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Virtual or Hybrid? Marketing Event in the Time of Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This article compares the implementation of two different types and methods of marketing events or special events that were popular during the Covid-19 pandemic, namely virtual events and hybrid events. Using the case study method, we observed and interviewed key informants and conducted document searches related to a job-fair event and an automatic product launch. The study found that virtual events allow participants facing travel restrictions to stay connected and participate in an event. In contrast, hybrid events are the best option if the number of participants is a critical factor in the event's success. In addition, despite having shortcomings in sensory stimulation, virtual events excel in terms of cost efficiency and participant affordability. As a result, hybrid or direct events are more suitable for marketing events focused on introducing items with a high level of involvement.

Keywords

special event, hybrid event, virtual event, direct event, marketing event

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INTRODUCTION

Since the pandemic's limits on community activities, popular virtual events have been held. Due to the restrictions on community activities, several regularly conducted events, such as jazz concerts, automotive shows, and academic conferences, did not receive direct implementation permission. According to the Indonesian Exhibition Company Association (ASPERAPI), the loss of industry players due to the COVID-19 epidemic will be IDR 44.3 trillion by the end of 2020. (Media Indonesia, 2020). In

the end, marketing actors use various mediums to carry out events.

Various online media have sprung up to carry out unique events. Music concert events, such as the Prambanan Jazz Festival, are no exception, with a strong desire to be carried out virtually. Event organizers use existing media such as Zoom, Google Meet, and IG live until new platforms such as Vfairs that are dedicated to hosting online events emerge. Virtual events, however, have been around since 1947, when a hologram was developed. However, it has not been widely used and is not as widespread as it

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is today when it is "forced" to perform virtual events to manage the Covid-19 pandemic that is sweeping the world. Before, it was only 45 percent of people attended virtual gatherings during the pandemic. On the other hand, Kaltura (2022, p. 5) showed with the pandemic, that figure increased to 87 percent (an increase of more than 93 percent). The author provides a brief history of how virtual events became what they are today.

As a consequence, problems arise when

interactions between the organizers and the target audience; also, the pandemic lasted long enough to make people tired of always glancing at their smartphone displays. This is congruent with the following statement by Jonathan Steur:

Virtual reality is often a technological experience rather than a live one. Jonathan Steur of Stanford University argues that a device driven definition of virtual reality is unacceptable. According to Steur, a narrow definition that is limited to technology ignores the human contribution to this phenomenon. Therefore, for the purposes of

Table I Development of Virtual Event History

1947	Dennis Gabor invents holography in Hungary.
1950	Bell Labs introduces audio teleconferencing.
1951	First Australia School of the Air broadcasts lessons to children by shortwave radio.
1952	Pennsylvania State University introduces closed captioning television versions of their courses to broadcast programs to remote locations on their campuses to alleviate overcrowded classrooms.
1953	The Ford Foundation provides a major grant to help develop Educational Television stations (ETV) in the United States. The first educational television station opens in Houston, Texas.
1957	First radio satellite communications are launched.
1962	First satellite to relay television communications is produced.
1969	The Open University distance learning program in is founded Great Britain.
1970s	AT&T introduces Picturephone video teleconferencing to multiple sites.
1980s	Digital telephony is introduced through the development of ISDN lines.
1990	Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) is introduced to enable computer-based teleconferencing.
1991	First webcam is developed at Cambridge University.
1992	First radio webcast. By 1996, there were 86 radio stations broadcasting on the Internet, and in 2013 there are now thousands.
1993	"Severe Tire Damage" is the first band to perform live on the Internet from Xerox PARC, and scientists web stream the performance to Australia.
2000	Video-telephony is introduced through programs such as Skype and iChat.
2004	Go To Meeting™ is introduced by Citrix to allow a single desktop computer to teleconference with multiple locations
2008	Marriott and Hewlett-Packard sign a deal to create HP Halo Telepresence rooms in select Marriott venues.
2008	CNN introduces hologram of reporter Jessica Yellen in a studio during U.S. presidential election coverage.
2010	Increased use of mobile smart phone communications for videoconferencing through introduction of Apple 's FaceTime application
2012	Tupac Shakur hologram is introduced at Coachella Music Festival and later seen by over 13 million people on YouTube.

