



The Role of Hybrid Events in Reviving the Hotel Industry in Egypt after the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

After the COVID-19 pandemic, governments obligated travel restrictions that negatively affected the international hotel industry. The events industry is also destructively influenced by the epidemic. However, the hybrid method has become popular. However, in Egypt, there is a significant gap in studying hybrid events during the epidemic. The researchers found that there are no previous studies that investigated hybrid events in Egypt during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the current study is to investigate the role of hybrid events in reviving the Egyptian hotel industry after the COVID-19 pandemic. The data was collected using in-depth interviews through phone calls, with 18 managers responsible for organizing events in five-star hotels in Egypt. The researchers analysed data depending on qualitative analysis. The results identified the facilities, practices, opportunities, and challenges of hybrid events, and distinguished the future trends. The study revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the events industry in Egypt. The most crucial practices are committing precautionary measures, allowing only 50% of the hall's capacity, and decreasing the number of participants. The hybrid way prevents the hotel from incurring losses regarding the cancellation of the events. The major challenges are the deficiency of face-to-face interactions and the need of providing well-equipped halls. The study recommended that hybrid events will be more dominant in the events industry based on political and health changes. Several implications, limitations, and future research suggestions are provided.

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1. Introduction

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak rapidly spread globally. As a result, governments imposed strict restrictions to curb the epidemic of COVID-19 (Ludvigsen & Hayton, 2020; Mohanty et al., 2020). These restrictions included regional

and national lockdowns that forced severe on personal activities, where all employees were urged to work from home, schools and universities closed and moved online, and only crucial businesses (such as supermarkets and pharmacies) stayed open (Richter, 2020). Many industries have

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been affected by the close, among them the tourism and hospitality industries (Kumar & Nafi, 2020).

The hospitality industry is the most sector affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in the world (Kumar & Nafi, 2020; Khorasani, 2021). Hotel organizations were also exposed to a variety of crises, including political and economic events, as well as environmental factors (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019; Kim et al, 2021). A crisis has a negative impact on a destination's image (Parida et al, 2021), which will influence customer decision-making (Wen et al, 2020; Skare et al, 2021). Then, the lower the customers' desire to travel to destinations, the lower the number of arrivals (Rittichainuwat et al., 2020). As a result, the hospitality business has been substantially impacted by COVID-19, in terms of both the ability to organize events and the willingness of participants to attend or not (Hall et al, 2020; Campiranon, 2021).

Previous studies have found that the COVID-19 pandemic produces a slew of challenges for the event industry, including unexpected market decreases, restrictions, and income loss (Margolis et al., 2020; Min Ho and Ming Sia, 2020; Mohanty et al., 2020; Ranasinghe et al., 2020). When the COVID-19 outbreak, rapid changes happened that made everyone in the industry and academics unable to design a cohesive recovery plan (Sanchez et al, 2021; Khorasani, 2021). According to the Nilsson (2020) study, 12,500 professionals from the hotel and event industries gathered digitally on 16 April 2020, to observe Global Meeting Industry Day in an online event. Participants came from the world (Canada, USA, Mexico, India, Argentina, United Kingdom, Philippines, Colombia, Singapore, Kenya, Portugal, Croatia, Malaysia, Brazil, Finland, Denmark, etc.) (Nilsson, 2020).

This event was also an attempt to beat the world record, which was not broken, as well as a chance for the industry to come together and show solidarity for one another during this terrifying time of epidemic (Simons, 2019; Kour et al, 2020). Approximately 62% of the 7086 survey respondents projected that most events would become hybrid, and 17% predicted that demand for virtual events will increase once the crisis is passed (Nilsson, 2020).

In Egypt, hospitality is a major sector with strong linkages to many parts of the economy. More than 50% of tourists' expenditure is on accommodation and food and beverages, including restaurants and

transportation (Raouf et al, 2020; AL-Said & Aziz, 2021). In other countries, tourism has also been subject to periodic downturns. In March 2020, with COVID-19 beginning to spread in Europe, tourism declined sharply in Egypt between 70 and 80 % of hotel bookings being cancelled (Salem et al, 2021; Kozmal & Abuzeid, 2021). Due to the pandemic's infectious nature, Egypt has implemented several limitations, including a lockdown (AL-Said & Aziz, 2021).

The Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions (MICE) industry has benefited greatly, as it is an important and rising segment of the tourism industry with significant potential (Chinazzi et al., 2020; Cao et al, 2020). The industry includes multiple areas of hospitality services such as hotels, food and beverage, catering, convention service, convention facility supply, transportation, tourism, retail, and entertainment and so plays a significant role in a destination's local economy (Ranasinghe et al, 2020; Gaye et al, 2021).

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 outbreak has brought our world to a halt with many negative effects, and there is an increased risk of a global recession and significant job losses in the hospitality industry (Madray, 2020; Kim et al, 2021). In 2020, United Nations World Tourism Organization expected a continuous increase in international tourism to reach 1.8 billion international tourist arrivals by 2030. However, after the pandemic, United Nations World Tourism Organization (2021) confirmed that the number of international tourist arrivals fall by 20% to 30% in 2021, which translates into a loss of between 300 to 450 billion USD in international tourism revenue globally (Raouf et al, 2020; Salem et al, 2021).

Many studies have explored hybrid events after the COVID-19 pandemic in many western countries, particularly the United States (e.g., Madray, 2020& Garg, 2022) and the United Kingdom (e.g., Ranasinghe et al., 2020& Ziakas et al, 2021). However, there is still a significant gap in investigating the issue in the Egyptian hotel industry. After reviewing all the published papers in 2020, 2021, and 2022, the researchers found that there are no previous studies that investigated hybrid events in Egypt during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, there is a need to uncover the topic and fill the above-mentioned research gap.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the role of hybrid events in reviving the hotel industry in Egypt after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study aims to achieve five objectives: determine facilities for hybrid events, explore the practices of hybrid events, identify opportunities for hybrid events, uncover challenges of hybrid events, and distinguish future trends of hybrid events. The questions of the current study are as follows:

- What are the facilities for hybrid events?
- What are the practices of hybrid events?
- What are the opportunities for hybrid events?
- What are the challenges of hybrid events?
- What are the future trends of hybrid events?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Concept of Hybrid Event

The hybrid concept is currently popular in academic discourse, with numerous scholars in different fields expounding their ideas concerning hybrid (AL Sayyad, 2001; Triyason et al., 2020). A hybrid is mentioned as something that is a mixture of two very different things the hybrid is used to describe a method of working that includes sometimes existence physically and sometimes existence at a distance using the Internet (Tyagi et al., 2021; Garg, 2022).

A hybrid event is characterized as a live event with components of a virtual event or an online component (Livina et al, 2020; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022). Hybrid combines physical and virtual events that typically run concurrently and include overlapping content and interactive components (Brown, 2021). Hybrid events are a new type of event that demands meeting planners to push their creativity, planning, execution, and measurement skills by combining technology with traditional live events to generate new experiences and content distribution systems (Simons, 2019; Nica & Luceanu, 2020). Therefore, a hybrid event is an event that takes place in a physical location but is simultaneously broadcast online (Badurina et al, 2018; Hayton & Blundell, 2021). The speakers, experts, and panellists are mainly at the physical location but may also attend online (Hanaei et al, 2020; Hagen, 2021).

2.2. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Event Industry in Hotels

International, regional, and local travel restrictions had an immediate impact on national economies, including tourism systems, such as international travel, domestic tourism, day visits, and segments as diverse as air travel, cruises, public transportation, lodging, cafes, restaurants, conventions, festivals, meetings, and sporting events (Forbes et al, 2020; Mallapaty, 2020). As a result of the crisis, international air traffic slowed dramatically, and several countries forced travel bans, closed borders, or instituted quarantine periods, and international and domestic tourism fell sharply for weeks (Li et al, 2020; Disimulacion, 2021). Countries hurried to send customers home, involving hundreds of thousands of individuals from all over the world in the case of major outbound markets (Gajjar & Parmar, 2020; Lade et al, 2020).

Travel and tourism have long been associated with several dangers, difficulties, and severe shocks (Steene, 1999; Aburumman, 2020). One such disaster is the COVID-19 epidemic, which has had a significant impact on the global economy, especially tourism (He et al., 2020; Lee et al, 2021). Unfortunately, tourism is one of the pandemic's biggest casualties (Gajjar & Parmar, 2020). Flight cancellations, hotel and tourist site closures, and other restrictions were implemented (Chang et al, 2020; Gursoy & Chi, 2020).

