et al., 2013). Qualitative approaches in studying and measuring event experience reveal "the contextual meaning of experiences such as senses of individual well-being and communitas" (Biaett & Richards, 2020, p. 279), providing

meaning and value to the social interaction where stakeholders cocreate experiences. They continue that measuring experiences requires the inclusion of subjective perceptions and the social context, as well as the measurement of the experience while it takes place (p. 280). An event experience should be seen as part of an "ecosystem" as attendees' experience is affected by different touchpoints and factors (Liu et al., 2017b). Measuring event experience is a complex task providing an opportunity for niche experience research. This study explores hybrid festivals and their impact on attendees' experience and satisfaction following de Geus et al.'s (2016) and Richards' (2019) suggestion for more in-depth investigations of both the context and the content of the event. Studies propose that empirical approaches are not appropriate for the generation of theories or for delivering meaningful understanding of experiences; however, they propose the need to include process, personal impact, authenticity, leveraging structures, and event design (Biaett & Richards, 2020; Howarth, 2025). Globalization and major events such as the pandemic-stimulated studies on the comparison of measurements from different sites, different locations, the dimension of engagement on event experiences—and more importantly on hybrid events experiences—"is very scarce and fragmented" (de Geus et al., 2016, p. 276). Studies on festival experiences propose that festivals provide space and time away from everyday life (Morgan, 2008), and they embrace socialization and sharing of experiences (Nordvall et al., 2014), but little is known about measuring and studying event experiences from hybrid festivals.

The EET proposes that the likelihood of an event taking place is dependent on the interaction between an individual and the environmental conditions of the event, which includes both physical and social aspects (de Geus et al., 2016). The framework includes the *experience interaction*, the *experience involvement*, the *experience conditions*, and the *experience outcomes*. Current research examines the potential variability of this *experience interaction* as a function of the level of engagement or involvement (Getz, 2012). Studies propose that experience interaction is active and requires *involvement*. Involvement "is an unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest between an individual and recreational activities,

tourist destinations or related equipment" (Havitz & Dimanche, 1990, p. 184). *Conditions* include, for example, group assembly, interpersonal interaction, feelings of communion, shared mood, and emotional intensity (Simons, 2019). This interaction is characterized by a diverse set of experiential elements and *outcomes*, such as satisfaction, emotions, behaviors, cognition, memories, and learning, among others. These outcomes can happen at any point during the event's progression (de Geus et al., 2016).

Satisfaction is an experiential outcome emphasized by pursuit of fantasies, feelings, fun, and emotions (de Geus et al., 2016). This framework views experiences as a process; however, other elements such as social equity and inclusion are not considered. Face-to-face events leave behind contributors (including participants) facing real-life challenges (i.e., special needs, mobility issues); therefore, the study of hybrid festivals with the use of the EET may provide an understanding of how such events may enhance attendee and community engagement. This research expands the theoretical framework of EET proposed by de Geus et al. (2016), which focuses on the in-depth experience of individuals participating in events. This study seeks to evaluate the impact of hybrid festivals considering the distinct experiential aspects associated with physical and virtual participation as part of the event experience theory. The research questions for this study are:

RQ1: How is the attendees' event experience impacted by hybrid festivals attendance after the pandemic?

RQ2: What are the factors that contribute to hybrid festivals attendees' engagement, interaction and satisfaction?

Methodology

Event stakeholders include a number of people with multiple categories of interests, expectations, and behaviors (Glyptou, 2023). To conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of hybrid formats on the event experience, it was crucial to consider the perspectives of event attendees (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Biaett and Richards (2020) proposed that more qualitative research is

required as events are complex phenomena; however, they added that quantitative data may also be useful in studying event attendees' experience. Therefore, for the purpose of this study structured interviews were found to be an effective way to comprehend attendees' experience and their motivations to attend a hybrid festival in the post covid era. The questionnaire for the online structured interviews was designed with consideration of the EET (see Table 1). It was shared via email, via social media platforms and virtual communities with people that had attended Glastonbury and/or Coachella festivals after the COVID-19 pandemic via hybrid mode. From those who responded to the study, a pilot test involving a sample of 10 participants was conducted, resulting in modifications being made to some phrasing for making the questions clearer to participants (e.g., the word culture was changed to atmosphere); open-ended questions were added to receive richer responses and allow in-depth analysis to be performed.

Purposive sampling (Creswell, 2015) was used to select the participants for the study. These participants were chosen among those who responded to

the call based on certain criteria: their characteristics, their experience having attended a festival in a hybrid mode after the pandemic. One hundred and five valid responses were identified to be analyzed. The aim was to ensure that all participants had first-hand experience in hybrid festivals and were able to offer valuable insights on the factors that contribute to a good experience from such events.

