

COVID-19 AND MICE EVENTS: UNPACKING THE FACTORS MEDIATING THE RETURN OF IN-PERSON EVENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: The shift to virtual events by the MICE sector was one of the first strategies adopted by the sector in response to the restrictions imposed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study examines the factors mediating the return of in-person MICE events in South Africa. Utilising a qualitative research design, interviews with MICE event planners, professional associations, and governing authorities reveal that live events are perceived to have greater potential to attain local economic development benefits and MICE event legacies. Additionally, the limitations of virtual events had a subsequent effect on networking, direct selling, and other main motives for attending MICE events. The return of in-person events began with stimulating the local market and exploring more hybrid events. Overall, the study presents the resilience of in-person MICE events, examining the various steps taken to ensure its return post-COVID-19.

Key words: MICE events, virtual events, South Africa, COVID-19,

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INTRODUCTION

Meeting, Incentive, Conference, and Exhibition (MICE) events have undergone a drastic transformation due to the onset of COVID-19 and resultant regulations. As underscored by Janiszewska et al. (2021), the geographical expansion, nature of transmission, severity, and infectiousness of the virus had significant implications for the hosting of the MICE events. This came after the widescale cancellation of major events globally and, to a certain extent, the conceptualization of events as being ‘super spreaders’ of the virus (Hemmonsby et al., 2021). Like other event typologies, the MICE sector had been one of the first forms of tourism to be prohibited and regulated following the outbreak of the pandemic (Bartis et al., 2021; Ho and Sia, 2020). As a result, the available studies on the reaction of this sector to COVID-19 have shown their transition to virtual platforms to have been a widely used strategy to adapt, survive and maintain business continuity (see for example, Anguera-Torrell et al., 2021; Dillette and Ponting, 2021; Hofstadter-Thalman et al., 2022; Palrao et al., 2021; Seraphin, 2021). Similarly, few studies have concurred that the pandemic and the transition to virtual events constitute an opportunity for the MICE sector

to reinvent itself (Seraphin, 2021; Dillette and Ponting, 2021; Hofstadter-Thalmann et al., 2022). Indeed, these studies affirmed that resulting conditions had led to the development of innovative means to plan and host MICE events.

While virtual MICE events present new opportunities, it has been agreed upon that the recovery of the MICE sector revolves around the return to in-person events as the predominant means to host such events. This is due to the significance of the sector for tourism development and economic growth for many destinations, particularly those in developing regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa (Shereni et al., 2021). Rogerson (2015) denotes the significance and expansion of MICE sector activity to be a result of globalization and the integration of economic sectors. Indeed, this sector has been noted to facilitate and constitute a key component of the knowledge economy (ICCA, 2018; Rogerson, 2015). Regarding tourism development, scholars such as Rogerson and Rogerson (2021) and Tichaawa (2017, 2021) highlight that, prior to the pandemic, MICE tourism held a large share of international travel to the region. Accordingly, this sector has been developed and leveraged to improve tourism economies of host destinations, contribute to urban regeneration strategies and enhance (and contribute to) the destination brand (Alananzeh et al., 2019; Cassar et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Weru and Njoroge, 2021). Unfortunately, despite the supported significance of the sector, it has remained a largely unexplored facet of tourism research in the region (Rogerson, 2015; Shereni et al., 2021). In fact, this continued within the context of COVID-19, whereby the effects and changes caused by the pandemic on tourism in Sub-Saharan Africa has yet to be focused on within the MICE events context.

In South Africa, the end of the national lockdown and the reopening of international tourism provided a much needed opportunity for MICE events to bounce back and begin their post-COVID-19 recovery. This is due to the fact that there is a need for (physical) contact between delegates, buyers and sellers, and other MICE stakeholders which necessitates the in-person hosting of such events (Dimitrovski and Seocanac, 2018). South Africa is recognized as one of the leading MICE destinations, regionally and internationally (Weru and Njoroge, 2021) and has, in 2022, resumed its hosting of two African premier events: Meetings Africa in February and Africa's Travel Indaba in May. These events were hosted in compliance with the country's 50% venue capacity regulations. In July 2022, all remaining lockdown regulations were lifted so from this time, the MICE events sector could fully resume their operations. While the sector and literature become focused on MICE event recovery, the purpose of the current study is to examine the factors that mediate the return of in-person events in the country, taking into consideration the role of MICE events in tourism and economic development as well as the regulations that had been in place at the time. In this regard, the theoretical significance of the study is twofold: (i) firstly, the study reveals factors that could shape the next phase in the development of the MICE events sector in South Africa; and (ii) secondly, this study could provide valuable insight for the MICE sector for further consideration when dealing with exogenous shocks or disruptions, as it critically unpacks the phases undertaken for the MICE sector to adapt and return to in-person mediums. These insights could be helpful in enhancing the resilience and flexibility of the sector in the future.

