

REFILOE JULIA LEKGAU,^a TEMBI MALONEY TICHAAWA^b

Dynamic Changes and Recovery in Event Venues: Perspectives from MICE Event Planners and Venue Managers

Abstract. The study examines the role played by event venues in helping the MICE event industry in South Africa recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, adapt to new conditions and innovate. The analysis is based on qualitative data collected during in-depth interviews with MICE event venue suppliers and planners. It was found that a crucial first step in order to reopen these venues was to ensure compliance with safety regulations. In response to the quick shift to virtual and hybrid events, many venues implemented necessary upgrades to accommodate such forms of participation. A number of event planners also considered using multiple venues to host large-scale events. The crisis caused by the pandemic re-emphasised the importance of alternative event venues and outdoor spaces. The study has implications for MICE event planners and suppliers.

Keywords: hybrid event, MICE events, South Africa, suppliers, venues, virtual event

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1. Introduction

Events are increasingly playing a role in destination development (Lu, Zhu & Wei, 2020). Recognised as a core part of the tourism system (Getz & Page, 2016), the events industry had experienced tremendous growth before the pandemic. According to Allied Market Research (2020), the industry was valued at us\$ 1.135 billion in 2017. Events contribute to job creation, community development, and urban development resulting from the construction of event infrastructure and generate revenue for local economies (Christofle & Fournier, 2023; Kramer et al., 2023;

^a School of Tourism & Hospitality, University of Johannesburg, South Africa, rlekgau@uj.ac.za, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0303-7592>

^b School of Tourism & Hospitality, University of Johannesburg, South Africa, tembit@uj.ac.za, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1913-3730>

Nyikana & Tichaawa, 2023). Consequently, there is much competition between destinations to host large-scale and international events (Nolan, 2020; Welthagen, Slabbert & du Plessis, 2022). The growth of the events industry has also attracted a lot of research interest, according to Mair and Smith (2021), event management research has become a maturing field of study that critically examines events as social, economic, cultural, environmental, and political phenomena. One area of focus is the growing popularity of virtual (and hybrid) events, initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hofstädter-Thalmann et al., 2022; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022a, 2022b; Steriopoulos & Wrathall, 2021). Authors interested in this emerging field of research are investigating how these new forms of participation are changing the hosting of events and tourism and hospitality and how they are perceived by different stakeholders (Saarinen & Rogerson, 2021; Tichaawa & Rogerson, 2022). The following study focuses on the meetings, incentive travel, conference, and exhibition (MICE) sector.

While events used to be associated with people coming to a specific place, recent advances in video conferencing technology (which became particularly useful during the pandemic) transformed events into location-independent and complex social networks (Simons, 2019). Given the growing popularity of virtual and hybrid events, it is necessary to explore this phenomenon from different perspectives to gain new insights about event management. To date, a few studies on virtual and hybrid events have attempted to examine the experiences of attendees of such events (Hofstädter-Thalmann et al., 2022; Pearlman & Gates, 2010; Simons, 2019; Sox et al., 2017; Steriopoulos & Wrathall, 2021) and their willingness to pay fees for virtual attendance (An, Kim & Hur, 2021). The following study focuses on the supply side and investigates changes taking place in event venues and perspectives of stakeholders who shape and are affected by these changes. Event venues are crucial factors that play a major role in the success of any event (Adongo, 2011; Lee, Parrish & Kim, 2015; Wenner, Caset & De Wit, 2019). Adongo (2011) points out that while all MICE stakeholders work together to enable the sector's operation and growth, event venues play a central role. Event venues were among those most hit by pandemic restrictions. Like elsewhere in the world, national lockdowns in South Africa limited normal operations of the MICE sector (Bartis, Hufkie & Moraladi, 2021). The country adopted an alert level system to manage the gradual reopening of economic sectors. Unfortunately, event venues were generally limited to 50–250 persons indoors, and 50% of capacity for outdoor spaces, depending on the alert level (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022c). This led to the cancellation of many MICE events and the quick shift to virtual events (Bartis, Hufkie & Moraladi, 2020; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022a). The purpose of the following study is therefore to examine

changes that took place in MICE event venues during the pandemic, and the transformation of the sector after the pandemic crisis.