Source: Goldblatt, 2014

events that are traditionally held in person are forced to be held online. After all, there are few

meetings and events production the term virtual reality is more complex and includes the incorporation of creativity with technology to

replicate and/or simulate the live experience (as cited in Goldblatt, 2014, pp. 296-297).

Are live events, however, always superior to virtual activities? Several successful hybrid events exist now, including GIIAS 2021, IIMS 2021, National Culture Week, Nusantara Coffee Festival, and E-Sport (ICE Indonesia, 2020). Even though there are fewer online events, they have advantages such as reaching a broader audience at a reduced cost for both organizers and guests who "attend" the event, and they may frequently overcome location and time constraints. Another advantage is that internet events are simple to record.

Saputro (2017) did a previous study titled "The Promotion Activation Strategy at the Indonesian International Motor Show Conducted by Direct Inter Brand in Building Brand Awareness (Case Study of the Toyota All New Sienta)." The purpose of this research is to determine the technique of using promotion activation carried out by Direct Inter Brand in increasing brand awareness of Toyota All New Sienta, the most recent brand from PT Toyota Astra Motor. The following study employs a descriptive qualitative method. The findings of the following study indicate that the promotion activation strategy conducted by Direct Inter Brand for PT Toyota-Astra Motor can be considered successful if interest and indicators of success exceed the KPI targets.

Meanwhile, a study titled "Innovation in agricultural and county shows: conceptualizing the e-eventscape" by Bosworth, Ardley, and Gerlach (2021) succeeded in broadening scholars' understanding of virtual events. The study's goal was to look into the quick advances that led to the creation of the online County Show. The County Shows is a regional agricultural and rural economic event that facilitates business networking and trade opportunities. Its effectiveness was assessed in this study using the newly designed e-eventscape model.

Furthermore, the purpose of this research is to inform readers about what occurrences are

effectively implemented virtually or inevitably implemented at least in a hybrid fashion. Because each type of special event implementation has its own set of advantages and disadvantages.

Events is defined as any activity aimed at providing an exciting and memorable experience to establish a particular relationship with the audience as brand stakeholders (Kotler, 2012). According to Noor (2009, p.7), an event is an action done to celebrate significant events in one's life, either individually or in groups, with customs, culture, and religion carried out to attain particular aims and the event will typically encompass the environment for a specific amount of time.

According to Goldblatt (as cited in Matthews, 2008), a special event occurs within a defined time frame and includes activities and celebrations for a specific goal. A special event is an essential aspect of public relations and marketing communications.

Meanwhile, a virtual event, also known as an online event, is an event that takes place in a virtual room via an internet connection and a device on a specific date and time.

Depending on the type of event, virtual events usually necessitate live or pre-recorded content. Interactive features can be used to keep your audience engaged and allow them to interact with speakers and other audience members.

There are numerous types of virtual events based on the evolution of virtual events that are offered at this moment. Webinars, Webcasts, Live Streaming, Virtual Meetings, and Virtual Conferences are examples of these.

During this period, there have frequently been substantial changes in the history of meetings and gatherings, with satellite technology allowing face-to-face activities to be carried out online utilizing software applications such as Skype or FaceTime. As a result, our abilities as humans to meet face to face, learn, and do tasks may be carried out via modern technology apps. Audio Webcasting, Video

Webcasting, PDF or JPEG, PowerPoint, Webcast, and Webinars are all examples of virtual content that can be exhibited at an event (Goldblatt, 2014, p.297).

According to Ball (as cited in Pearlman et al, 2010), virtual events will play a big role in the future. This is due to several variables, including virtual events that may be hosted anywhere, lower travel expenses, and less worry of absenteeism, for example, as a result of a global epidemic (Pearlman et al, 2010). In this virtual environment, there are many levels of activity in the implementation of events. Each organizer may vary the media utilized to maximize the event. The purpose of this media is to give event organizers an alternate way to compete when they are unable to hold face-to-face activities due to an issue (Pearlman et al, 2010).

