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Enhancing Attendee Engagement: A Study on Designing Successful Hybrid Events in Malaysia

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Abstract: This study seeks to address the void by exploring hybrid event design and, attendee engagement and experience in the Malaysian context. It is also hoped to provide event stakeholders with information that will help them design successful hybrid events that prioritize attendee engagement and enhance the overall event experience. By understanding the needs and preferences of attendees, event organizers can tailor their strategies to create seamless and interactive experiences for both on-site and remote attendees. This study will contribute valuable insights to the growing field of hybrid events in Malaysia and guide event planners in delivering impactful and memorable experiences to all attendees. From the findings, none of the studies related to hybrid events have been conducted in the Malaysian context. This study was conducted by using electronic database searching from reputable databases such as Scopus, Science Direct and Google Scholar. 52 articles that are related to hybrid events were published from 2014-2023. Hybrid event is a new trend in organizing events. It offers a unique opportunity to cater to both in-person and virtual attendees.

Keywords: *Hybrid event, Attendees engagement, Event experience, Malaysia*

1. Introduction and Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of hybrid events, which seamlessly integrate in-person and virtual elements to create a dynamic inclusive and flexible experience for attendees. This format allows events to continue while accommodating social distancing guidelines and travel restrictions. Hybrid events in Malaysia provide opportunities to sustain engagement, learning and connections amidst revolving restrictions, However, designing hybrid events that optimize the attendee experience remains a challenge.

This study aims to address the knowledge gap around maximizing attendee engagement and experience of hybrid events in Malaysia. By gathering insight into attendee needs and preferences, the study provides event organizers with strategies for creating seamless and interactive hybrid events. The goal is to contribute insight that will allow event professionals to deliver impactful, memorable experiences for both physical and virtual participants. Understanding attendees' perspectives will enable organizers to tailor hybrid events that prioritize engagement across platforms. This research aims to guide the best practices for emerging hybrid event models in Malaysia. The finding will benefit the field by helping equip organizers to create successful hybrid events that keep attendees meaningfully involved regardless of participation format.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and lasting impact on the travel and tourism industry, which has been severely impacted by widespread lockdowns, travel restrictions, and decreased consumer confidence. Specifically, airlines, cruise lines, hotels, restaurants, attractions such as national parks and protected areas cultural heritage sites, travel; agencies, and tour operators have all suffered significantly (Aburumman, 2020; Foo et al., 2020). Client loss is the primary impact of the pandemic on tourism-related firms, leading to mass layoffs and unemployment (Bui et al., 2022). During the pandemic, large gatherings were either banned or severely restricted. This has an impact on the event sector, which relies on human mobility in practice. The pandemic's most profound impact is the widespread cancellation and delay of events across various sectors, particularly in the event industry (Madray, 2020; Bartis et al., 2021). Since the COVID-19 pandemic started spreading in 2020, thousands of events worldwide have been postponed or cancelled, leaving a significant impact on entertainment, sports, and cultural industries (Congrex Team, 2020). In Malaysia alone, the estimated financial damage from these cancellations and postponements has been substantial, with a potential loss of millions of ringgit in revenue and an economic impact is Ringgit Malaysia 1.5 billion (MACEOS, 2020).

Therefore, event organizers must pivot their strategies and explore virtual and hybrid event options to continue providing services to clients and attendees. By embracing technology and innovative solutions, event organizers can navigate through the obstacles posed by the pandemic and deliver successful events.

To sustain business, the event organizer must adapt to the pandemic. Event organizers play an important role in organizing events because they have been appointed by the client to organize the event from planning to implementation and evaluation (Fadillah, 2015; Priyatmoko et al., 2022). The transition towards digital and blended events has forced event planners to adapt quickly to new technologies and strategies (Madray, 2020). As the event landscape continues to transform, event professionals must stay abreast of the latest innovations and advancements in event planning and management (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2021). Due to COVID-19 constraints, actors in this industry must devise new event-planning techniques (Bukovska et al., 2021).

The integration of alternative technologies (AR), virtual reality (VR), and other emerging technologies is likely to create new and innovative experiences for attendees while also presenting new challenges and opportunities for event professionals (Dolasinski et al., 2021). As these technologies advance, they will likely transform the way events are designed, delivered, and experienced, opening up new opportunities for event professionals and further expanding the field of event studies. There are a few scholars that have been discussing hybrid events such as White, 2014; Porpiglia et al., 2020; Priyatmoko et al., 2020; Rubinger et al., 2020; Jauhiainen, 2021; Sox et al., 2014; Sox et al., 2015; Sox et al., 2017; Pakarinen, 2018; Nilsson, 2020; and Hameed et al., 2021. Scholars have extensively discussed hybrid events; despite the growing popularity of hybrid events, there is a dearth of research on the adaptive processes and strategies employed by event organizers in response to the shift towards hybrid events. Thus, leaving a void in our understanding of this critical aspect of event management. Furthermore, a finding by Lumanauw and Suastawa (2023) emphasizes the need to explore the effects of hybrid events on participant engagement and satisfaction.