The study contributes to event management literature on venues. The majority of research on event venues has considered them as one of the selection criteria used by meeting planners (Mair, 2010; Welthagen, Slabbert & du Plessis, 2022), with a focus on attributes of conference facilities (Elston & Draper, 2012; Lee, Parrish & Kim, 2015; Nolan, 2020). A few studies have examined venues in terms of sustainability (Mair & Jago, 2010, Orthodoxou et al., 2021; Wenner, Caset & De Wit, 2019; Whitfield, Dioko & Webber, 2014). Most of these studies concentrated the perspectives of event planners or attendees. In contrast, this study investigates event venues, their ability to adapt to the pandemic crises and the resulting evolution of event participation.

2. Literature Review

As the world is becoming increasingly connected, the MICE sector is growing rapidly (Orthodoxou et al., 2021). Business tourism associated with the MICE sector plays a vital role in the global travel and tourism industry (Hooshmand et al., 2023; Mair & Smith, 2021; Zhou, 2021). MICE tourism has grown to become one of the most lucrative forms of tourism globally (Suwannasat et al., 2022). Substantial economic benefits of this tourism segment have captured the attention of governments worldwide and generated competition between venues interested in hosting such events (Marais, du Plessis & Saayman, 2017; Nolan, 2020). Before the pandemic, the MICE sector contributed US\$ 1.5 trillion to the global GDP (Hooshmand et al., 2023). In an effort to capture MICE markets destinations have made significant investments to support the growth of this sector (Suwannasat et al., 2022; Zhou, 2021). This is evident in the construction of purpose-built MICE venues and the expansion of conference and meeting rooms in existing accommodation facilities (Rogerson, 2015, 2018; Zhou, 2021).

Much of the MICE tourism literature is devoted to the study of destination competitiveness (Elston & Draper, 2012; Lee, Lee & Joo, 2015; Nolan, 2020; Welthagen, Slabbert & du Plessis, 2022) and the role played by MICE event venues. According to Elston and Draper (2012), research on this topic dates back to the 1990s, with Nolan (2020) acknowledging Fortin and Ritchie's research (1977) as the first to conceptualise the site selection process in association conferences. Generally, the literature lists a number of factors that make destinations attractive venues to host events, such as accessibility, proximity to key tourism services, capacity, infrastruc-

ture and amenities, and ambiance and aesthetics (Cassar, Whitfield & Chapman, 2020; Elston & Draper, 2012; Lee, Lee & Joo, 2015; Nolan, 2020; Rogerson, 2018; Wenner, Caset & De Wit, 2019).

A few attempts have been made to examine developments in MICE event venues to meet the changing needs of the MICE sector. Authors of these studies point out that MICE planners are increasingly trying to diversify venue options by exploiting unique and non-traditional spaces to provide memorable experiences for their clients and event attendees (Lee, Parrish & Kim, 2015; Wenner, Caset & De Wit, 2019; Whitfield, 2009). According to Whitfield (2009), a growing number of visitor attractions in the UK were starting to offer conference and event facilities. Lee, Parrish & Kim (2015) report a similar trend in the case of sport stadiums in the UK, adding that while these facilities can provide glamorous and unique experiences, they are at a disadvantage when it comes to aspects such as audio-visual equipment, food and beverage services and pricing structures. These studies provide another dimension to understand the role of venues (both purpose-built and potential) in the MICE sector.