SOUTH AFRICA'S MICE SECTOR'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

While the South African government's response to COVID-19 began in March 2020, with the implementation of the national lockdown, the MICE sector (along with other typologies of events) had already cancelled and postponed their events much earlier (Hemmonsby et al., 2021; Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2021). The national COVID-19 response had been followed by the adoption of the Alert Level strategy to manage the reopening of certain sectors while accounting for the state of the virus in the country; the level of infections and transmission rates at the time, health facilities capacities and socio-economic impacts of the restrictions (Bama and Nyikana, 2021; GSA, 2021; Kotze, 2021; Vermeulen-Miltz et al., 2022). Since the MICE sector was classified within 'gatherings' under the Disaster Management Act, the sector was particularly vulnerable to

regulations pertaining to the number of people permitted at gatherings and international borders (Bartis et al., 2020; TBCSA, 2020). Accordingly, the hosting of in-person events during the pandemic was subject to the respective implemented alert level. Table 1 below illustrates the various alert levels set within the nation from 2020 and 2022 and the subsequent implications to the hosting of in-person MICE events.

Table 1. Alert levels and implications for the MICE sector

(Source: Government of South Africa, 2021)

Alert Level	Dates placed	MICE events implications
Alert level 5	26 March to 30 April 2020	MICE events prohibited & international borders closed.
Alert level 4	1 to 31 May 2020	MICE events prohibited & international borders closed.
Alert level 3	1 June to 17 August 2020	MICE events prohibited & international borders closed.
Alert level 2	18 August to 20 September 2020	Limited to a maximum of 250 persons for indoor venues and 500 persons for outdoor venues or 50% of the capacity of the venue should it be small. International travel permitted in certain airports, outside hours of curfew. A negative COVID-19 test must be produced not more than 72 hours before the date of arrival.
Alert level 1	21 September to 28 December 2020	Limited to a maximum of 250 persons or less for indoor venues and 500 persons or less for outdoor venues or 50% of the capacity of the venue should it be small.
Adjusted alert level 3	29 December 2020 until 28 February 2021	Limited to a maximum of 50 persons or less for indoor venues and 100 persons or less for outdoor venues or 50% of the capacity of the venue should it be small
Adjusted alert level 1	1 March 2021 to 30 May 2021	Limited to a maximum of 100 persons or less for indoor venues and 250 persons or less for outdoor venues or 50% of the capacity of the venue should it be small
Adjusted alert level 2	31 May to 15 June 2021	Limited to a maximum of 250 persons or less for indoor venues and 500 persons or less for outdoor venues or 50% of the capacity of the venue should it be small
Adjusted alert level 3	16 June 2021 to 27 June 2021	Limited to a maximum of 50 persons or less for indoor venues and 100 persons or less for outdoor venues and if the venue is too small, then not more than 50 percent of the capacity of the venue may be used.
Adjusted alert level 4	28 June to 25 July 2021	MICE events are prohibited until 11 July 2021, after which this will be reviewed.
Adjusted alert level 3	26 July to 12 September 2021	50 persons or less for indoor venues and 100 persons or less for outdoor venues or 50% of the capacity of the venue should it be small
Adjusted alert level 2	13 to 30 September 2021	Events subject to a limitation of a maximum of 250 persons or less for indoor venues and 500 persons or less for outdoor venues or 50% of the capacity of the venue should it be small
Adjusted alert level 1	From 1 October 2021	Events are allowed but limited to 1000 persons or less for indoor venues and 2000 persons or less for outdoor venues or 50% of the capacity of the venue should it be small. International travel permitted in certain airports. A vaccination certificate and/or a negative COVID-19 test must be produced not more than 72 hours before the date of arrival.