The researchers employed the Qualtrics platform to upload the structured interview questionnaire consisting of 16 questions. The questionnaire was developed in accordance with the established research objectives and incorporating pertinent scholarly literature and theoretical framework (the EET); the questionnaire facilitated the acquisition of valuable insights from the participants. The first section comprised questions relating to participants demographics, such data was collected to identify participants' relevance to the study. The second section assessed their views on hybrid events, their experiences, using 5-point Likert scale. It also included open-ended questions relevant to the study aiming at getting more information on hybrid events and the overall experience. The

Table 1

List of Questions Used for Primary Data Collection (Structured Interview)

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1. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements: "Hybrid events have the potential to reach a wider audience, including those who are unable to attend in-person events."
2. To what extent do you believe that hybrid events will become the norm for festivals in the future, rather than remaining a temporary trend?
3. Can you name any hybrid festival events that you have attended?
4. Have you attended the hybrid festival event in-person, virtually, or both?
5. How satisfied were you with the hybrid event you attended in terms of meeting your expectations?
6. Hybrid festivals blend virtual and in-person components. Have you attended any? Would you mind sharing your hybrid festival event experience and your thoughts on this concept?
7. How much do you agree with the following statement: "Hybrid events offer more opportunities to festival attendees."
8. If you agree with the above statement, please provide some examples of the opportunities that hybrid events may offer according to your perspective.
9. Are there any particular features or elements of hybrid festival events that you find particularly appealing?
10. Did you encounter any technical difficulties when attending the virtual component of the hybrid festival event?
11. Did you feel that the virtual component of the hybrid festival event provided a good substitute for the in-person experience, or was it lacking in some way?
12. How has the inclusion of virtual elements in festival events impacted the atmosphere? Do you perceive it to be as lively and exciting as it was previously?
13. Finally, do you feel that the addition of virtual elements to the festival event enhanced the overall festival experience? Could you provide an explanation for your response to the above question (Q12)?
14. Based on your experience, would you be more likely to attend the virtual component festival event in the future, or do you prefer traditional in-person events?
15. Based on your experience, to what extent do hybrid festival events typically enhance attendee engagement and promote greater consumption of event content compared to traditional in-person events?
16. If possible, could you please provide an explanation for your answer to the question?

Note. Likert scale: 1 – *strongly disagree*, 2 – *somewhat disagree*, 3 – *neutral*, 4 – *somewhat agree*, 5 – *strongly agree*.

link with the questionnaire was shared via social media groups that have attended the two festivals after the pandemic. The platform was open for 21 days (until the required number of responses was acquired and when the researchers observed data saturation on the open-ended questions) (Saunders et al., 2015).

One hundred and five responses were provided and analyzed in an innovative methodological way by quantifying the data as well (Hochwald et al., 2023). A sequential approach to analyze the data was adopted as both the inductive and deductive approaches were used (Azungah, 2018; Bingham, 2023). In Phase 1, applying the deductive approach (commonly used to apply theory or conceptual frameworks), the codes were predetermined and created by the researchers. Based on the literature, on the topic, and what was known about EET with the support of the research aims and questions core concepts were identified within the data. Such top-ics–codes were related to the conditions and the outcomes from the EET (e.g., feelings, expecta-tions, and motivations). To ensure reliability and validity of the results, each researcher examined the data independently and rigorously according to multiple encoding approach (Zaman et al., 2025). In Phase 2, an inductive approach (Bingham, 2023) was then performed to identify any further themes that would emerge from the data analysis and were relevant to the study and its aim. The researchers wanted to identify any important rela-tionships and patterns among the data to explore the development of the theoretical model. Themes that emerged included several items relevant to the experience such as networking opportuni-ties. Finally, in Phase 3 regression analysis was performed with the use of SPSS28 on the Likert scale responses aiming to analyze the relationship of participation (dependent variable) and future, reach, engagement and consumption, expecta-tion, opportunities, good substitute, enhanced experience (independent variables) (Silverman, 2015). Descriptive statistics were also performed to identify and analyze other data provided such as participation at events, how often such festivals were attended, etc. This sequential approach and the high number of responses helped to reduce bias and increase validity of the data (Azungah, 2018; Fakis et al., 2014).

Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis led to the identification of six themes as they are discussed in this section. Table 2 presents a summary of the coding results with the emerged themes and examples of relevant quotes.

The data analysis and discussion of each theme was triangulated with quantitative analysis of data collected via the structured interviews. Data were collected on the format of attendance among the participants in this study as shown in Figure 1.

Although 52 participants attended the festi-vals in person a total of 43 attended either virtu-ally or both. This highlights the online attendance

Table 2

Summary of Themes

Theme	Examples of Quotes
1. Increased attendee engage-ment and reach	"Hybrid events are a good option for people to get the zest of the event even though they can't attend the event physically." "Mind-blowing experience." "Awesome experience." "Very good for relaxing your mind and getting relief from stress. Very good experience for every people." "Hybrid events create an overall in-person experience, and we can participate wherever we want." "It was interesting and mindful. It will help an individual to make their mind free and enjoy the moment." "The virtual experience felt like the same as attending festival in person." "Virtual elements are good advancement method compared to old style."