COVID-19 raised several issues concerning the event industry (Livina et al, 2020; Rwigema, 2020). Following the closure of the national border, a slew of restrictions was imposed on the tourism industry, including the cancellation of all public indoor events, the prohibition of outdoor gatherings, the closure of all museums, cinemas, gyms, restaurants, and bars, as well as restrictions on international passenger travel and table spacing (Ranasinghe et al, 2020; Fong et al, 2020). Furthermore, COVID-19's disruption has had a significant impact on the event industry (Haque, 2021). Hundreds of events have been stopped or delayed worldwide since the outbreak began and waking up to the news of cancellations or postponements have become the new normal (Aburumman, 2020).

Most physical events and meetings have been cancelled or postponed indefinitely, causing uncertainty in the industry (Gosling., 2020). Events are short-lived and sensitive to environmental and social crises (Clark et al, 2020). This severe sensitivity due to COVID-19 has

greatly affected the hospitality and tourism industry (Lau et al, 2020; Ziakas et al., 2021). As a result of widespread concern, most major public gatherings and events have been cancelled or postponed globally (Ippolito et al., 2020). The event sector is severely impacted by regional and national "lockdowns" and limitations (Richter, 2020; Mohanty et al., 2020). As previously mentioned, cancelling all events will result in an existential crisis for the event industry, which will take many years to recover from (Mia and Putul, 2020; Haque, 2021). Given that technology has long been an important aspect of events (Brown and Stokes, 2021), and the changes brought on by the COVID-19 problem, the event sector has quickly shifted to online platforms. As a result, hybrid event platforms have exploded in popularity (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2021; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022).

2.3. The Role of Hybrid Events in Reviving the Hotel Industry after the COVID-19 Pandemic

Hybrid events and digital engagement are becoming an increasingly regular part of our daily life as one of the good side effects (Ogbeide, 2020; Dousay et al, 2021). Technology's accessibility, digital capabilities, and social acceptability have benefited from focusing on it (Sox et al, 2014). Many activities are now organized digitally, organizations are becoming more decentralized, and events are becoming more movable and less tied to a fixed location (Rubinger et al, 2020). As a result, the hybrid way is projected to have a high potential for assisting the tourism and hospitality industries' recovery, because locals are strongly advised or obliged to stay at home and limit unnecessary trips during the COVID-19 epidemic (Fong et al, 2020; Hall et al, 2020). Tourism and hospitality industries have responded to and adapted to the problems of COVID-19 by leveraging new technology (Gossling, 2021; Werner et al., 2022).

Hybrid events flourished during the COVID-19 pandemic by providing a safe and adaptable platform that has adjusted to almost all the consumers' limitations (Saatci et al, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid events were widely employed in numerous organizations, and as most of the participants indicated, they will continue to be a significant component of the whole event business (Saatci et al., 2019; Roy et al., 2020). These organizations feel that hybrid events

are the future of the event industry because they are a hybrid of virtual and physical events that incorporate the best aspects of each (Clark et al, 2020; Mia and Putul, 2020). The experience, related to audience interaction with the existing event, is a critical aspect for hybrid events to succeed (Quinn, 2013; Smit & Melissen, 2018).

The level of involvement in a hybrid event can be increased by combining audience members at the venue with those who are present online (Hanaei et al, 2020; Hagen, 2021). Technology will be utilized to assist, provide value, and enhance the experience for both on-site and online participants (Baum, 2020; Khorasani, 2021). Hybrid events combine the flexibility and accessibility of virtual events with the prospect of connection and engagement that can only be found at an in-person event (Baum, 2020; Howarth, 2021). Then, organizations will compete for a high degree of participation and flexible expertise (Kang et al, 2021; Park & Jones, 2021). For those who join online, there will be a demand in the market for meetings that work and feel like physical engagement (Dousay et al, 2021). Checking the websites of several event and trade show planning companies reveals that many of those with plans for the coming months have virtual and hybrid meetings planned for the whole of 2021 and into 2022 (Raouf et al, 2020; Brown, 2021).

The hybrid platform can link a live event and a larger online audience (Sox et al, 2017; AL-Said & Aziz, 2021; Garg, 2022). Moreover, although restrictions are gradually lifted and facilitated, they are still imposed on meetings and events (Ludvigsen & Hayaton, 2020; McCloskey et al., 2020; Garg, 2022). Therefore, event planners will continue to be required to host online audiences, and hybrid events will offer on-site integration and online sharing (Brown et al, 2021; Gossling et al, 2021). In the face of disruption, virtual and hybrid events emerge as two more possibilities to explore (Simons, 2019; Sabri et al, 2021). As a result, many meetings and conferences are being reinvented as hybrid events, and this format is likely the best option in these difficult times (Sox et al, 2016). As budgets tighten in the aftermath of the financial crisis, more organizers increasingly see video conferencing and hybrid meetings as cost-effective choices when hosting events (Lau et al, 2020; Lee et al, 2021). Hybrid events are mostly used as a good substitute for exhibitors and attendees who

are affected by the recession (Rubinger et al, 2020; Lekkau & Tichaawa, 2021; Werner et al., 2022)