3. The Development of MICE Tourism in South Africa: An Overview

South Africa has emerged as a prominent destination for business events, leveraging its diverse offerings, infrastructure, and natural beauty (Marais, du Plessis & Saayman, 2017). Business tourism contributes significantly to the growth of tourism in South Africa (Bartis, Hufkie & Moraladi, 2021; Donaldson, 2013). Indeed, the country's international rankings as a MICE destination, coupled with the individual rankings of cities highlight the importance of MICE tourism for the nation's overall economic development (Marais, du Plessis & Saayman, 2017). According to Zhou (2021), South Africa is the only African destination with four cities (Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban and Tshwane) ranked among the top ten MICE cities of the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA). Available studies highlight the direct and indirect economic benefits of MICE tourism, including revenue generation, job creation, and increased investments (Bartis, Hufkie & Moraladi, 2021; Marais, du Plessis & Saayman, 2017; Rogerson, 2018). The sector fosters the growth of local businesses, stimulates the hospitality industry, and drives regional development through infrastructure improvements (Bartis, Hufkie & Moraladi, 2021; Rogerson, 2015). As a result, the importance of this form of tourism has been recognized by the national government, which is reflected by

policy and consultancy documents and the establishment of the National Conventions Bureau (Donaldson, 2013; Marais, du Plessis & Saayman, 2017; Rogerson, 2015). According to Rogerson (2015), these developments have helped to improve the position of South Africa as an international MICE destination.

The growth of MICE tourism in South Africa can be attributed to several factors, including (but not limited to) the role of Johannesburg as a gateway to other African destinations. The city is home to the headquarters of many international companies and associations, and has invested much in improving accommodation and transportation infrastructure, especially in the infrastructure to host business events (e.g. convention centres) (Donaldson, 2013; Marais, du Plessis & Saayman, 2017; Rogerson, 2015; Zhou, 2021). In an effort to develop the MICE market, several provincial tourism bodies (e.g. provincial convention bureaus) have also built international convention centres. In 2003, the city of Cape Town collaborated with the Western Cape government in order to build the Cape Town International Convention Bureau, which has since made a substantial contribution to the national economy (Cape Town International Convention Centre, 2022). Much earlier, in 1997, a similar initiative led to the establishment of the Durban International Convention Centre (Durban International Convention Centre, 2022). In addition to these purpose-built convention venues, the main MICE cities (Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban and Tshwane) have a diverse range of venue options for MICE events. The following sections are devoted to a study of venues located in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

4. Research Method

Since the main purpose of this study was to examine changes implemented in MICE event venues as a result of the pandemic, the following analysis is based on qualitative data about strategic decisions taken by MICE venue managers and event organisers to ensure that these physical spaces continued to operate during a period when the MICE sector had largely switched to virtual participation. An exploratory approach was adopted in order to examine the adaptation process as the MICE sector started to recover. A purposive sample of respondents was selected to participate in interviews, representing various experiences and backgrounds in the South African MICE sector. 19 interviews were conducted from March to June 2021, when attendance in indoor venues was restricted to 100 people and in outdoor venues — to 250 (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022c). The sample of interviewees (Table 1) included professional conference organisers (PCO), exhibition

and trade show organisers, representatives of national (and provincial) convention bureaus, managers of convention centres, conference venues, suppliers of audio-visual equipment, government representatives and members of trade associations, namely the Southern African Association of the Conferences Industry (SAACI), the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), the Association of African Exhibition Organisers (AAXO), Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE) and the Event Safety Council. These interviewees are located in two key MICE destinations in the country, Cape Town and Johannesburg. However, it is important to note that a number of these interviewees (aside from venue suppliers) conduct their MICE operations in both cities.

Table 1. Study participants

Key informants	<i>n</i>
Tourism governing authority	1
Convention bureaus representatives	3
Industry associations representatives	5
Event organisers	3
Suppliers of audio-visual equipment	2
Venue suppliers	4
Exhibition stand supplier	1
Total	19

Source: Authors

The interview questionnaire was developed after reviewing the literature on tourism crisis impacts, event changes during crises, and adaptability and change in event management. The interviewees were asked to speak about their experiences of adapting to the pandemic, changes that venues had to make and trends expected to emerge as the sector continued its recovery. The interviews, which lasted from 45 to 90 minutes, were recorded (with the permission of the participants). The recordings were transcribed using the Otter.ai software. Transcribed data were coded using the Atlas.ti software and grouped according to themes. Broad themes identified in the data are presented below.

