

The Development of Digital Live Events: The Experts' Perspective

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Abstract. *Events are important instruments that generate emotions and enable multisensory experiences. Hence, companies use as a part of their strategic communications efforts. Following the technological developments live communication formats adopted digital and hybrid formats. This trend was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the theoretical framework of the Technology Adoption Model, the present research investigates the usefulness of digital and hybrid live communication in business-to-business events. Eight experts were interviewed and highlighted both the opportunities and challenges that such types of live-communication are associated with. Hence, flexibility of content creation, new strategic approaches, the inclusion of new target groups, and a differentiated approach to communication towards certain target groups were mentioned as advantages of digital or hybrid live-communication. However, there are also disadvantages of digital live-communication which detract from the positive effects such as the limited interaction among participants, less emotional involvement of participants and lack of attention. The present study has both theoretical and practical implications.*

Keywords: Digital communication; Event marketing; Expert interviews; Live communication; Qualitative research.

Introduction

Events are important instruments that companies use as a part of their strategic communications efforts. Events generate emotions and enable multisensory experiences that can result in positive attitudes toward brands and corporations (Nufer, 2006; 2012). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the event marketing field experiences digitalization processes that had an impact on communication instruments, formats, and concepts (Chodor & Cyranski, 2021; Dams & Luppold, 2016). Hence, following the current technological developments, classic live communication formats such as conferences, kickoff meetings, trade fair appearances, or product presentations with exclusively real physical encounters of all participants are probably a model that needs to be adjusted (Chodor & Cyranski, 2021; Dams & Luppold, 2016; Knieriem & Luppold, 2021).

The context facilitated the adoption of digital technologies in the field of event marketing. Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic was not the trigger for the adoption of the digital technologies in live-communication, but rather an accelerator of the digitization processes. The trend towards digital and hybrid events had already started before the COVID-19 pandemic but was massively reinforced during the pandemic due to restrictive measures. Thus, live events were not allowed, or their organization required additional efforts to ensure social distance by limiting the number of participants. Under this pressure, the event industry was forced to adapt the core of its product, namely live communication, to the existing conditions (Heinrich, 2023; Zanger, 2022). Thus, the accelerated digitization also has a massive impact on live communication and events (Borstel, 2021; Dams, 2021; Hosang *et al.*, 2020; Knieriem & Luppold, 2021; Luppold *et al.*, 2021; Luppold, 2021; Luppold & Urban, 2022; Zanger, 2022). Furthermore, companies need to implement environmentally friendly policies to reduce the carbon footprint also by reducing travel, a relevant aspect that digital or hybrid events can contribute to (Heinrich, 2023).

On the one hand, event organizers and planners recognized the advantages of hybrid or digital events such as less resources involved in organizing the event. On the other hand, relevant principles of event communication such as the importance of multisensory experiences as a basis for increased event success (Ronft, 2021), are limited in digital live communication settings (Heinrich, 2023). Considering the current developments, the benefits alongside the disadvantages of hybrid and digital event marketing need to be discussed. This is a relevant topic for communication researchers and practitioners and yet not many studies have addressed it. Therefore, the goal of this study is to delve into the topic of the present and future usage of digital live events for companies and to investigate the extent to which digital formats of events influence the reception of content and information especially for Business-to-Business (B-to-B) events. Aligned with the aim of the research, interviews with experts from the field of event marketing and communication were conducted in Germany and Romania, two countries that are both member of the European Union that are different from the perspective of the economic development.