As shown in the table above, the regulations placed on the MICE sector limited the full reopening of the MICE sector as these events had not been permitted in line with the restrictions on the number of people in outdoor and indoor venues. Evidently, the sector had to adjust its MICE offerings accordingly and focused strongly on virtual events. This resulted in numerous calls for industry and government collaborations for the planning of tourism recovery, particularly in the months following the initial implementation of the national lockdown (Bama and Nyikana, 2021; Rogerson and Baum, 2020; SAT, 2020). The collaborations that emerged led to the development of the tourism recovery plan, which delineated recovery into three main phases: Protective Interventions, Managed Re-opening and Continuous Interventions (SAT, 2020). However, it is crucial to note that the recovery plan sought to design focused-MICE event strategies and activities in the second phase and implement them in the third phase. Further, the plan recognized that the uncertainty in the hosting of MICE events, particularly large-scale (also indicated in the table above), necessitated developing a MICE sector-specific plan. After appealing for the reopening of MICE events, there were several demonstrations of self-regulations. In fact, the different segments of the MICE sector formed the South Africa Events Council - an industry-wide coalition to address the collective challenges of the sector, provide a unified voice and showcase the value of MICE events (AXXO, 2021). These acts of self-regulation led to the development of a comprehensive set of safety protocols for the MICE operators, which include the re-opening guidelines and the industry protocols (Event Council Industry, 2020; TBCSA, 2020). These protocols regulated the hosting of in-person COVID-19-compliant MICE events, and were strongly leveraged in order to demonstrate to the government the safety and expert organisation of MICE events and its differentiation from other events within the 'gatherings' categorization.

The above discussion unpacked the efforts of various MICE stakeholders in lobbying for the return of in-person MICE events, and the current study continues this research theme by exploring the factors that contributed to the return of such events. The following section details the methodological procedures adopted in this research.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a qualitative research approach. A qualitative research approach was deemed suitable as it allowed for the in-depth exploration of the subject matter (Leavy, 2017). Accordingly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 representatives of the MICE sector. As underlined by Bartis et al. (2021), the MICE sector of South Africa is represented by three broad segments, which include governing authorities (or decision makers), the supply side, and the support services. These stakeholders play an important role in developing, growing, and executing MICE events in South Africa. As such, it became paramount to understand the views and expert opinions of representatives from these stakeholder groups. The representatives from these stakeholder segments were purposively selected based on their expert knowledge and involvement in MICE tourism recovery in South Africa. Further, owing to the different roles played by these three major subsectors of MICE tourism, the study gathered views from each of the three segments. Specifically, the study included representatives from the Southern African Association for the Conference Industry (SAACI), the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE), AAXO, the Professional Conference Organisers (PCO) Alliance; MICE event planners, MICE event suppliers (venue, audio-visual suppliers, exhibitions stands), and finally, representatives from the National Department of Tourism and the South African National Convention Bureau.

The interviews were held virtually via MS Teams and Zoom which allowed for eased convenience in terms of meeting time and venue. The interviews, on average, lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interview protocol focused on exploring the changes in hosting MICE events during COVID-19, the use of virtual events, the gradual reopening of the sector, and its implication on how such events are hosted. The semi-structured nature of the protocols allowed for further probing of the participants' answers to gather a deeper understanding of the current workings of the MICE

tourism environment. With their permission obtained, the interviews had been recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thereafter, the transcriptions were loaded onto Atlas.ti version 9, which allowed for the coding (and grouping) of the data, in which three major group codes were then generated.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Limitations of virtual events

Interviews with various MICE professionals averred virtual events to have been a temporary solution to the restrictions that strained the operations of the MICE sector. While the value of these forms of events were acknowledged and praised, the study participants then underscored that the rapid rise of virtual MICE events was followed by ‘virtual fatigue’, which affects the levels of engagement in these events. Encapsulating such views, one participant stated:

In other settings, there needs to be some sort of physical component... because we are seeing that engagement levels are dropping. I just had my team meetings this morning where at some point I said, ‘just switch on your cameras, and stand up’. Because nobody is saying anything. It has been proven that engagement levels are dropping. While some of the objectives are being achieved, you also need to look at outcomes. If you're looking at outputs and outcomes, it is not achieving exactly what you need.