Regarding what Goldblatt and Steur mentioned about virtual events that lack a human touch and merely strive to excite the experience of the event directly, it follows Goertz's level of involvement (1995). The level of engagement is determined by five criteria: (1) the degree of selectivity; (2) the amount to which the user can modify a given piece of material; (3) the quantity of distinct content that can be selected and modified; (4) the degree of linearity/nonlinearity; and (5) the number of different senses active when using the media. A high degree/number of these qualities, according to Goertz, should equate to a higher level of engagement in general.

What Goertz (1995) says is actually in accordance with what Goldblatt says, where stimulation of the five senses must be quite high to satisfy the needs of event visitors. An event's experience should include the five senses of touch, smell, taste, sight, and hearing (Goldblatt, p.80).

The need to engage the five senses is what drives the emergence of Hybrid Events during the Covid-19 epidemic. Virtual events limit the use of the five senses to provide a satisfying experience after an event. As a result, virtual events coexist alongside real-world events that

comply with the Covid-19 health protocol and CHSE standards. Furthermore, for more than a year, people have been enjoying virtual events, which are quite likely to achieve saturation.

This study compares the implementation of two different types and methods of marketing events or special events that were popular during the Covid-19 pandemic, namely virtual events and hybrid events.

METHOD

This research followed a qualitative approach, employing the case study method (Neumann, 2013). The virtual job fair event and the hybrid automotive event in 2021 are the subjects of this project.

The authors used two sorts of data sources in the creation of this study. Primary data were gathered through observations and interviews with event stakeholders, including the event's organizing team and participants. Photographs and event press reports provide secondary data. The Miles and Huberman model was used in the data analysis technique used in this investigation (Ruslan, 2008; Sugiyono, 2013).

This study includes seven (7) informants: five (5) from the Ekrutes.id Marketing Team and three (3) from the *Ekrutes.id* Virtual Job Fair Event on June 16-17, 2022. In-depth interviews were conducted by the researchers to explain and reinforce the facts acquired in the field. The researchers chose the marketing team as informants since they were directly involved in the activities of the Ekrutes.id Virtual Job Fair from event planning to event completion and knew a lot about all of these activities. The document analysis was obtained from news reports related to the event's organization and the outcomes of the event's evaluation in 2021, which could not be released directly and completely due to the organizer's data confidentiality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The majority of scholars and practitioners may believe that live events are highly beneficial.

However, our data reveal that the efficiency of an event type is dependent on a variety of circumstances. These factors include the event's size, funding, participants, timing, and venue. Each method of organizing events has its own set of advantages.

Direct & Hybrid Events

Face-to-face connection reveals the intricacies of communication better than any other media. The gesture is an important part of communication. Direct translation is excellent for posture, gestures, facial emotions, and eye movements.

Many individuals attend the event not just for the material, but also for the opportunity to meet and interact with other attendees (and speakers) who share similar interests. People attend events mostly for the human component and the experience of creating relationships.

According to the findings of an automotive event evaluation, around 88 percent (%) of visitors were more interested in visiting a live show when the pandemic had not yet hit the planet. While the remainder is still interested in taking part in online exhibitions. According to the people who came, the virtual event did not accurately portray the exhibition circumstances at the place. They contend that product exhibitions in the "high participation" category are inappropriate when delivered online. Hands-on experience, according to study respondents, is irreplaceable. Individuals that attended the event believed that by witnessing the event personally, they would be able to see the actual thing, take photos, and try. It is indisputable because when we do online buying, the color might often be substantially different when the goods have arrived.

Covid-19 Pandemic & Virtual Events

Virtual events are frequently chosen due to resource restrictions such as time and money. When compared to in-person events, virtual events can be created rapidly and at significant cost savings. Panel discussions on current events or policy concerns, chat shows, and educational

conference events are some examples of programming that perform best in virtual formats alone.

However, it is not limited to such occasions. According to research findings, the popular job seekers event known as the job fair was also successfully implemented digitally. The case study in this study was a job fair hosted by the job vacancy information supplier site ekrutes.id. Ekrutes.id is a talent management platform that focuses on producing online psychological evaluation tools. It is still relatively new in the commercial world, having only begun operations in February 2021.