Despite the increasing adoption of virtual and hybrid events, a significant knowledge gap remains in the current academic discourse, with little scholarly attention devoted to understanding their complexities and potential benefits (Legkau and Tichaawa, 2022). Because of the trends towards online events that the global pandemic has accelerated, it is advisable to investigate and comprehend hybrid events. As the event industry continues to evolve, research on hybrid events is essential for adapting to the changing landscape and meeting the needs of both virtual and in-person attendees. By addressing this gap in the literature, researchers can provide crucial findings for event organizations looking to navigate the new normal of hybrid events.

Hybrid events, which combine online and offline audiences pose a unique set of obstacles that go beyond simply hosting a virtual event. By blending these two formats, event planners must navigate the complexities of managing multiple channels, ensuring seamless connectivity and engagement, and catering to the diverse needs of both online and offline participants. However, the complexity of hybrid events is not as widespread as that of virtual ones (Sakovets,2023). Despite the challenges, many event marketers predict that hybrid events are poised to become increasingly prevalent in the future. A survey conducted by Bizzabo, a leading event platform, found that an overwhelming 97% of event marketing professionals expect to see more hybrid events in the years to come (Bizzabo, 2022). This shows that hybrid events have high demand and will be a new norm for the event industry. While hybrid events offer numerous advantages, they also require a high level of expertise and effort to execute successfully. According to Above Creative Event (2022), effective hybrid events involve much more than just hosting an event, as they require creative design and video production, sourcing suitable venues, developing virtual event platforms, integrating on-ground and online features, and crafting comprehensive offline and digital marketing campaigns.

Academia and industry have witnessed a shift in how events are viewed. Previously, the focus was on logistical and operational elements; however, there is now an increasing discussion and debate among them about events as a constructed experience (Orefice, 2018). Different audiences have different experiences, highlighting the need for a design-focused approach rather than just management (Orifice, 2018). According to Getz and Page (2019), there has been a significant change in the field of research, where the focus is shifting from management to event design. This transition has created a promising and unexplored area for future studies. In 2014, Goldblatt explained that event management encompasses various stages, such as research, design, planning, coordination, and evaluation (Hazira et al., 2019). Daniel et al. (2012) explored various aspects of

event management, including event design and organization. This study shares important discoveries about the importance of event design in the overall event management process. Similarly, Hessel (2016) examined the impact of technology on physical events and highlighted the need for a fresh approach to event design in the era of hybrid events. However, there is still a lack of understanding and awareness of the event process, especially in the context of business events in Malaysia (Al-Hasan and Chris, 2019; Mohd Nasir et al., 2019). Hence, it is crucial for the Malaysian government and all relevant stakeholders in the business event industry to collaborate in formulating a fresh and targeted strategy for conducting business events (Mohd Nasir et al., 2019).

Event studies are fields with an abundance of literature on event management. In this literature, event design is featured as a key element, alongside other essential components such as event marketing, budgeting, stakeholder networking, logistics, operations, and events (Allen et al., 2008; Bowdin et al., 2011; Ferdinand and Kitchin, 2017). However, an increasing number of discussions focus on the social aspect of planned occasions and the ability of event organizers to create a unique experience for attendees. This shift from simply managing events to actively designing them has led to a new field of study (Brown 2014; Antchak and Ramsbottom 2020). In today's business, design plays a vital role in connecting creativity and innovation (Antchak & Ramsbottom, 2020). Creativity involves coming up with a new idea, finding a new solution to an existing problem, and exploring new possibilities. The literature on service design and design management presents an intriguing opportunity for researchers in the event field to enhance their understanding of event design (Orifice, 2018). Viewing events as platforms for engaging stakeholders over the long term implies that design plays a strategic role. The notion of design as a strategy is recognized as a fresh area of study within the realm of events (Antchak and Ramsbottom, 2020; Orifice, 2018). When designing an event, it is important to shift the focus away from the vogue concepts of the audience, and instead concentrate on specific individuals who will be participating or attending. As event designers, it is important to create and coordinate the emotional and intellectual elements of an event to provide a life-changing experience (Antchak and Ramsbottom, 2020). This demonstrates that a well-designed event can improve or impact attendees' experiences positively or negatively. Experience poses a challenge because event designers lack control, and even with the same props and script, no two experiences are identical (Candi, M. & Beltagui, A., 2016).