(*continued*)

Table 2 (Continued)

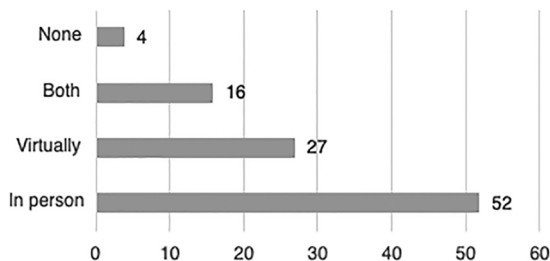| Theme	Examples of Quotes
2. Expanded opportunities for attendees	"Hybrid events attract more people from around the world, increasing event visibility and recognition for artists." "Online advertising and audience." "Social media interaction." "Online marketing." "Online meetings and wider range of audience." "More activities and events without missing any." "More meditations." "Hybrid events offer expanded opportunities to festival attendees, including increased accessibility, flexible attendance options, a wider range of content, networking possibilities beyond physical boundaries, enhanced interaction features, and extended event duration."
3. Innovative content formats, consumption, and experiences	"The impact of hybrid events on attendee engagement and consumption of event content would be based on the event type." "Attendees can consume more event content without missing any second of the event." "Hybrid events provide more interactive features and increase attendee consumption of event content." "Flexibility for the attendees, Rich Content, Network opportunities." "Attendees can engage in more event content, buy event merchandise online." "Attendee gets more event content through online platform." "Hybrid events provide more interactive features and increase attendee consumption of event content." "Hybrid events providing more content and giving exciting experience to everyone around the world through online and offline." "The virtual experience felt like the same as attending festival in person." "Virtual elements are good advancement method compared to old style."
4. Networking opportunities and increased interactivity	"Hybrid events have exciting potential for reaching diverse audiences and fostering interactive environments." "Increased reach and accessibility." "Ability to bring multi-nation people to work and enjoy together." "Wide variety of people around the world can be seen." "Multicultural interactions."
5. Positive recommendations and endorsement of hybrid events	"Increased reach and accessibility." "Reaching more audience worldwide." "Hybrid events provide increased attendee engagement and reach." "Hybrid festivals have exciting potential for reaching diverse audiences and fostering interactive environments." "Hybrid events provide increased attendee engagement and reach." "Connecting like-minded festival enthusiasts together." "Worldwide availability." "Wide variety of people around the world can be seen." "Ability to involve people from different areas who can't be present in person." "It was a mind-blowing experience." "It is more exciting and engaging now." BUT "Hybrid events are good example in cases of pandemics." "Virtual elements in festival events impact the atmosphere but may not match the liveliness and excitement."
6. Removal of travel constraints and easy accessibility of hybrid events – Cost-effectiveness	"More economical and removes travel constraints." "Saving expenses on travel and accommodation." "Budget-friendly option for attendees." "Less money usage." "Cost-effective way to attend events."

Figure 1. Format of attendance.

of festivals, as well as the significance of offering hybrid events to satisfy diverse attendee preferences. A survey conducted by Bizzabo (2023) proposed that a significant proportion of event professionals expressed their intention to adopt the hybrid format as the primary mode for organizing their events in the same year. This trend highlights a persistent inclination towards the incorporation of both physical and virtual components within event planning and execution.

Theme 1. Increased Attendee Engagement and Reach

The participants emphasized the positive impact of hybrid events on attendee engagement. They noted that such events facilitated greater levels of active participation in discussions and increased interaction with speakers through virtual platforms. Participant 1 (P1) stated:

> I noticed a significant increase in attendee engagement during our hybrid event. People were more active in participating in discussions, asking questions, and sharing their thoughts.

Additionally, attendees reported feeling actively involved in the event, even when participating from remote locations. P2 responded:

> I felt more engaged during the hybrid event because I could interact with the speakers through the virtual platform. It made me feel like a part of the event, even though I was attending from home.

The present study states that the incorporation of virtual elements in hybrid events contributes to an enhanced level of engagement among attendees. Attendees had the autonomy to choose the mode

of engagement, resulting in an enhanced sense of control and individualization in their experience providing them with a sense of empowerment that encourages active involvement in discussions and interaction with the event (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Moreover, increased engagement was evident as attendees felt competent through the use of technology-based experiences. They could relate with the event, which encompasses social affiliation and inclusion (Simons, 2019) as they could participate remotely, develop virtual social connections with online conversations, live chats leading to increased levels of satisfaction and active participation. Ninety-six respondents confirmed the tendency to support hybrid events (mean 3.98, *SD* 1.32), stating that such events provide the capacity to appeal to a wider range of participants.

Theme 2. Expanded Opportunities for Attendees

Hybrid festivals provided attendees with more opportunities to interact with the event's content and participate in other activities, such as virtual workshops, discussion forums, and/or special content. P3 mentioned:

> The virtual component allows us to offer additional workshops and panel discussions that attendees could access at their convenience. It expanded the opportunities for everyone to learn and engage with the festival content.

Hence, participants could engage with the content, at different time frames. For example, P44 stated:

> I loved that I could access recorded sessions and workshops even after the event. It allowed me to continue learning and exploring the festival content.

A positive relationship was established between the increased level of attendee engagement and the enhanced opportunities facilitated by the hybrid mode of the festival.

Theme 3. Innovative Content Formats, Consumption, and Experiences

The integration of hybrid events has facilitated the emergence of novel content formats and experiential opportunities. P17 explained:

I watched a live performance on stage, but I also streamed virtual performances from artists who I couldn't attend in person. This allowed me to get diverse range of experiences from the same event.

P38 expressed satisfaction:

I loved that I could choose between attending live sessions or watching recorded sessions later. It gave me the flexibility to customize my festival experience.

The hybrid format of a festival event provided the opportunity to personalize and tailor one's experience according to their preferences and needs, enhancing the quality of their experiential encounters and increasing satisfaction. Hybrid events have the potential to introduce a multitude of innovative concepts, including the incorporation of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) experiences (de Geus et al., 2016; Morgan, 2008). The concept of the hybrid event has emerged as a notable innovation within the event sector with an "out of the ordinary" character (Simons, 2019), as hybrid festivals provide time and space away from everyday life. It is important to acknowledge that the acceptance of innovations, despite their potential value, can be a complex and challenging process. Confirming other studies (Liu et al., 2017b; Simons, 2019), attendees were satisfied from the memorable experience provided by the hybrid event.