5. Results

5.1. Change in Use of Venue Space

The first theme emerging from the data is the change in how event venue space was used. One important driver of this change was having to comply with pandemic regulations. When MICE event venues were reopened, assuring visitors of their health and safety was a priority. As a result, many venues across the country implemented safety protocols, such as temperature checks upon entry, sanitising stations, and social distancing measures. One conference centre manager said:

A very important thing is we had to get up to speed with what the correct protocol was with regard to COVID compliance. Because the first and most important is that our clients needed to feel safe and secure when coming to our property. They needed to know that everything was correctly put in place that temperatures were taken, that there was an actual trail that we could follow, just in case somebody possibly tested positive, that we could then you know, approach everybody that had been in contact.

MICE event organisers agreed that compliance with COVID-19 protocols was considered as a factor when selecting venues for events. One convention centre manager said:

I think when people or clients are looking to select a venue, I think, probably, the first and biggest question would be ‘Do they have safety process processes in place? And are they COVID-19? compliant?’. I think that’s number one. For any event organiser that wants to book an event venue, nowadays, the first thing is to make sure that the people coming to the conference will be safe.

Many interviewees emphasised the importance of ensuring sector-wide compliance with COVID-19 measures, with some industry association representatives acknowledging the importance of spreading this information and training to all organisations, regardless of membership. The implementation of such protocols is an example of adjustments undertaken by MICE venues. Both venue managers and event planners acknowledge the enhancement of safety procedures in venue processes and resources, as evidenced by the following quotes, one from a venue manager and the other from an event planner:

I think there’s been a huge change in how we plan events because ordinarily you would get all information on the client and the client would arrive and into their venue and

they would conference and it would be just seamless. Now, you have to advise them to come earlier because there's the COVID screening that needs to happen before they can get into the venue. And once they're in the building, they need to make sure that they are sanitised etc. And then make sure that the venue is sealed and when the client arrives, they know that that venue is now ready for them and that no one else has been in that venue. So it's being cleaned and sanitised and ready at each tea and coffee break or a refreshment break. And when they go out, there has to be an area that is socially distanced. You now have to have a COVID compliance officer, making sure that when they come out they need to wear their masks, they need to avoid more than three people around the table, be 1.5 metres apart. And it's tough. It's as people it's not our norm to act this way. So I think it's more of ensuring [that] the clients understand what our processes are and how it's changed.

The biggest change will be the space that we use. But that ties into the safety element, and also the audio-visual that's booked. So it's not going to be the standard audio-visual that's booked anymore. And also the amount of delegates that you're allowed to have on-site. And we're going to have to make sure that there's the two metres between them, that if they can register, how many people are we going to allow into the registration area, how far away must there be by space? How long? You know, we pretty much know we need so many staff to get through 1000 registrations, but that's going to double up because we're going to have to register so many more people. So we're going to have less where we could play to have 1000 coming to register. We're going to have say only 500 but we've got to get through that other 500 as well. So it's going to change staffing. It's going to change audio-visual is going to change the new capacities, how we use the venues, and it's going to effectively change health and safety as well. So it's going to be interesting.

The transition to virtual and hybrid events caused a change in the way rooms and certain spaces in a given venue were used. According to some interviewees, virtual and hybrid events provide opportunities for more creativity in the preparation and selection of venues (and rooms); for example, more rooms and venue facilities can be turned into studios to host virtual events. A conference facility manager added:

So although it's a virtual event, the panellists are all coming to a studio. And that event is actually taking place at a hotel. So the studio is actually going to be in their sort of Gin bar. So then you also have your not-so-obvious conference venues that are also starting to convert some of these spaces into virtual studios.

The growing popularity of virtual and hybrid events had serious implications for venues, which is captured in another major theme concerning the upgrading of facilities in MICE event venues.

5.2. The Upgrading of Event Facilities

The second major change observed in MICE event venues was the upgrading of venue facilities to accommodate and capitalise on the shift to virtual and hybrid events, such as the expansion of Wi-Fi capabilities, and turning rooms into green studios. Many interviewees agreed that virtual and hybrid participation would be a prominent feature of the MICE sector, even after in-person participation became possible again. These views are represented by the following quotes from a manager of an international convention centre and a representative of ICCA:

And I think that from a — I think, from a technology point of view, probably the most important is that we provide state-of-the-art capabilities from a Wi-Fi point of view from a streaming point of view, from a bandwidth point of view to our clients, because I think as I said, it's the virtual component, it's going to be with us forever.

