GLOBAL ECHOES

The pros and cons of virtual networking events: online exploratory survey of psychiatrists' opinions

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We conducted an online questionnaire-based cross-sectional study to clarify psychiatrists' perspectives on virtual networking events. We compared two groups of respondents: those who had participated in virtual networking events (experienced group, n = 85) and those who had not (inexperienced group, n = 13). The experienced group had a greater level of agreement than the inexperienced group that virtual events were generally useful and helped with forming professional relationships and improving professional skills. Respondents in the experienced group considered the ease of participation and low financial burden to be advantages of virtual networking meetings and difficulties in building friendships and socialising to be disadvantages.

Networking within a physician's respective field of interest is essential for leadership development and career growth.[1,2] We held a virtual networking meeting, the 1st Japan Young Psychiatrists Organization Online International Networking (JOIN) meeting, via the Zoom videoconferencing platform in February 2021. The meeting's primary objective was to maintain international collaboration with the Japan Young Psychiatrists Organization (JYPO) during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it consisted of a series of events such as team-building workshops, networking events and lectures. In total, 27 Japanese and 11 overseas participants joined it and successfully interacted with each other.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many conferences and networking events like this meeting have been organised virtually. Previous studies have reported the use of virtual tools for education,[3] clinical practice,[4] obtaining informed consent[5] and team building.[6] In addition, the usefulness of participating in virtual networking events has been reported in mentoring[7] and forming global connections.[2] However, there are no studies that have primarily investigated differences of opinion between people with and without experience of participating in virtual networking events. We therefore conducted an online questionnaire survey to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of virtual and in-person conferences to improve future conferences.

Method

This cross-sectional study was conducted using an online questionnaire using Google Forms. All responses were collected between 13 and 28 February 2021 after the JOIN meeting, and participants were recruited from the participants in the meeting and also from psychiatrists in psychiatrist-specific groups on social networking services (Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.) in which the authors participated. All respondents were divided into two groups: those who had participated in virtual networking events (experienced group) and those who had never participated in such events (inexperienced group).

The following demographic information was collected: age, gender, nationality, years of clinical experience, primary working facility (university hospital, general hospital, psychiatric clinic, etc.) and current job position.

The research committee of the 1st JOIN meeting (Y.S., I.K., R.K. and M.M.) developed the original online questionnaire. We piloted and modified it among the committee members and colleagues before its dissemination. The questionnaire uses a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Disagree) to 5 (Agree), and participants were asked the following questions regarding virtual networking events: 'Do you think online networking events are useful?' (overall usefulness), 'Is it possible to form a professional relationship at online networking events?' (forming professional relationships), 'Is it possible to form a personal relationship at online networking events?' (forming personal relationships), 'Is it possible to improve professional skills at online networking events?' (improving professional skills) and 'Do you think you can get enough unity in an online networking event?' (having a sense of unity)'. The group of experienced participants were asked an additional question: 'Which do you think is better, online or face-to-face networking event?', which had eight sub-items ('Easy to participate', 'Less financial burden', 'Easy to share information', 'Easy to save information', 'Easy to build friendships', 'Privacy protection concerns', 'Need for technical preparation' and 'Having fun'). Each sub-item had three options ('online', 'same' and 'face-to-face'). The full questionnaire is shown in the Supplementary Appendix, available at https://doi.org/10.1192/bji.2023.26.

Data regarding the participants' demographics and responses to the five questions about the usefulness of virtual networking events were analysed and compared between the experienced and inexperienced participant groups. For the question 'Which do you think is better, online or face-to-face networking events?', we described the proportions of answers. We used the Mann–Whitney U-test for continuous variables such as age, years of clinical experience and responses on the Likert scale, and we used Fisher's exact test for categorical variables such as the proportions of the genders and nationalities. A two-tailed test was used for all statistical analyses, with statistical significance set at a $P < 0.05$. These analyses were performed using SPSS for Windows (version 27.0).

Results

A total of 98 responses were obtained, 85 from those in the experienced group and 13 in the inexperienced group. Table 1 shows the participants' demographic characteristics. Age, gender, years of clinical experience and the proportion of Japanese participants did not show any significant differences between groups; 44 of the 85 in the experienced group had participated in the JOIN meeting. On the five questions about the usefulness of networking events, the experienced group indicated that virtual events were better than face-to-face events in terms of overall usefulness, forming professional relationships and improving professional skills (Table 2). The results of the question 'Which do you think is

Table 1

Demographic characteristics

	Experienced ($n = 85$)	Inexperienced ($n = 13$)	P^a
Age, years: mean (s.d.)	36.5 (6.3)	38.1 (7.9)	0.518
Gender (male:female:prefer not to say), n	57:27:1	12:1:0	0.220
Years of clinical experience, mean (s.d.)	10.5 (5.9)	11.0 (7.8)	0.883
Japanese, n	62	12	0.204
Overseas, n	22	1	—
Albanian	1	0	—
Belgian	1	0	—
German	1	0	—
Greek	2	0	—
Indian	1	0	—
Indonesian	5	0	—
Iranian	1	0	—
Italian	1	0	—
Maltese	1	0	—
Nepalese	1	0	—
Polish	2	0	—
Romanian	1	0	—
Taiwanese	1	0	—
Thai	2	0	—
Turkish	1	1	—
No response	1	0	—
Primary working facility, n			
General hospital	12	2	—
Psychiatric clinic	8	0	—
Psychiatric hospital	25	5	—
University hospital	32	5	—
Other	8	1	—
Current job position, n			
Academic post	18	2	—
Clinical doctor	43	8	—
Graduate student	3	3	—
Psychiatry resident	21	0	—
1st JOIN meeting participants, n	44	0	—

JOIN, Japan Young Psychiatrists Organization Online International Networking.
a.Two-tailed Mann–Whitney U-test was used for continuous variables and two-tailed Fisher's exact test was used for categorical variables ($P < 0.05$ as statistical significance).