To achieve the goal, the Ekrutes.id marketing team must plan brand activation in virtual job fair activities in this activity. Marketing Event Activation is a type of brand activation that is carried out through the use of events. Performances, BA (brand ambassador) selection contests, arena games, and other events are examples (Wallace, 2012).

As is well known, Ekrutes.id is a digital start-up operating amid modern civilization and at a time when the world is troubled by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, Ekrutes.id must have the correct strategy in place to carry out brand activation to develop product awareness in the face of the pandemic's problems and restrictions.

Because they rely on technology, virtual events, particularly digital media in virtual job fair activities, play a significant role. According to the statement, this virtual event is significantly reliant on technology and is not possible without a computer, smartphone, or other mobile devices. According to Pearlman et. al. (2010), technology is constantly evolving and includes a wide range of products and services. The usage of all technology platforms in virtual events aids in the promotion, execution, and management of the event. The complete series of Ekrutes.id Virtual Job Fair activities are carried out through the use of various digital media, such as Websites and social media (Instagram, Whatsapp, and Youtube).

This virtual job fair activity was effective because participants did not feel burdened with both the registration process and the job application process. The speed and simplicity of adoption of virtual activities can indicate their success. The adoption of virtual events is used to determine whether the virtual version of the event is a viable choice for achieving organizational goals and objectives (Pearlman et al, 2010).

Virtual Marketing Event, Engagement & Its Problems

The committee provides the highest level of service, making it easier for the audience to participate in this virtual job fair. They set up a customer service on WhatsApp to accommodate and solve problems on the given platform. Furthermore, with evidence of positive community feedback, such as an increase in the number of active users on the application, an increase in the number of followers on social media accounts, word-of-mouth from participants, and the desire to recommend products to those closest to them, this activity can be said to have achieved the company's goals.

The success of this event activity is undoubtedly attributable to the hard effort and performance of Ekrutes.id, but it has not satisfied the committees due to many challenges encountered during the virtual job fair activity. This shortcoming can be utilized to teach future situations so that there are fewer hurdles. According to the organizers, there are always flaws in the execution of each event in every activity. During the virtual job fair's implementation, the obstacles encountered were caused by system and internet network factors, such as the system on the website and application that had an error where at the beginning of the event when the special job vacancy feature for the event could not be loaded, so participants were unable to apply for the job for 5-10 minutes. Another issue arises

when the internet is unplugged from one of the organizations that are conducting business.

Virtual events are also an excellent choice for swiftly arranging anything, such as coping with a potential crisis or sharing a skill. However, for events that are relatively extensive in duration and the primary purpose is face-to-face interaction, live or hybrid event formats may be a preferable choice.

CONCLUSION

Because physical events cannot occur today, virtual events are a popular choice. Even if the pandemic has gone, virtual events are unlikely to vanish completely in the future. Virtual events allow attendees who are unable to go to stay connected and participate in an event. Virtual events can still be used by practitioners in any profession to save money.

If the quantity of participants is a significant aspect of the event's success, hybrid events are generally the best option. Some participants can attend in person, while others are "virtually brought in," adding to the overall benefit of the engagement. If there are resource constraints, hybrid meetings can also be utilized to optimize resources from the participant's side. New product introductions, usually through brand activation, can use a hybrid method to reach a wider audience to achieve maximum awareness (Puccinelli et al, 2022) due to brand activation is the extension of marketing event, including product launching events (Wijaya, 2014). Amplification of brand activation efforts is another word that is frequently used (Siregar, 2011). Hybrid event apps can continue to be implemented throughout this pandemic with good CHSE implementation.

However, if an event requires the participation of all five senses, a direct event is the solution. The enthusiasm feature of various demonstration events, such as automotive, lowers when done virtually. Especially if it incorporates perfume and taste, such as dessert, wine, and coffee festivals. The concept of scent is sometimes overlooked by designers, even

though the aroma created would be easily embedded in the minds of the audience through the sense of smell. This scent could be a little reminiscence that brings back memories of an event (Pudjiastuti, 2010).

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