A lot of venues on now, and have been since last year, because of the virtual component, are now converting one or two of the venues into a virtual studio with a whole green screen that the background and sort of maybe one or two permanent cameras in the venues. So although it's again, not the people coming in face to face, at least there is a little bit of revenue coming in for the venues. With the studios that they have. In Cape Town, we've got Cape Town International Convention Centre.

Efforts to upgrade facilities involved collaboration with other stakeholders in the sector, specifically suppliers of audio-visual equipment, as exemplified by the following quotes from a venue manager and a supplier of audio-visual equipment, respectively:

So we very quickly had to learn about the virtual side of things, we had to make sure that our property was set up and collaborating with the correct company, like an IBM, or Gearhouse Group or whoever, to be able to set up a virtual space, so that clients could actually still use our facility. And then when the hybrid elements allowed to be able to have X amount of people on our property and be able to stream out. So we very quickly had to adapt.

And we arranged online training and demos. And in partnership with various venues in in Cape Town, Joburg and Durban we actually set up studios and green rooms that would stay there for when lockdown restrictions are eased. And when, when we went to, I think it was level three, we then invited clients over to come and have a look so that they could experience this studio space.

It is important to acknowledge that facility upgrades were mainly made by medium to large-scale venues, especially international convention centres, which made considerable technological improvements. In contrast, smaller venues, which were able to host MICE events during the pandemic, without a huge loss (in comparison to larger venues), focused more on compliance with regulations. Some interviewees pointed out that since South Africa is a long-haul destination and international convention (and conference) centres want to attract international business participants, these newly acquired facility upgrades helped MICE organisers to select appropriate venues. For instance, a representative of the Cape Town International Convention Centre said:

So there will always be the hybrid component, but we're also doing live streaming during this time, for some reason, I don't know why. But we've even done a virtual site inspection. So if a client can't travel here to see the venue, we've created a platform where they can log in, and we can show them the venue, but it's going to be virtual. And then they get a sense of what the venue looks like, what it can have in it. And we sell the venue that way. And that way, we've actually won, you know, 12 International bids during lockdown. Because I think we had that option because people aren't going to buy what they don't see. So I think that was quite a good way of how we've changed our selling techniques as well.

This is consistent with the wider sector's plan to replenish the event pipeline and continue to bid for future events (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2021a).

5.3. Use of Multiple Venues and Destinations

The pandemic called for a rethinking of how to host events when the number of participants was restricted. MICE organisers were no longer able to host large-scale events in one venue with in-person participation. One of the solutions to this problem was the use of multiple venues and destinations. In this regard, a PCO said:

But what we were trying to do is convince corporates to still have their conference, but to use a couple of venues. So, to be able to use us, for example, and [to] have a regional

event, they fought for 20 or 30. And then for them to possibly have it at another venue in Cape Town, or [at] another one in Johannesburg and [to] have a bit of a hybrid, a hybrid space. The only problem with that is, it's incredibly costly.

The use of multiple venues allowed MICE organisers to host in-person events, with large numbers of delegates in attendance. However, hosting events in different locations within the country changes or even at a few locations in different countries is associated with extra costs. Some interviewees added that this approach was even more challenging and complex if the event was to be organised in a hybrid format. A trade show organiser said:

I think hybrid is going to potentially be the buzz. They are still struggling with [it] a little bit from a technical point of view. And, of course, multi destination [events are] even more difficult. If you've got a hybrid event with one main venue, it's not too bad. But when you start adding venues, typically, again, it becomes quite complicated. Because, let's say you do it in five different African countries, I actually have a client that was considering doing that. And we advised him against it, just from a technical point of view, it becomes very complex, besides the fact that you now need to pay ... staff [at] five different venues, instead of one.