The respondents explained that this phenomenon was due to the prolonged period of remote working, as well as the frequent hosting of online MICE events. Bailenson (2021) explains that this fatigue from virtual meetings is caused by limited mobility, increased cognitive load and extra amounts of close-up eye gaze. Participants strongly contended that in-person events were more effective in garnering positive engagement, interactions and experiences compared to their virtual counterparts. See, for instance:

When you are in a venue, you are there with the atmosphere and with the people around you and the networking opportunities. And now when you are logging in from your laptop at home, I think while the clients want their reach to be more, the reality is that people have become hesitant to sit behind their laptops for nine hours in a day. They would maybe watch the first hour, and then they would walk away or continue with the day.

Additionally, the respondents then questioned the viability of virtual events, in the long term, considering the role of MICE events in facilitating knowledge creation and sharing, networking and collaborations. In fact, some respondents agreed that the limited return on investment in some virtual events was due particularly to this limitation:

We have seen conference organisers suddenly moving to a virtual space. I have been involved in one or two events, which have been virtual. And the virtual spaces got very little return. I mean it's just like watching a television screen - there is a bit of interaction, but people, as humans, aren't built like that, we are built to engage face-to-face.

However, the above should be considered within the context that the use of virtual events in South Africa is relatively new, particularly at the time of the study. As such, the current study concurs with the contention of Dillette and Ponting (2021) as well as Hofstadter-Thalman et al. (2022), in that the focus on virtual events going forward will be on ensuring that the platform, content, and program supports and embeds this interactive character (on the side of delegates) within MICE events.

Some respondents underscored the social nature of events, similar to the view of Seraphin (2020) on the anthropological needs tied to events, in that people want to come together for such occasions. Indeed, the respondents concurred that this was another limitation of virtual events. Overwhelmingly, the respondents put forth that the major appeal of in-person events was tied to the fact that these events are grounded on human interactions. Some responses in this regard include the following:

Long term, we would much prefer to be doing physical events. And some people ask 'what if it is so good that it replaces the physical events'. That is never going to happen with our industry. I mean, it might happen with pharmaceuticals, some of the medical professions might prefer to keep it virtual. But for us, the reality is that tourism is a social industry, and people like to connect. When you're in hospitality, you're in it for the love of people. And people want to see people.

A lot of companies still want that human contact. And we, as South Africans, like to be there and say, 'Hello, we're glad to see you'. We like that human contact. I don't think it will last. When we are clear and we can move around again like normal, I think we'll go back to full capacity venues.

Interestingly, some studies have argued that continued innovation (facilitated by training and content redesign) holds future opportunities for facilitating interactions with event attendees (Dillette and Ponting, 2021; Simons, 2019; Sox et al., 2017). However, the above results corroborate previous findings on the significance of networking and forming professional relationships in the decision to attend MICE events (Cassar et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2020; Oppermann and Chon, 1997). In fact, Kim et al. (2020) averred that the need to expand social contacts in MICE events had been a strong determinant of conference attendance requiring much consideration from organisers on ways to develop and structure the program to facilitate networking opportunities.

Furthermore, considering the factors determining MICE event attendance, the respondents highlighted the importance of the travel component involved in this sector. As attendees are noted to derive different social values from virtual and in-person events, some respondents highlighted the travel to the hosting destination to allow for more immersive experiences at the event when compared to virtual events. This arises from the difficulty recently identified in balancing home and work responsibilities prevalent in remote working (Chetty and Motala, 2021), which subsequently feeds into the nature of virtual event hosting and attending.

Impact of live events

Underscored by the respondents is the role of in-person events in tourism growth, destination development, and local economic development. Accordingly, many of the respondents pointed to the role of in-person MICE events for promoting and developing the South African destination brand. Indeed, representatives of SAT (specifically the SANBC) had noted this role to have led to the establishment of the sector, as well as the strategic targeting of events supported. Speaking to the opportunities provided by MICE events for local businesses, entrepreneurs, and individuals, one representative of SANCB highlighted:

With the events that we go after, it's not about the numbers for us. We supported, for example, an event of 100 delegates that focus on rural educators, providing training. For us that is much more valuable because of the macro economic impact that it will have. So compared to 2000 people getting together that will have minimum impact in terms of the priority areas for our country, we look at the priority sectors for the country, and then we overlay it with events with these macroeconomic legacy potentials. Just another example, there is an international

clown congress and it is 6000 people that meet every three years, and it rotates around the world. So that event I kept on saying to my boss, 'but it's 6000 people'. And she said 'how is that event going to help us in terms of investment and entrepreneurial opportunities?' And those are the filters that we use to decide what events we do and attract to South Africa.