2. Result and Discussion

The study was conducted by conducting online searches in leading academic databases, including Scopus, Science Direct, Google Scholar, and Web of Science, using a combination of keywords and filters limited to articles published between 2014 – 2023, to identify relevant articles on hybrid events. 51 articles are related to hybrid events with different themes. The list of articles is as below:

Table 1: Study of hybrid events from 2014 – 2023

Authors	Title	Country
Princhankol et al. (2023)	Outcomes from Professional Experience Provision for Students Through Media Development and Special Hybrid Events During Covid-19 Pandemic	Thailand
M.S. Sakovets (2023)	Virtual and Hybrid Events as A Fast-Growing Event Industry Trend	Belarus
Dewi Jaimangal-Jones (2023)	What role can virtual and hybrid events play in addressing sustainability and social inclusion?	UK
Maiju Richterich (2023)	Digital transformation in the event industry – answering the competence needs of event professionals with Hybrid Ninja	Finland
Lumanauw & Suastawa (2023)	Evaluasi Komunikasi pada Hybrid Event (Studi Kasus Konvensi III Bali Tourism Board di Bali)	Indonesia
Ansah et al. (2023)	Reflecting on Hybrid Events: Learning from a Year of Hybrid Experiences	Germany
Wade et al. (2023)	Hospitality And Analysis of Feeling in Hybrid Events and on Digital Platforms During the Covid-19 Pandemic	Nil

Rasconi (2023)	Feedback report from the first Par Aqua hybrid meeting with considerations on challenges and advantages of mixed events	Cyprus
Meriläinen, Janica (2023)	New normal of B2B trade fair events: on-site, online, hybrid or something else?	Finland
Mahadewi (2023)	Hybrid Event: Utilization of Digital Technology in Organizing Events during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia	Indonesia
Chhatwal et al (2023)	Future Trends of the Exhibition Industry: Hybrid, Digital Technology and AI	European
Nechita et al. (2023)	Hybrid Events as a Sustainable Educational Approach for Higher Education	Romania
Brown & Drakeley (2023)	Designing the Virtual and hybrid event experience	General
Doran et al. (2023)	Planning virtual and hybrid events: steps to improve inclusion and accessibility.	UK
Lekgau & Tichaawa (2022)	Exploring the Use of Virtual and Hybrid Events for MICE Sector Resilience: The Case of South Africa	South Africa
Hammound et al. (2022)	Technological Innovation in Tourism and Events industry: A hybrid future of Event	Egypt
Firmansyahrani et al. (2022)	Conference Hybrid Event as a New Alternative Event in The Covid-19 Pandemic.	Indonesia
Hanaei et al. (2022)	Emerging Standards and the Hybrid Model for Organizing Scientific Events During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic	UK
Hussein et al. (2022)	The Role of Hybrid Events in Reviving the Hotel Industry in Egypt after the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Exploratory Study	Egypt
Estephania Canessa Araya **Alice Nordgren**	Marketing Hybrid Events A qualitative study investigating the event industry during the Covid-19 pandemic and the change from physical to hybrid events	Sweden
Viliano (2022)	Implementasi Penyelenggaraan Event Hybrid International Fragrance Association (IFRA EXPO) Oleh Dyandra Promosindo	Indonesia
Soepriyanto et al. (2022)	Development of virtual classroom for hybrid live teaching mode	Indonesia
Schulte-Römer & Gesing (2020)	Online, offline, hybrid: Methodological reflection on event ethnography in (post-)pandemic times	Iran
Priyatmoko et al. (2022)	Virtual and hybrid event: how Indonesian event organizers adapt during the COVID-19 pandemic	Indonesia
Ellis et al. (2022)	Application of human factors at hybrid meetings: facilitating productivity and inclusivity	UK
Zhong et al. (2022)	Binaural Audio in Hybrid Meetings: Effects on Speaker Identification, Comprehension, and User Experience	General
Puccinelli et al. (2022)	Hybrid conferences: opportunities, challenges and ways forward	France
Wjiewickrama & Nawarathna (2022)	Hybrid Events As A Tool to Promote MICE Tourism in Sri Lanka: A Management Perspective	India
Constantinides & Quercia (2022)	The Future of Hybrid Meetings	General
Khan & Sethi (2022)	Transition from Face-to-Face to Hybrid Hackathons	Finland, Estonia