The phenomenon of enhancing content engagement aligns with the principles of EET, which posits that interactive elements play a crucial role in shaping and determining the memorability of event experiences (Getz, 2012; Simons, 2019). The proliferation of digital platforms has made it easier for individuals to retrospectively engage with past events. This allowed participants to revisit specific instances that contributed to their overall experiential understanding, leading to a sense of satisfaction and contentment across various aspects of the event landscape. Many respondents provided various intriguing responses about increased content consumption. For example:

Hybrid events providing more content and giving exciting experience to everyone around the world through online and offline. (P11)

Hybrid events provide more interactive features and increase attendee consumption of event content. (P72)

Attendees can consume more event content without missing any second of the event. (P81)

Attendees can engage in more event content, buy event merchandise online. (P9)

The majority of respondents stated that hybrid events result in significantly higher attendee engagement and increased consumption of content (57%). Participants suggested that the impact of hybrid events on attendee engagement and consumption of event content varies widely and is difficult to generalize.

Theme 4. Networking Opportunities and Increased Interactivity

The emergence of hybrid events has enhanced networking opportunities for participants (Simons, 2019). The feelings expressed by the individuals in participation were evident in the feedback they provided. For example, P59 expressed satisfaction with the virtual networking sessions, highlighting the valuable opportunity it provided to engage with a diverse group of intellectually stimulating individuals. The occurrence presented a noteworthy occasion for networking that would have been unattainable solely through a traditional face-to-face setting. The primary emphasis of this thematic analysis revolves around the increased degree of engagement and interactivity enabled by hybrid events. The participants emphasized the importance of establishing connections with like-minded individuals, engaging with artists, and participating in virtual meet and greets. As per the testimony of P10:

hybrid events present a unique prospect for individuals to actively interact with like-minded individuals in the context of festivals, facilitated by virtual communities, fan forums, or online discussions.

The current topic emphasizes the interactive characteristics of hybrid events that enhance the overall experience of participants. Simons (2019) proposed that events are interaction ritual chains, where attendees participate "at a community of

like-minded comrades" (p. 146) where the state of liminality can be created and prolonged.

Theme 5. Positive Recommendations and Endorsement of Hybrid Events

Hybrid festivals have emerged as a noteworthy and effective strategy in the field of event planning, wherein the integration of physical and virtual elements creates a multifaceted and enhanced experience for participants (de Geus et al., 2016; Michopoulou et al., 2019). The importance of the interaction between individuals and the environment of the event was repeatedly identified by the participants in this study. Individuals who participate in hybrid festivals, which combine both physical attendance and virtual engagement, undergo a state of complete participation and active involvement within a dynamic and stimulating setting (Biaett & Richards, 2020; Simons, 2019). Participants confirmed that the incorporation of flexible engagement strategies within the festival events sector facilitated a wider scope of audience outreach, thereby promoting inclusivity and diversity. Hybrid festivals possess the capacity to evoke a wide range of experiential components, encompassing emotions, satisfaction, and knowledge acquisition (de Geus et al., 2016; Simons, 2019). The diverse range of experiences encountered by individuals in this study have a significant and lasting impact, leading to the creation of deeply valued memories and promoting continued involvement

that extends beyond the immediate timeframe of the occurrence (Getz, 2012).

In reference to the EET, participants provided discussion and examples to confirm that the extensive positive feedback and endorsements garnered by hybrid festivals highlight the convenience, accessibility, and promising possibilities associated with this format, rendering it a highly recommended option for event organizers aiming to cultivate interactive settings and cater to a wide-ranging audience. In the dynamic and evolving realm of the event sector, hybrid festivals represent an appealing example of the potential for innovation and adaptability (Azara et al., 2023). These festivals provide participants with exceptional and captivating experiences that effectively facilitate the connection between in-person attendance and virtual engagement. For example, participants said:

> Hybrid events are a good option for people to get the zest of the event even though they can't attend the event physically. (P13)

> I attended a film festival 2 years ago that was a hybrid event. I was amazed by this innovative movement that took place in the event sector. (P66)

> The concert was in South Korea, and there was no chance that I could attend that in-person. However, there was the option to attend it virtually. I was happy that I could at least experience the show online. (P73)

Table 3

Hybrid Event as Substitute: Did You Feel That the Virtual Component of the Hybrid Festival Event Provided a Good Substitute for the In-Person Experience, or Was it Lacking in Some Way?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid				
The virtual component provided an excellent substitute for the in-person experience	53	53%	58.9%	58.9%
The virtual component provided a good substitute for the in-person experience	26	26%	28.9%	87.8%
The virtual component was lacking in some ways, I would have preferred a completely in-person experience	9	9%	10.0%	97.8%
I did not attend the virtual component	2	2%	2.2%	100.0%
Total	90	90%	100.0%	
Missing system	10	10%		
Total	100	100%		

These responses showed that the participants of this study had a positive experience attending hybrid festivals and they were able to take home some precious memories and valuable experiences. Participants valued the hybrid mode as a substitute for the in-person attendance; 53% of the participants identified the virtual component as an excellent substitute for the in-person experience (see Table 3).