In the case of incentive travel, the interviewees pointed out it was not about using multiple venues or destinations, but rather booking out an accommodation facility. An incentive trip organiser considered:

But use small boutique hotels, where there's nobody else besides your group in the hotel. Use the smaller Safari lodges ... [with] ... eight to 12 rooms, and book it out exclusively. And, that way, you've also got that sense of security. You're not mingling with other people that you don't know where they've been. So that's the recommendation at the moment.

This approach was used as a contemporary solution for this subsector as it ensured minimal contact with other guests.

5.4. Use of Alternative (Non-traditional) Event Spaces

The last theme emerging from the data was the use of alternative spaces for MICE events. This option was MICE organisers' response to the changing expectations of attendees. Indeed, the social and psychological effects of the pandemic have been widely recognised in the literature (Neuburger, & Egger, 2021; Rogerson, & Rog-

erson, 2021). One of the central concerns in the case of event organisation during the pandemic was the problem of ventilation. As a result, more consideration was given to outdoor venues. Further, interviewees involved in destination marketing noted that the brand of South Africa as a destination, which is closely associated with wildlife and wilderness landscapes, is an untapped opportunity for the country's MICE sector after the pandemic. The following quotes represent views of a destination marketing organisation and a conference association:

One of the key insights was that South Africa is such an open destination, there's a lot of open spaces, and it is one of the few destinations that can actually answer to the COVID-19, regulations, around ventilation around being outdoors and hosting more events. That, there was that [international] appeal to say, 'Tell us what you can offer. Because we understand your open spaces, we understand that you can actually host' so if anything, this started pre-empting ideas for us to say, perhaps we need to then dial up, you know, what South Africa is known for openness, you know, a vast landscape that we can now start saying you can actually have a meeting right in front of a, right inside the Kruger National Park surrounded by, you know, surrounded by the big 5¹.

In addition to that, there is also the choice of venue as well. The weather is improving in some parts of the country, and there is the opportunity that exists to find an outdoor venue, or venue that leads itself into nature, for instance. So there is an opportunity to consider that, and some venues in the city. And I think of the Convention Centre, some of the lobby areas or even the back end of the coffee sort of spaces can be utilised effectively. So on that basis, safety, definitely. But it's also the enhancement of the experience. And it's showing that you can meet outdoors, so from the South African perspective, that has sort of allowed people to look at where they choose the venues in the coming weeks or months and into the future as well.

Regarding the shift away from popular or well-known destinations to lesser-visited ones as alternative venues, a destination management company representative said:

And it was we were shocked to say we saw that interest coming in from Mpumalanga. So people were more interested in Mpumalanga. There was mention of Cape Town, which has always been but, Mpumalanga has always been one of our least visited. So if you ask me 'Okay, urban life city life', they said, 'you know, what, because of the crowding, you

¹ The phrase 'Big Five' refers to African lions, leopards, rhinoceros, elephants, and Cape buffalo. It is usually used to market safaris.

know, we are quite sceptical'. So can you see also now the population is starting to play a huge role. Also, things were slowly changing from what we know.

The above quotes illustrate opportunities emerging in the sector. The following section contains a critical discussion of these findings.

6. Discussion

The events industry, especially the MICE sector, is often described as being resilient to crises and change (Aburumman, 2020; Shereni Ncube & Mazhande, 2021; Wenner, Caset & De Wit, 2019). According to previous studies, this resilience can be linked to the sector's adaptability, collaboration, and innovation (Aburumman, 2020; Dillette & Ponting, 2020; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2021a, 2022a). Studies such as Horne et al. (2022) point to the importance of examining supplier experiences and adaptability during periods of significant change and uncertainty. The responses presented in the previous section describe changes implemented and considered by MICE event venues. With the slow and gradual reopening of the events industry, one of the first priorities was to ensure the safety of event attendees. The focus was on minimising the transmission of the virus, according to guidelines developed by the Southern African Communications Industries Association in partnership with the South African Events Safety Council (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2021b). The guidelines stipulated changes to be implemented at various stages of MICE event planning.

