

HYBRID EVENTS AS A TOOL TO PROMOTE MICE TOURISM IN SRI LANKA: A MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

MICE tourism has a significant impact on the world economy. However, MICE tourism was highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Global Data, 35% of tourism revenue is obtained by organizing events. In 2020, world events faced different challenges; 44% were postponed, 30% moved to virtual, 14% were canceled, and only 9% were held physically (ICCA, 2020). Demand for virtual and hybrid events has suddenly grown because of the slowdown in MICE Tourism. In the Sri Lankan context, challenges like Easter Sunday terrorist attack and the Covid 19 pandemic have decreased the MICE traveler arrivals. As Ranasinghe et al. (2020) state, without a doubt, Sri Lanka's tourism, hotel, and MICE sector are facing many negative impacts brought by the pandemic situation.

Furthermore, many researchers have suggested that virtual and hybrid events can be organized to retain MICE tourism in the new normal. Additionally, as Ranasinghe et al. (2020) suggested, organizing hybrid events is one way to keep the MICE industry of Sri Lanka afloat in this pandemic situation and further state that there are numerous advantages to hybrid events, including improved financial benefits, increased attendance, measurability, and ease of changeover. However, there is a lack of research on organizing hybrid events to promote MICE tourism internationally and domestically. Furthermore, there is no empirical study conducted in Sri Lanka focusing on organizing hybrid events to promote MICE tourism in Sri Lanka. This has been identified as a research gap.

This research studied organizing hybrid events as a tool to promote MICE tourism in Sri Lanka from MICE managers' perspective. Therefore, the main objectives of this research were to identify the best practices of organizing hybrid events as a tool to promote MICE tourism in Sri Lanka. Moreover, an analysis has been conducted to examine the challenges and opportunities of organizing hybrid events to promote MICE tourism in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the significance and contribution of the research are prominent in providing the foundation for future studies regarding organizing hybrid events as a tool to promote MICE tourism in Sri Lanka. Moreover, this study will provide a theoretical idea about the best practices, opportunities, and challenges in organizing hybrid MICE events.

Additionally, this study will comfort future researchers and scholars as a base for their studies. The study's findings will contribute to the MICE industry of Sri Lanka when developing guidelines to organize standards, quality, and successful hybrid events. Emerging Sri Lankan entrepreneurs can grab the outcomes from the study to create new businesses related to hybrid events management.

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to find the best practices, challenges, and opportunities for staging hybrid events to promote MICE tourism in Sri Lanka. As a result, the researcher chose a qualitative research approach. Moreover, this research requires detailed information, opinions, and perspectives of the MICE managers. Further, the study was coordinated with the Sri Lanka Association of Professional Conference, Exhibition, and Event Organizers (SLAPCEO). There have been 28 companies registered under SLAPCO. Therefore, target population of this study was SLAPCEO registered MICE company managers. Fifteen MICE managers of registered companies in SLAPCEO have been selected as the sample using a purposive sampling technique. The data was gathered through structured face-to-face interviews with MICE managers. Interview lengths were approximately 30-40 minutes. The data was analyzed using the content analysis method. The content analysis categorized the data by utilizing categories generated from the data (Figure 01).

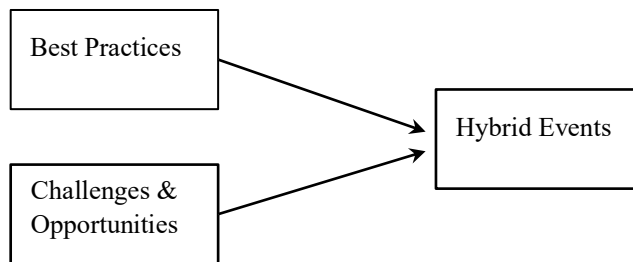


Figure 1 Concept Indicator Model

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Some best practices are ensuring internet connectivity, clear communication, user-friendly platforms and licensing, checking time zones, contingency planning, and maximizing interaction. Due to the time variability in the world, checking time zones and preparing for a risky situation with a contingency plan is also considered a best practice. However, maximizing participant interaction using various strategies can also be a best practice. When considering the best practices found by this study, ensuring internet connectivity, ensuring equipment and electricity, and ensuring clear communication seemed are prominent. As the second research objective, challenges and opportunities of organizing hybrid events have been identified. However, research findings show that stable connection and data cost, consistent experience, and venue selection were challenges.

Moreover, as opportunities, the ability to increase the number of participants increased sponsorship opportunities, and high revenue and profits were identified. Stable connection and data cost are a challenge in this study; however, when considering hybrid events literature, the connection is recognized as a challenge and conforms to this study's findings—ensuring the speakers and internet connectivity. Moreover, data cost is also considered a challenge in organizing hybrid MICE events in Sri Lanka. Since Sri Lanka is an island and not sharing borders with other countries is the cause of high data cost. As Ranasinghe (2021) states, Sri Lankan data is expensive due to undersea cables, maintenance, and lower density usage. However, despite the challenges of organizing hybrid MICE events, opportunities also were

found. Accordingly, high revenue and profits can be achieved by organizing hybrid MICE events in Sri Lanka.

Moreover, as respondents stated, issuing an entrance fee for the virtual attendees can be identified as a revenue generation mode. Providing a virtual experience for events can enhance ticket sales, engagement, brand visibility, and lead generation (Martinez, 2021). Table 01 shows a summary of the research findings.

Table 1 Categories Summary

Objective	Code	Categories
One	Best Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assure Internet Connectivity ● Assure Equipment and Electricity ● Assure Clear Communication ● User-friendly Platforms and Licensing ● Check Time Zones ● Contingency Planning ● Maximize Interaction
Two	Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stable Connection & Data Cost ● Offering an Uniform Experience ● Venue Selection
	Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ability to Increase Participants ● Increased Sponsorship Opportunities ● High Revenue and Profits

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In Sri Lankan MICE tourism, hybrid events management is still a developing category even though regional MICE competitors organize hybrid MICE events often. According to the research findings, hybrid event managers should ensure internet connectivity as an essential practice to secure the smooth flow of events. In order to cope with the high data cost, event management professionals can negotiate with the telecommunication providers and maintain good supplier relationships. The government should aid and establish necessary infrastructure facilities to encourage the MICE industry. Hybrid MICE event organizers should understand that, since the virtual platform can achieve high reach, the gain is also higher than the physical event. Moreover, as per the study's outcomes, it can be recommended to publish a national guidebook for hybrid events management to disseminate best practices and other related findings revealed by this study. Additionally, organizing or bringing a reputed international hybrid MICE event to Sri Lanka is recommended.

Keywords: Best practices, challenges, hybrid events, MICE tourism, opportunities

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I want to express my heartfelt thanks and indebtedness to my research supervisor Mr. A.M.D.B. Nawarathna, Lecturer of the Faculty of Management, Uva Wellasa University for providing me with invaluable counsel, direction, and supervision from the very beginning of this research, as well as for providing me with incredible opportunities via the work.

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