Table 2

Responses to the questions about the usefulness of virtual networking events among respondents with and without experience of such events

	Mean (s.d.)		
	Experienced (*n* = 85)	Inexperienced (*n* = 13)	*P*^{a}
Overall usefulness	4.20 (0.8)	3.31 (1.38)	**0.013**
Forming professional relationships	3.91 (0.88)	3.23 (1.09)	**0.025**
Forming personal relationships	3.33 (1.15)	3.38 (0.96)	0.871
Improving professional skills	4.02 (0.89)	3.46 (0.97)	**0.041**
Having a sense of unity	3.31 (1.08)	3.23 (0.93)	0.686

a.Two-tailed Mann–Whitney *U*-test was used (*P* < 0.05 was statistically significant). Statistically significant *P*-values are shown in **bold**.

better, online or face-to-face networking event?' are described in Table 3.

Discussion

The present exploratory survey identified several points about psychiatrists' attitudes towards virtual networking events. It showed differences between those who had and had not participated in virtual networking events and the ways in which psychiatrists preferred virtual to in-person events.

The experienced group felt more optimistic than the inexperienced group about virtual networking events regarding the following points: overall usefulness, forming professional relationships and improving professional skills. Although previous articles about virtual networking events that were held concurrently with formal academic conferences showed their usefulness, their respondents were limited to the participants of these events. Our results may indicate that persons without experience of attending virtual events tend to think these events are not important. However, the two groups showed no significant differences in terms of personal relationship formation and a sense of unity in virtual events. 'Networking' in previous articles usually focused on professional dimensions;[2,7] however, in the present study we presumed that networking events have professional and non-professional dimensions. This study may suggest that participants in virtual networking meetings found that these meetings were better for forming professional relationships than personal relationships.

Regarding 'Which do you think is better, online or face-to-face networking events?' (asked of the experienced group), as expected, many individuals found online events to be better in terms of being 'easy to participate [in]' (77.6%) and incurring 'less financial burden' (85.9%). Virtual meetings cost little to no time and money for travelling and accommodation, which a previous report insisted were factors favourable for women and persons living in low- and middle-income countries.[2] However, our respondents found in-person meetings to be better in terms of being 'easy to build friendships' (90.6%) and 'having fun' (77.6%). This was compatible with the previously mentioned results. For people who have experienced virtual meetings, in-person meetings were still considered more enjoyable and helpful for building friendships. However, many global conferences, such as the WPA World Congress of Psychiatry, are shifting from in-person to virtual or hybrid formats.

Previous reports have shown the non-inferiority of online services, even in psychotherapy[8] and education,[9] which depend on trust among participants. There are also individuals who enjoy developing friendships through communications during internet gaming. Factors such as the number of participants in meetings or shared interests may play a role.

Table 3

Responses of respondents (*n* = 85) with experience of virtual networking events to sub-items of 'Which do you think is better, online or face-to-face networking event?'

Sub-item	*n* (%)		
	Online better	Face-to-face better	Same
Easy to participate	66 (77.6)	8 (9.4)	11 (12.9)
Less financial burden	73 (85.9)	2 (2.4)	10 (11.8)
Easy to share information	34 (40.0)	14 (16.5)	37 (43.5)
Easy to save information	38 (44.7)	16 (18.8)	31 (36.5)
Easy to build friendships	1 (1.2)	77 (90.6)	7 (8.2)
Privacy protection concerns	5 (5.9)	46 (54.1)	34 (40.0)
Need for technical preparation	40 (47.1)	18 (21.2)	27 (31.8)
Having fun	1 (1.2)	66 (77.6)	18 (21.2)

Limitations

Our study had several limitations. First, this survey was conducted immediately after the JOIN meeting and more than a half of the experienced group had participated in the meeting. Furthermore, the participants in the JOIN meeting generally expressed high satisfaction with the meeting and knew all the authors. Respondents' impression of the meeting and concerns for the authors possibly biased responses in favour of virtual networking events in the experienced group. Second, the questionnaire conducted in this survey was only disseminated to individuals connected to the authors' online communities. Therefore, the respondents were likely to be biased in favour of those familiar with online tools more than the whole population of psychiatrists. Third, the number in the inexperienced group ($n = 13$) was much smaller than in the experienced group ($n = 85$). The very much smaller sample of inexperienced respondents might lead to type II (β) errors in difference testing. It must be considered when interpreting our study. Fourth, the questionnaire in this study was newly developed by us and we did not ensure that it has adequate criterion validity for multicultural populations. However, our questionnaire was designed to explore the usefulness and characteristics of virtual networking events for psychiatrists and it provided us with information to consider when organising future networking events.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available online at https://doi.org/10.1192/bji.2023.26.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, I.K.

Author contributions

Y.S. wrote the initial draft of this article. I.K., R.K., M.M. and Y.S. designed the study and conducted the online survey. M.A. and N.O. provided advice on the study design and the discussion of the results. All authors contributed to the manuscript and approved the submitted version.

Declaration of interest

None.

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