The non-tourism benefits of MICE events, unfortunately, remains a relatively unexplored facet of MICE tourism. The ICCA (2018) report explained that MICE events draw in leading experts, specialists and practitioners in their respective fields to strengthen the internal capacities of a nation. Similarly, Jago and Deery (2010) add that MICE events contribute towards the professional development within the hosting city by creating access for local professionals to experts in their field. Accordingly, the quote above illustrates the support provided by the SANBC to MICE events based on their ability to provide macro-economic benefits, as opposed to only the size of the event. As such, many respondents had pointed to the ability of in-person events to greatly strengthen the attainment of these legacies linked to MICE events. Such findings concur with that of ICCA (2018), which reported that face-to-face collaborations, facilitated by events, greatly enhance the knowledge economy. Asongu and Kauda (2020) have gone on to expand on the significance of the knowledge economy in opening economic opportunities in Sub-Saharan Africa. Evidently, hosting these events can provide opportunities for local entrepreneurs, businesses and the greater society within the hosting city. The value of offering accessibility to industry experts and information creation and dissemination has been frequently cited in interviews as an important reason to fast-track the return of in-person events.

Moreover, many of the respondents concur that virtual events resulted in some lost opportunities owing to a focus on the presentation of information. Some representatives of the MICE planners agreed that virtual events largely served the purpose of providing content, with one stating '*And we just gave them the academic content, that is what is been presented to them. That's the only part of the conference that we are effectively keeping - it is academic content*'. It is important to note that the quote was stated during the period where MICE event planners had been testing and learning to host such events online, and consequently experienced some difficulty in ensuring that the platform facilitated and allowed for networking and user engagement. However, it is also important to note that the type of experience gained from virtual events is dependent on several factors, such as connectivity and accessibility to devices. While much of the country had shifted to remote working during 2020 and 2021, some respondents pointed out that not all parts of the country had stable network coverage, which was further affected by loadshedding. These, unfortunately, are factors beyond the control of MICE event planners but which can affect the delegates' overall experience of an event. This is due to the fact that connectivity, or the lack thereof, affects accessibility to the event, engagement, as well as the presenters' ability to share their content. Resultantly, event planners found these concerns to be easier to manage when the event is held in person. Specifically, they accrued this to the venue's ability to provide backup generators, staff onsite to assist attendees, and prior experience in hosting in-person events.

Finally, the impact of live events has also been related to the tourism impact of in-person events. The onset of COVID-19 saw many events cancelled and postponed to a later date. Many of the respondents described the significant disturbance to the multiplier effect of the tourism industry. For instance, one respondent underlined the following:

If you think about it with one conference, who all gets affected? From the moment that delegate arrives in the country, there [is] the person who picks them up at the airport, that brings them to the hotel. Then they book in at the hotel, and there is the hotel employees, the housekeepers, the waiters, [and] the front of office staff. Then they go to the conference, and there is everybody that's on site at the conference. Then they go on a tour, and there's a tour guide that takes them on a tour...

Subsequently, the halt of in-person events meant that *'...so the whole value chain gets impacted. Now all of a sudden, we've taken all of that away'*. Accordingly, in-person events serve a crucial role in realising the tourism impact of MICE events, as relating to increased visitor arrivals, direct and indirect employment opportunities and the interlinkages with tourism and leisure businesses. In planning for recovery, the SANCB underscored that while it had developed a strategy to develop virtual events (Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2021), this was done in order to promote the South African MICE destination brand so as to ensure further intentions to host such events in the country, in person. Accordingly, the organisation then posited for the focus to remain related to *'getting bums in beds'* so as to support the recovery of tourism in the country.

Restarting in-person events

The recovery of the MICE sector mirrors that of the wider tourism industry, particularly in its approach. The SAT (2020) reported that cultivating and sustaining local demand is the first step towards tourism recovery. Interestingly, there were some debates regarding the relevance of this approach for the MICE sector, with several respondents contending that the sector in South Africa was dependent on international markets, while others emphasised that the local demand exists, as has been demonstrated by the leisure travel activity after local borders and travel had been opened. One respondent offered the following:

As soon as we lifted the regulations and the restrictions, our leisure business was booming, and still is. And you would think by now that maybe people have run out of money but actually, people are still travelling for leisure. You know, they're obviously travelling locally. And it's the same in all markets, whether it's in South Africa, or in Nigeria, or in, in any of the European countries - domestic leisure business is still happening. So the way we see it, we all start with the local, which is within countries, and then Africa will be the next source that will supported others, as we've seen already. And then lastly, it will be the international key source markets.