Theme 6. Removal of Travel Constraints and Easy Accessibility of Hybrid Events—Cost-Effectiveness

The implications of travel restrictions on individuals participating in festivals can be substantial, as they are influenced by a range of factors including geographical distance, visa prerequisites, financial limitations, and personal commitments (Bellotti et al., 2018). Various environmental, political, or social factors have the potential to act as supplementary obstacles that impede access. The concept of cost-effectiveness plays a crucial role in achieving favorable outcomes for events (Getz, 2012). Participants' responses on decision-making processes, their participation in social interactions with the objective of optimizing benefits and minimizing costs within their interpersonal relationships were analyzed. Hybrid events were found to be perceived as a cost-effective solution for both attendees and event organizers. The respondents discussed how the virtual component reduced costs associated with venue rental, travel expenses, and accommodation. P5 explained:

> Hosting a hybrid event allowed us to save on venue costs and reach a wider audience without incurring additional travel expenses. It was a cost-effective solution for us.

P6 said that:

> Attending virtually saved me money on travel and accommodation. It made the festival more affordable for me.

The reduction in costs associated with the adoption of hybrid events is a significant factor contributing to the increased popularity of this event format (Wehmeyer et al., 2019).

Our study investigated the importance of hybrid events as an inclusive approach, by also catering to the requirements of individuals facing mobility limitations or restricted accessibility. P16 when asked about the positive features of a hybrid event stated:

> More economical and removes travel constraints.

Hybrid events encouraged inclusion for those with travel or mobility issues. This was also underlined by P19 who said:

> I have a disability that makes it difficult for me to attend in-person events. The virtual option allowed me to be a part of this festival, and I felt included.

Statistical Analysis

The variables used for the regression analysis are presented in Table 4. Simple linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the extent to which the independent variables (Future, Reach, Engagement & Consumption, Expectation, Opportunities, Good Substitute, and Enhanced Experience) could predict participation. The analysis (Tables 5 and 6) showed that only Expectation significantly ($p < 0.05$) predicted the participation of the respondents [$R^2 = 0.181$, $F(1, 2.099) = 8$, $p = 0.011$] and Enhanced Experience was also close to significantly predict participation [$R^2 = 0.181$, $F(1, 2.099) = 8$, $p = 0.069$].

The correlation coefficient was 0.425%, indicating a moderately positive correlation. The analysis conducted revealed a R^2 value of 0.181, suggesting that around 18.1% of the variability in the dependent variable could be explained by the independent variables. This study revealed that the independent variables, in conjunction with the number of predictors used in the analysis, explained approximately 9.5% of the observed variability in the dependent variable, which was Participation. Nevertheless, the model was found to be valid, demonstrating statistical significance ($p = 0.046$). Interestingly, looking at the results of *t* and *B* when the expectation (EX1) increased the participation (PR1) increased as well. On the contrary, when enhanced experience (EE1) decreased the participation (PR1) decreased as well. Looking at the rest of the independent variables the following observation was made: when reach (RE1), attend hybrid events in the future (FR2), and engagement and consumption (EC1) increased then participation (PR1) increased as well, whereas

Table 4
Regression Analysis: Variables

Variables	Code	Item
Participation (PR)	PR1	Have you attended the hybrid festival event in-person, virtually, or both?
Future (FR)	FR1	To what extent do you believe that hybrid events will become the norm for festivals in the future, rather than remaining a temporary trend?
	FR2	Based on your experience, would you be more likely to attend the virtual component festival event in the future, or do you prefer traditional in-person events?
Reach (RE)	RE1	Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements: "Hybrid events have the potential to reach a wider audience, including those who are unable to attend in-person events."
Engagement & consumption (EC)	EC1	Based on your experience, to what extent do hybrid festival events typically enhance attendee engagement and promote greater consumption of event content compared to traditional in-person?
Expectation (EX)	EX1	How satisfied were you with the hybrid event you attended in terms of meeting your expectations?
Opportunities (OP)	OP1	How much do you agree with the following statement: "Hybrid events offer more opportunities to festival attendees."
Good substitute (GS)	GS1	Did you feel that the virtual component of the hybrid festival event provided a good substitute for the in-person experience, or was it lacking in some way?
Enhanced experience (EE)	EE1	Finally, do you feel that the addition of virtual elements to the festival event enhanced the overall festival experience?

Table 5
Regression Analysis

Model	Unstandardized B	Coefficients SE	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.254	0.488		2.571	0.012
RE1	0.070	0.092	0.111	0.758	0.451
FR1	−0.043	0.099	−0.064	−0.435	0.665
EX1	0.381	0.146	0.373	2.609	0.011
OP1	−0.071	0.192	−0.048	−0.372	0.711
GS1	−0.034	0.142	−0.029	−0.237	0.813
EE1	−0.359	0.195	−0.216	−1.844	0.069
FR2	0.119	0.083	0.164	1.433	0.156
EC1	0.056	0.110	0.060	0.507	0.614

Note. Dependent variable: PR1.

Table 6
ANOVA and Summary

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Regression	10.793	8	1.349	2.099	0.046	0.425	0.181	0.095
Residual	48.854	76	0.643					
Total	59.647	84						

Note. Dependent variable: PR1. Predictors: EC1, FR1, GS1, EE1, FR2, OP1, EX1, RE1.

when future of hybrid events (FR1), opportunities (OP1), and good substitute (GS1) decreased then participation (PR1) decreased as well.