In addition to revising floor plans according to the protocols, the transition to virtual and hybrid formats required a number of adaptations in these venues, mainly the upgrading of audio-visual equipment as well as room conversion to green studios to enable the hosting of virtual events. In this way, venues' technical and digital capabilities came to be treated as competitive attributes (Adongo, 2011; Davidson, 2019; Mair, 2010; Nolan, 2020; Welthagen, Slabbert & du Plessis, 2022). According to Davidson (2019), the adoption of new technologies led to the transformation of the MICE sector. The interviews indicate that the facility upgrades were consistent with efforts to maintain the emerging international industry standards and gain a competitive position in the global MICE event market after the pandemic. Some studies have noted the importance of this aspect (Bueno, Urbistondo & Martínez, 2020; Nolan, 2020). The ability to host virtual events emerges as a strong advantage for venues catering to international markets, given the location of South Africa in relation to its key global markets. Being able to offer such services could help destination marketing organisations and convention bureaus attract events

to the country. However, it is important to acknowledge that the extent to which technological capabilities were implemented or upgraded depended on the financial and market realities of different types of venues.

Another strategy for the future was the use of venues in different cities and/or countries and exploring non-traditional venues. The first option has been described as a 'decentralised', 'multi-site', and 'multi-venue' event and has been in existence for many years (Parent & Ruetsch, 2020; Wenner, Caset & De Wit, 2019). According to Wenner, Caset & De Wit (2019), the use of multiple venues has re-emerged over time for several reasons, starting with the practice of only key speakers travelling to venues, to the growing awareness of the environmental impact of MICE events prompting the resurgence of this trend. The present study contributes to this discussion by providing evidence of the impact of (global) health crisis, which led to the re-emergence of this trend.

Some concerns have been raised in the literature regarding the impact of the pandemic and the development of attractive event options for clients through the organisation of hybrid events and multi-destination events (Bartis, Hufkie & Moraladi, 2021; Kramer et al., 2023; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022a). The current study illustrated that these new ways of hosting events have cost and staff implications. Event professionals are the backbone of the industry, and the pandemic drastically changed the working environment and required flexibility, adaptability, and acquiring new skills (Kramer et al., 2023). Additionally, a previous study by Lekgau & Tichaawa, (2021a) found that one of the negative consequences of the pandemic is the loss of key skills, which affects the long-term recovery and sustainability of the industry. This problem exacerbates human resource challenges faced by many tourism destinations in sub-Saharan African countries (Adeniyi & Folarin, 2021). Consequently, more collaborative work is required to address the existing skills gap as well as to ensure the availability of the necessary skills to suit the emerging MICE event environment.

Globally, MICE events have been increasingly associated with efforts to shape destination image and branding (Christofle & Fournier, 2023; Rogerson, 2018; Weru & Ngoroge, 2021). Christofle and Fournier (2023) examined this relationship given that cities are increasingly hosting international events owing to their high level of tourism and urban qualities and that these events influence urban changes (i.e., urban development and renewal). Opinions expressed by study participants indicate that the destination brand of South Africa should be used to provide new experiences for this market and expand the growth of MICE events to wilderness and outdoor venues, thereby broadening their key market (or offering) as well. Generally, discussions with the interviewees illustrate that while virtual and hybrid events broaden the MICE offerings in South Africa (as evidenced by the upgrading