Further, it is crucial to consider the way in which the pandemic had been unfolding in other countries and the subsequent uncertainty that still permeated through the travel industry - focusing on local demand became a vital means to restart the MICE industry. This was owed to fluctuation in COVID-19 cases that determined the government's responses, which, more often than not, meant more stringent regulations on travel and gatherings.

While the above discussions detail some of the factors mediating the return of in-person events, the respondents aver that this return began with the use of hybrid events. Some respondents went on to explain that these events were a crucial means to restarting the hosting of in-person events while complying with the COVID-19 regulations. The quote below illustrates this sentiment:

In the case of South Africa, although we can now have meetings up to 100 people, it's still very much virtual most of the time, and then a little bit of hybrid that is starting to come by. And with your hybrid events, it will be a mix of some people in person at the venue and most of them attend virtually.

The COVID-19 regulations that had the most significant impact on the operations of the MICE industry had been the closure of international borders and the restrictions on the number of people permitted at gatherings. While the regulations on the number of people at gatherings have been altered with the adjustment of alert levels, where more people were gradually permitted to attend events, the restrictions on the events sector of South Africa lasted the longest, particularly the regulations on gatherings. Indeed, it was only in July 2022 that all COVID-19 regulations were

eased. As such, the stringent regulations on the MICE sector led to the implementation of hybrid events (the mixture of virtual and in-person components into an event) becoming a prominent means for the return and recovery of the MICE sector.

Accordingly, hybrid events are viewed to combine the strengths of both virtual and in-person events while minimizing each of the medium's limitations. For example:

Clients are seeing a bigger return on investment now, and they want the best of both worlds. They know face to face works because there are certain things that cannot be done online, there are certain connections that cannot be made online. It's an exhausting process, that face to face, that human need, the empathy, those physical cues that we get when we are in a same room with a person or sitting across the table from somebody. You don't get those physical cues online and so you need to have a face to face. And maybe the interaction in the hybrid [event], those people that come online virtually during that showtime will be there. They might not be able to seal the deal, but maybe there could be follow-up meetings and sessions that could happen face to face from the hybrid [event]. So it's making sure that we will be able to deliver on those needs, so that we can bring both audiences together and allow them to engage with both audiences within the capacity that they have. But at the same time, exhibitors need a lot of training to manage the virtual space as well.

Hybrid events allow for the facilitation of the social component of MICE events, which had been identified as missing in virtual events. Therefore, in terms of attendee engagement and experience, hybrid events remain one of the best available options. Largely, the quote above suggests that virtual events comprise a means to transition back to MICE events being hosted fully in person. It is important to note that there still remains some barriers before this can be achieved, which include travel and gathering restrictions which still remain techniques used to minimize the spread of the pandemic, until widespread immunity is achieved against the virus. As such, these events still allow for the return of the hosting of in-person MICE events. Furthermore, emerging studies have noted that the pandemic has caused a major shift in travel behaviours, specifically relating to an increased perception of risk (Agyeiwaah et al., 2021; Matiza and Slabbert, 2021; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). For a nation such as South Africa, which is a long-haul destination, hybrid events become valuable in generating confidence in participating in travel to future MICE events. Furthermore, beyond COVID-19 regulations, it is important to consider the role of the public image in the determination of whether or not to attend MICE events. Since 2020, the manner in which the pandemic had been managed at a national level, as well as the unfortunate July 2021 riots, have been noted to have negatively affected the destination image of South Africa. Accordingly, hybrid events prove useful beyond managing the COVID-19 restrictions on the sector.

In fact, some respondents have noted the potential of this medium for hosting events, owing to the wider reach provided for by the virtual component. For instance, one MICE planner mentioned the following:

I think it's definitely going to be hybrid going forward. So one incredible opportunity that has come out of this is that it has open people's eyes and mind to how we can actually make the world even smaller. Therefore, for argument's sake, if we are hosting an association, and there are 500 delegates from all over the world, normally it would be we'd spend a fortune on getting an international speaker to fly into Cape Town, and to be there for the full duration. Now, budgets allowing, because budget doesn't always allow that, so automatically, your opportunity is now 'okay, who can we afford, who could we bring in'. We are now able to have a hybrid event where that specific international speaker could be sitting in Sweden, or could be sitting in any part of the world, and it is as if he is sitting right in the venue.