The research findings provide valuable insights into a range of important observations related to hybrid festivals. The study participants exhibited a positive reaction, often expressing support for hybrid events due to their immersive integration of in person and digital elements. While some participants lacked direct experience with hybrid festivals, their curiosity and enthusiasm towards this concept were apparent. A proactive approach in using familiarization with technology was used to enhance their personal growth and development. Accomplishment had a transformative effect, as attending the festival was considered a lifetime achievement. Participants in this study were mentally and emotionally fulfilled in line with Kirillova et al. (2017).

The evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of hybrid events may be subject to relative influences that originate from individual experiences and personal preferences (de Geus et al., 2016). However, a comprehensive analysis of the gathered data revealed some *contrasting opinions* regarding the potential benefits associated with hybrid festivals. Further in-depth assessment identified potential *limitations* as indicated by comments from participants such as discrepancies in digital accessibility leading to unequal access to internet and technological resources, technical barriers impeding the effectiveness of virtual experiences, the occurrence of digital fatigue due to prolonged screen exposure, and reduced levels of interpersonal engagement within virtual settings, confirming Simons' (2019) suggestions on the construction of hybrid event communities through events and online interaction. Some participants (i.e., P43, P89, P91 among others) referred to the challenge of replicating the spontaneous and natural interactions found in attending physical festivals. Getz and Page (2020) highlighted that virtual events and technology cannot replace all events that are social in nature as they do not permit complete connectivity, face-to-face interaction, cocreation and coproduction of the event experience.

The findings of this study indicate that a significant majority of respondents expressed satisfaction with hybrid events due to several advantages such as increased accessibility, a diverse range of engagement opportunities, decreased expenses related to travel, improved time management, and enhanced networking facilitated by virtual platforms. This positive viewpoint can be ascribed to the advantages of hybrid events in enabling the participation of individuals from various geographical locations, expanding engagement methods beyond traditional in-person events, decreasing travel time, cost and effort, and improving networking opportunities through virtual tools (de Geus et al., 2016; Michopoulou et al., 2019; Simons, 2019). The majority of the participants confirmed other studies' (e.g., Biaett & Richards, 2020; Simons, 2019) suggestion that hybrid events provide a way to bring both virtual and physical audiences together in real time providing diverse content and a larger reach, including the opportunity to take part in the same content and experience.

Hybrid events have received considerable scholarly interest owing to their distinctive characteristic of inclusivity, which enables the active involvement of remote participants through virtual engagement, thereby promoting a broader scope and enhanced accessibility (Biaett & Richards, 2020). The participants conveyed positive experiences regarding their participation in virtual concerts, thus emphasizing the potential of hybrid festivals in providing enjoyable entertainment. Although some expressed the view that this format is good during crises such as the pandemic, hybrid festivals were found to be "an amazing experience" (P18). Hybrid festivals were identified as cost-saving options and a feasible approach to tackle obstacles related to inclusivity, facilitating active engagement and participation of individuals that encounter limitations in terms of mobility or travel. Furthermore, the research study placed significant emphasis on the immersive attributes of virtual reality (VR) technology as a tool for enhancing the overall event experience among participants. In similar views to Ritcher (2020), although participants identified challenges of using technology, they clearly demonstrated confidence with technology, making them more willing to attend online events. The research findings collectively underscore the various benefits associated with hybrid festivals, suggesting a growing level of acceptance and the possibility of transforming the event sector.

The research conducted in this study documented a significant rise in participant engagement and