of venue facilities), the various strategic, adaptive, and innovative solutions for MICE venues and the industry at large were centred on returning to predominantly in-person events. This is primarily because such events generate more economic benefits, create employment opportunities, facilitate knowledge sharing, stimulate destination development, and are associated with visitor spending (and the multiplier effect), which supports local economic development.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of the study described above was to understand the process of change in the MICE sector, with emphasis on venue suppliers who had to adapt to new ways of providing services when many venues had to be closed, then were reopened, and switched to virtual and hybrid formats. The study found that maintaining operations during and post-pandemic required addressing emerging concerns related to the sector. When the sector was reopened, many venues in key MICE cities in South Africa had to implement stricter health and safety measures, which caused a fundamental shift in operations and modes of working within these facilities. The importance of risk management in the sector will arguably continue to increase, particularly in the face of its volatility and more health crises predicted to occur in the future (Hall, Scott & Gössling, 2020). Also, the study demonstrated that the transition to virtual and hybrid formats was associated with the upgrading of venue facilities to accommodate virtual and hybrid events. While in-person events are crucial to the recovery of the sector, hybrid events are likely to predominate in the sector because they combine benefits of virtual formats (i.e. time convenience, affordability, prevailing risk perception in travelling and attending events and reduced environmental footprint) with those of in-person events (i.e. networking and collaboration). Consequently, more and more venues are upgrading their infrastructure (and upskilling their personnel). Further, another (adaptive) response of the sector in relation to the venue challenges (i.e. capacity limitation imposed by the government) was the use of multiple venues. This solution could still be used in the planning of international conferences, particularly in the association market where event planners can use multiple venues for their various regional members. Finally, the study found more attention was paid to the potential of non-traditional event spaces, particularly those aligning with South African tourism brand perceptions, driving recovery and redevelopment of MICE venues.

The MICE sector is defined by change, disruption, and innovation, owing to its nature, i.e. its growth and development are (to a large extent) tied to the evolution

of the global society and economy. The years 2020 to 2022 were the most remarkable years of the MICE sector, as characterised by significant changes propelled by the widespread adoption of video conferencing, which led to a change in MICE event planners' expectations in response to changing expectations of clients and attendees.

The study holds offers practical implications for MICE event planners and venue managers, demonstrating the growing importance of health and safety precautions, the need to adapt to digital and hybrid events (as these are emerging as popular event options) as well as the importance of opening up more event spaces into the MICE sector and capitalising on the destination image to provide more unique experiences. While site selection and destination competitiveness was not the subject of the study, the findings suggest these emerging practices influence and shape the MICE sector in its new development phase. Theoretically, this study extends the literature on MICE venues by exploring actions taken by venues during the pandemic and how they have affected the MICE environment. By focusing on South Africa, the study reveals how venue suppliers are able to change and demonstrates the importance of innovation, technological expertise, adaptiveness, and collaboration in their survival and relevance. Also, by focusing on one key stakeholder group, this study further contributes to the understanding of the MICE sector's resilience.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the main limitation of this study, which is connected with the period when data were collected. Because of the way the pandemic unfolded in the following months, and the reopening of the sector's in 2022, MICE event venue requirements had to be altered to meet the changing landscape. This is why future research needs to examine how these changes affect the planning and organisation of hybrid events and their implications for the MICE sector suppliers.

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Dynamiczne zmiany i ożywienie w obiektach eventowych: perspektywy planistów i menadżerów obiektów MICE

Streszczenie. Celem badania było zbadanie zmian zachodzących w obiektach, w których odbywają się wydarzenia MICE w RPA, oraz ich wpływu na ożywienie tamtejszej branży MICE po pandemii COVID-19 i dostosowanie się do nowych warunków. Analiza opiera się na danych jakościowych zebranych podczas wywiadów pogłębionych z osobami zajmującymi się planowaniem wydarzeń MICE oraz zapewnianiem obiektów do ich organizacji. Z wypowiedzi respondentów wynika, że kluczowym pierwszym krokiem umożliwiającym ponowne otwarcie tych obiektów było zapewnienie zgodności z przepisami bezpieczeństwa. W związku z faktem, że stosunkowo szybko wydarzenia zaczęły być organizowane w formie wirtualnej i hybrydowej, wiele obiektów wdrożyło niezbędne ulepszenia, aby umożliwić takie formy uczestnictwa. Wielu planistów wydarzeń rozważało również wykorzystanie wielu obiektów do organizacji wydarzeń na dużą skalę. Kryzys wywołany pandemią ponownie uwidocznił znaczenie nietypowych obiektów i przestrzeni plenerowych jako alternatywnych miejsc do organizacji wydarzeń.

Słowa kluczowe: wydarzenie hybrydowe, wydarzenia MICE, Republika Południowej Afryki, dostawcy, miejsca, wydarzenie wirtualne



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