	During Covid-19 Pandemic	and Latvia
Kelum et al. (2022)	Online and Hybrid Teaching and Learning: Enhance Effective Student Engagement and Experience	India
Garg et al. (2021)	Hybrid Workshops During the COVID-19 Pandemic—Dawn of a New Era in Neurosurgical Learning Platforms	India
Dousay et al. (2021)	Hybrid or Virtual Conferencing: that is the Question	General
Mariana P. Silva (2021)	The Age of Hybrid Events: Amplifying the Power of Culture Through Digital Experiences (Music Festivals Feat. Technology)	Portugal
Ayhan et al. (2021)	A survey about preferences of future FESSH congresses: virtual, in-person, or hybrid	European
Assadi & Johansson (2021)	The best of both worlds? A study of how hybrid events can create strong experiences	Sweden
Sumandiyar et al. (2021)	The effectiveness of hybrid learning as instructional media amid the COVID-19 pandemic	Indonesia
Khaleque et al., (2021)	Experience Technology. How the Creative Industries Help Increase Audience Engagement at Virtual and Hybrid Events	Denmark
Hameed et al. (2020)	Will "Hybrid" Meetings Replace Face- To-Face Meetings Post COVID-19 Era? Perceptions and Views from The Urological Community	56 countries
Nilsson (2020)	Hybrid Events Breaking the Borders: Transferring your hybrid event into an engaging and inclusive experience for different audiences and stakeholders	Finland
Saatçi et al. (2020)	(Re)Configuring Hybrid Meetings: Moving from User-Centered Design to Meeting-Centered Design	UK
Triyason et al. (2020)	Hybrid Classroom: Designing for the New Normal after COVID-19 Pandemic	Thailand
Simons (2019)	Events and online interaction: the construction of hybrid event communities	Netherland
Karin Hamann (2019)	The Use of Hybrid Meeting Formats to Increase International Collaboration in Scientific Research	German
Hamm et. al (2018)	Hybrid and virtual conferencing modes versus traditional face-to-face conference delivery: A conference industry perspective	Australia
Pakarinen & Hoods (2018)	From hybrid events to the next generation - interactive virtual events: Viewed from three different stakeholders' point of view	Europe
Sox et al. (2017)	Virtual and Hybrid Meetings: Gaining Generational Insight from Industry Experts	US
Sox et al. (2015)	Virtual and hybrid meetings: A mixed research synthesis of 2002-2012 research	Nil
Ivkov et al. (2015)	Visitors' Motives for Attending a Hybrid Event: A case study on agricultural fair	Serbia
Hasan & Dwyer (2014)	Designing a Hybrid Academic Workshop: Lessons from the Field	USA
Sox et al. (2014)	Including Virtual and Hybrid Meeting Planning Within the Curriculum: A Knowledge Management Perspective	USA

Based on the table above, most of the studies on hybrid events have been conducted outside of Malaysia. None of the studies have been explored by researchers in Malaysia. Thus, it is important to understand the hybrid event in the Malaysian context. Most of the study above focuses on hybrid event trends and perspectives. Only

a few studies discussed hybrid event design. It is important to discuss further hybrid event design and to create more engagement and lasting impressions.

3. Conclusion

By conducting a thorough investigation into the process of organizing hybrid events, this study will seek to close the academic gap that Yozcu et al. (2023) identified. Through interviews, the study will examine the obstacles faced by event planners. This is due to several complexities faced by the event professional, namely technological problems due to fluctuations in internet connectivity (Saatçi et al., 2020); poor hybrid event design (Saatçi et al., 2020); Yung et al., 2022); uncertainty in technology acceptance of hybrid events (Dieck et al., 2021; Perdana & Mokhtar, 2022; Saatci et al., 2020); and poor performance of human resources, especially in handling communication processes among the event's team throughout the process of organizing a hybrid event (Chodor, 2020; Helsen et al., 2022; Saatci et al., 2020). Apart from this, attendees of hybrid events perceive the lack of integration between physical and remote events as a challenge. Audience engagement is seen as a crucial consideration in the planning and execution of the hybrid event, with a focus on creating an immersive and memorable experience.

By examining the integration of physical and virtual audiences within the framework of hybrid events, the study will also address the academic gap that Brown and Drakeley (2023) highlighted. Furthermore, the study will investigate the experiences of stakeholders to understand their perspectives on the organizational and logistics aspects of a hybrid event.

Event stakeholders' involvement during the process of organizing a hybrid event is also seen as a challenge due to the organizational and logistics aspects of the event. Therefore, this study will also fill in the academic gap mentioned by Fulcher et al. (2020) and Weiniger and Matot (2021) on the need to investigate an event's stakeholders' experience in conducting a hybrid event.

In conclusion, hybrid events are emerging as a cutting-edge trend in event planning, offering a unique and innovative way to engage attendees and expand the reach of events. Hybrid events offer a unique opportunity to cater to both in-person and virtual attendees, providing a wider reach and a more inclusive atmosphere. By incorporating elements of event design and focusing on attendee experience, organizers can craft an event that seamlessly integrates technology, creativity, and interpersonal connections, resulting in a memorable and impactful experience. As the event landscape transforms and the way people engage with events continues to shift, grasping the nuances of the event experience will be pivotal in creating successful and influential events that leave a lasting impression.

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