interactivity, particularly in relation to virtual inter-actions with presenters. The participants expressed positive views towards the economic advantages linked to hybrid events, notably the cost savings resulting from reduced travel expenses. In addition, hybrid events have emerged as a feasible approach to tackle the obstacles related to inclusivity, thus facilitating the active engagement and participation of individuals who encounter limitations in terms of mobility or travel. Furthermore, the research study placed significant emphasis on the immersive attributes of VR technology as a tool for enhancing the overall event experience among participants. The research findings collectively underscore the various benefits associated with hybrid festivals, suggesting a growing level of acceptance and the possibility of transforming the event sector. The long-term viability of hybrid events relies on the proficient handling
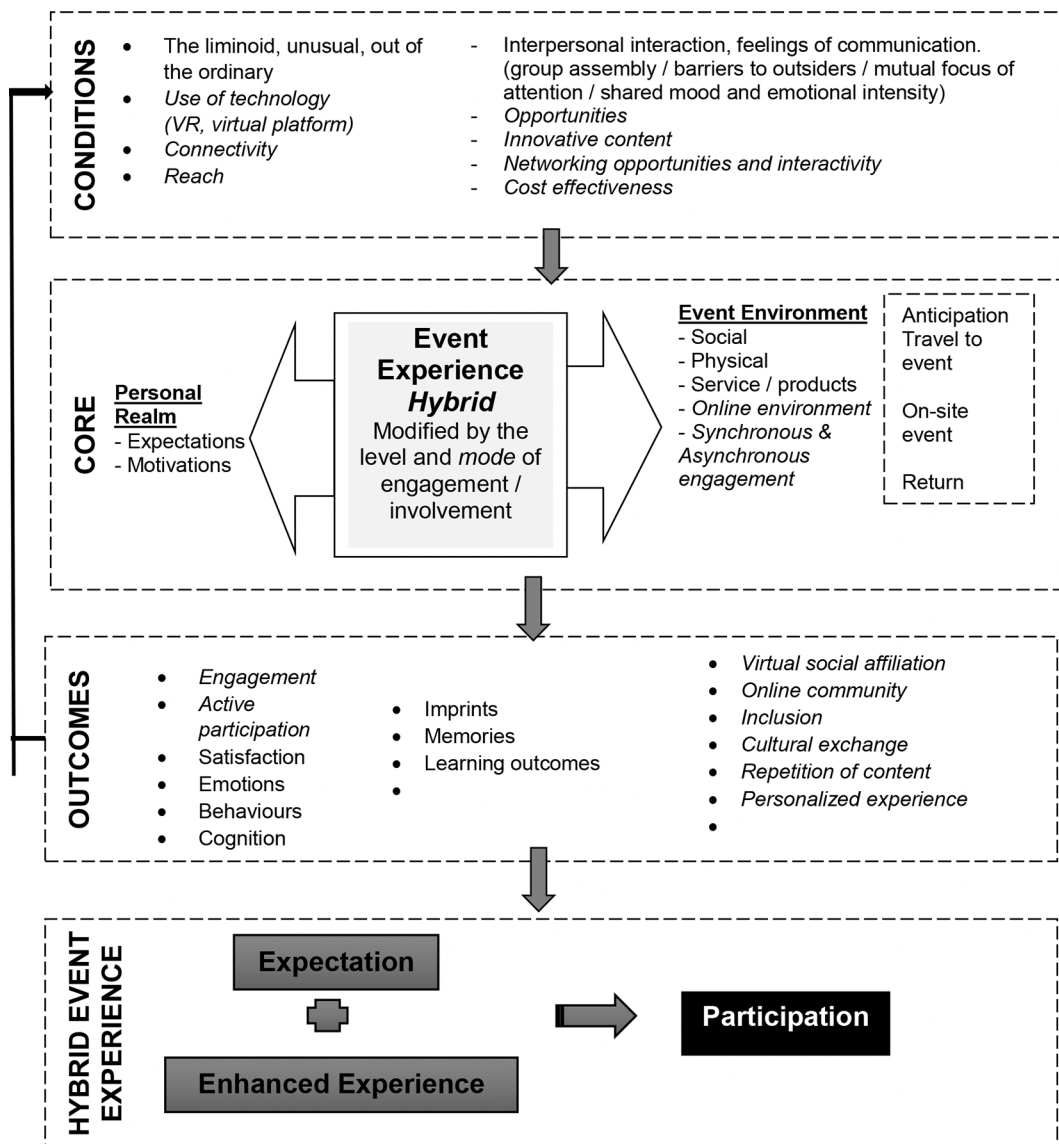

Figure 2. Revised Event Experience Theory: Hybrid Event Experience Theory (HEET). Additions to EET are shown in italic.

of technical obstacles and the smooth amalgamation of virtual and in-person components. Therefore, these the authors propose a revised version of the EET, titled *Hybrid Event Experience Theory (HEET)* as illustrated in Figure 2.

Conclusions

This study explored EET in hybrid festivals post-COVID-19. In response to RQ1 we propose that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the event sector, leading to a profound transformation marked by the rise of virtual and hybrid events. The implementation of lockdown measures necessitated individuals to participate in virtual and hybrid events, resulting in widespread acceptance of online interaction owing to the perceived benefits gained from the hybrid experiences. Nilson (2020) confirmed that the original reluctance towards hybrid events underwent a significant shift in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study suggests that hybrid events have transformed attendees' perspectives, expectations, and experiences, with a growing demand for diverse, flexible content and greater accessibility. Therefore, the transition from skepticism to the widespread adoption of the hybrid model was driven by the evolving circumstances and new challenges that impacted all sectors, including events and festivals. This study contributes to theoretical knowledge by proposing a revised EET framework, which reflects the evolving dynamics of hybrid events and their impact on attendee engagement (HEET, Fig. 2), which incorporates attendees' experiences from hybrid festivals. As suggested by de Geus et al. (2016), at the core of the framework remain the expectations and the motivation of people to attend events. We propose that it is no longer only the social, physical, and service elements that influence the event experience. We add that hybrid formats of festivals offer personalized participation, with *synchronous* and/or *asynchronous engagement* either with the physical event or the *online environment*. Factors that draw individuals towards the *personalized experience* from hybrid events are added. Festival attendees can choose between in person or *virtual participation* based on their individual preferences and situational limitations. The immersive attributes associated with attending events in person are recognized, but the advantages of convenience and flexibility offered from hybrid and/or virtual engagement are added. The EET has emphasized the value of connection and participation, while stressing the variety of outcomes and levels of participant satisfaction that result from events (de Geus et al., 2016; Getz, 2012; Michopoulou et al., 2019). We add the *virtual social affiliation* and the development of *online communities*. Roberts et al. (2021) proposed that a fundamental characteristic observed among individuals attending events is their collaborative engagement, which contributes to the development of group dynamics inside the event environment. Events provide opportunities for individuals to get together and establish a coherent group, facilitating interactions within a community framework. Hybrid events emerge as a possibility to explore in face of disruption (Gossling, 2021).