Accordingly, this provides greater flexibility for both attendees and participants in the MICE events. The virtual component therefore provides a broader array of options on how to host such events. In fact, some respondents noted that adoption of virtual events, as well as the new condition to operate in (as caused by the virus), may result in the generation of various formats of hybrid events. For example, one respondent postulated:

This is just me seeing how things will pan out. The physical events will become the premium version - where less people will go to, you pay a premium, you are also going to get the premium. Where you are going to sit in front of your computer and still participate in business events, you're going to probably pay less, but you're also going to get less.

Indeed, the market for MICE events has changed and may continue to change in light of the effects of COVID-19 on the economic sectors of societies. The above postulation is only one of the ways in which the MICE events might return. However, most of the respondents hold the view that in-person formats are best suited to the MICE sector owing to the fundamental reasons these events are hosted.

Lastly, while there remains questions around the various ways hybrid events will be utilized going forward, many of the respondents indicated that while the demand for such events had been understandably low, the government market segment was identified to have driven the restart of MICE tourism:

The areas where it's recovering first, or maybe the segments that are really recovering first, is [the] government [market]. Interesting enough, we've seen some groups coming through from governments. But it's also because their financial year is ending now in March. So they are kind of finishing up whatever is sitting on their budget. And, of course, you've got new budget being released now. And so they've got to start the activity at the same time.

Such views were shared by several respondents involved in MICE planning. This suggests that this segment is targeted for the restart of the industry. Interestingly, some other respondents highlighted that their engagement with the restart of MICE activity may aid in the industry's lobbying efforts to demonstrate the safety of attending such events, as well as the deliberate and expert planning involved that minimise the risk of COVID-19 spread. Notably, while the government had been identified as the immediate market showing signs of recovery, the respondents had further emphasised the significance of MICE events to industry associations:

You need to look at it from the associations because it's where the demand is coming from. The association still need to be financially viable. Conferences and meetings is [still] a huge part of their revenue. And it drives and creates income for the association. So if you take, for example, a large Congress, the International cardiology Congress, 15,000 people normally converge every four years to a destination. Their business model is based on getting an income every four years for 50,000 people. So these fundamental shifts taking place, that is not key at the moment on how these business models need to change, to make associations more sustainable in the future, and how meetings and conferences will be used as income generators and revenue spreaders for them.

An earlier study had found that the bidding activities of the SANCB continued during 2020 and 2021, and primarily, the association market segment had been one to book their events in South Africa in the near future (Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2021a). This thereby suggests that the return of in-person association events may occur in the medium-term. Understandably, the corporate market may

take the longest to return to in-person formats owing to the economic downturn resulting from COVID-19.

CONCLUSION

The stringent regulations implemented in response to COVID-19 severely hampered the operations of the MICE sector of South Africa. Resultantly, the return of in-person MICE events in South Africa has been strongly lobbied for by the MICE sector stakeholders. The current study aimed to unpack the factors that mediate the return of such events, particularly focusing on those factors outside of the COVID-19 policy considerations. The study shows that the MICE sector contended that virtual events had been instrumental in ensuring the continuity of the events industry up until the COVID-19 regulations permitted the return of such in-person events. The results suggest the limitations of virtual events, the impact of live events (on local economic development and tourism), as well as the inherently social nature of MICE events are factors essentially leading the transition back to an in-person dominant MICE event sector. Arguably, some of these factors, such as the realization of both tourism and non-tourism benefits, are vital for economic and tourism recovery. Further, the results shown in the study reveal the various stages (and subsequent debates) of the bounce back of in-person events, beginning with generating local demand to hybrid events and various new options developed for MICE events.

Largely, the results of the study concur with the contention of Shereni et al. (2021) on the eventual return of in-person MICE events and their resilience to disturbances and crises. As one of the most regulated tourism sectors, the MICE sector has faced many challenges on its path to reopening and recovery. By providing a critical identification and analysis of this path, the current study offers value in informing plans and strategies when crises occur. Moreover, while the study focused on the context of South Africa, the lessons learned could be adapted to other developing MICE destinations in Sub-Saharan Africa, as this sector has been identified as a critical economic sector to develop, and therefore its resilience and sustainability should be continuously enhanced.

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