Hybrid events enhance the overall event experience by creating a feeling of unity, strengthening participants' inherent drive to *actively participate* and communicate with other attendees, creating an environment of *inclusion*. Confirming other studies (e.g., de Geus et al., 2016; Silva, 2021; Simons, 2019), we propose that *virtual participation* offers a viable alternative to physical attendance, thereby mitigating the limitations imposed by travel and time constraints, ultimately expanding the scope of engagement. Due to their convenience and accessibility, hybrid events are becoming increasingly popular as a result of their ability to address geographical limitations, increase participation, and broaden content access. We confirm that participants perceive hybrid events as platforms for facilitating *cultural exchange* and fostering *diverse engagement with content*. Different formats available via hybrid festivals are designed to accommodate the specific interests and availability of individuals, thereby enhancing the overall experiences at festivals. Another element added to the framework is *cost-effectiveness*. We propose that decision-making processes are influenced by careful and thorough cost-benefit analysis. Despite all the advantages of virtual festivals, we agree with Bladen et al. (2018) that demand for in person attendance will not be entirely replaced.

Practical Implications

This study is the first to adopt EET on evaluating and identifying attendees' experience of hybrid festivals. Studies have relied on subjective measures

to capture hospitality and tourism customers' experience, they have provided valuable insights on experience; however, they are prone to bias and inaccuracies (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Sigala, 2018). Our study provides a more creative way to understand and measure experiences of hybrid festivals and captures the complexity and the role of the event format on attendee experience in an objective way. We provide a less conventional way to conduct surveys to investigate customer experience from events.

Hybrid events offer personalized participation favoring digital networking. Future events could incorporate both real and virtual components. Hybrid events strive to achieve equilibrium between the advantages they offer and the level of authenticity they convey, relying on format selection and the seamless integration of technology. From a managerial perspective, the recognition of the value of hybrid events on attendees' experience should be considered. Attendees value their experience, the ambience and feel of an event; hence, festival managers should improve event design and programming to address such needs (Getz & Page, 2020). Organizers should create meaningful and engaging experiences for both those attending in person as well as those online. New technologies and other applications such as social media and networking apps can enhance the caliber of the virtual event platforms, integrating other applications to provide interactivity through (i.e., live polling, chat functions, voting, etc.).

Although consumers became more familiar with virtual technology, tools, and applications during the pandemic, not all event professionals are fully versed in designing and delivering hybrid events as they may be technologically challenged (Ritcher, 2020). Event organizers and managers should attend training and up skilling to ensure they are technically proficient for the future of hybrid events. In light of the technical obstacles, it is imperative for event companies to allocate resources towards the development of resilient infrastructure, dependable platforms, and comprehensive technical support in order to guarantee a smooth and uninterrupted virtual participation experience. They should also establish routine testing protocols and develop contingency strategies. Hybrid events, if planned and managed correctly provide strong revenue streams,

as event organizers may capitalize on larger global audiences.

Leisure and tourist experiences are concerned with social interaction that enlists active participation (de Geus et al., 2016), individuals actively construct (Andersson, 2007), "cobuild" (Mossberg, 2007), or "cocreate" (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and therefore a degree of engagement. Drawing on EET, it is advised that event organizers adopt inclusive planning strategies that consider the diverse experiential components linked to both in-person and online engagement. As hybrid events have global reach, event organizers should be aware of cultural sensitivities, account for time zone disparities, and accommodate language preferences. Festival organizers should provide activities requiring some degree of active involvement; for example, livestreaming, communication through social media, acceleration of virtualization, hybrid events, shortening of official events, event apps, and generate engagement. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) and extended reality (XR) could also be used for immersive experiences development. Such experiences should be memorable, create positive emotions and feelings, fulfill expectations and unexpected positive surprise, enhance social relationships and intellectual development, and finally to be remembered and reflect on them (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). The right setting and environment (physical and online) with elements to enable attendees to connect in a memorable way should be created by service providers. Value creation requires an understanding of the cocreating process for event attendees experience. Event planners will continue to host hybrid events, with on-site integration and online sharing providing cost-effective choices (Gossling, 2021).

Limitations and Future Research

Considering its valuable insights, this research possesses some inherent limitations. Although the sample size is wide, it may not fully represent the whole range of opinions. The study's time frame also affects its comprehensiveness, particularly in light of the ongoing evolution of hybrid events. Experiences vary at different stages of the event, so it would be recommended to research the role of the hybrid event format in the preevent, event

experience, and postevent phases. For example, a longitudinal research study may be conducted in the three event phases. Additionally, the research mostly focuses on perceptions after the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps neglecting viewpoints prior to the outbreak. We encourage conceptual experience research on applied service research in the design of the customer journey, where experience is studied at several points in time.

The potential presence of bias may arise due to the use of self-reported data, and the study may not adequately consider numerous aspects that influence individuals' choices. Other creative and experiential-based methods could be used in future research to address any challenges or limitations from this study. Additionally, the research context may not be applicable to all types of events or demographic groups. Getz (2012) and de Geus et al. (2016) proposed some outcomes in the EET, but future research should examine the various factors that motivate individuals to attend events, whether they are attending in person or virtually. We propose other studies to assess event experience with the use of the HEET in other contexts (i.e., conferences, exhibitions, trade shows) or cultures to explore individual factors that may impact on this experience from hybrid events.

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