3. Methodology

3.1 *The Sample and Data Collection*

The present study intended to investigate the state of hybrid events in the Egyptian hotel industry after the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the study is to explore the role of hybrid events in reviving the hotel industry in Egypt after the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve the purpose of the current study, the researchers discovered facilities, practices, opportunities, challenges, and future trends of hybrid events in the Egyptian hotel industry. To establish suitable standards for selecting the appropriate sample, the researchers made a pilot study to identify the employees responsible for organizing special events such as conferences, meetings, and exhibitions in hotels in Egypt.

It was found that after the COVID-19 pandemic, the hotel's management decided to reduce the number of employees. The managing positions that take charge of organizing special events in the hotels in Egypt are marketing and sales managers, banquets and events managers, quality and development managers, and food and beverage managers. The current study collected data from 18 managers who are working for five-star hotels and are from different positions (7 banquets and events managers, 5 marketing and sales managers, 4 quality and development managers, and 2 food and beverage managers). The researchers collected data from managers who are working in five-star hotels located in different regions in Egypt such as the Red Sea (8 hotels), Cairo (6 hotels), and Luxor (4 hotels). They are the best-qualified respondents in the hotels to answer questions about the special events after the pandemic, facilities practices, opportunities, and challenges of hybrid events after the COVID-19 epidemic, and future trends of hybrid events. After the eighteen interviews, no additional themes manifested. As such, saturation was considered to have been achieved, and data collection was stopped (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016).

The current study adopted the qualitative research strategy. To collect qualitative data, the researchers performed in-depth and semi-structured interviews that helped researchers explain, understand, and explore respondents' opinions. An interview is a crucial qualitative data collection tool that usually

contains open-ended questions to collect in-depth information (Creswell 2014; Neuman 2014). Participants are encouraged and promoted to talk comprehensively about the topic under study (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009; Alshenqeeti, 2014). An interview is not mandatory for a meeting, but it can be performed over phone calls, or over various forms of applications supported by only audio or both audio and video without the physical presence (Saunders et al., 2016). The researchers in the current study conducted semi-structured interviews to discover: the state of special events after the COVID-19 pandemic, facilities needed for hybrid events halls, practices in hybrid events after the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities of hybrid events after the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges of hybrid events after the COVID-19 pandemic, and future trends of hybrid events in the Egyptian hotel industry. The current study collected data by conducting 18 in-depth interviews through phone calls, from January to March 2022, and the researchers wrote a transcript of every interview. The duration of calls ranged between 11 to 25 minutes.

3.2. *Data Analysis*

After collecting all the opinions and interviewees' comments, the researchers analysed data depending on qualitative analysis and broke down each transcript into small parts. Qualitative analysis means analysing the interview to recognize the key themes that arise from the interviewees' responses. The researchers adopted thematic and comparative analysis; both are closely connected. In the thematic analysis, data is analysed by theme, which is a highly inductive analysis (Dawson 2007). Using comparative analysis, data from different respondents is compared (Dawson 2007). The study identifies and analyses the answers of the respondents, summarizes the data to conclude findings and identifies the objectives of the study.

3.3. *Validity and Reliability*

To verify the content validity and reliability of the interview, the interview questions were reviewed by two hospitality professors and three marketing and sales managers to recognize interview deficiencies, formatting, and design concerns. They suggested a question about the future trends of hotel hybrid events in Egypt. They also recommended reformatting the question of

practices: What are the adopted practices of hybrid events in your hotel?

4. Finding and results

The researchers pointed to hotel managers as 1, 2, 3 till 18. The numbers represent the anonymous recognition of the 18 interviewees. Furthermore, they added the abbreviations of the positions: B&E for banquets and events managers; M&S for marketing and sales managers; Q&D for quality and development managers; and F&B for food and beverage managers. Their comments and responses are explained as follows.

4.1. Special events after the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the industry of conferences and special events in two ways; delaying or cancelling the events and the reduction of the number of employees. On the one hand, most of the interviewees agreed that after the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that COVID-19 is a pandemic, the countries have imposed travel restrictions, and hence, all the events and special occasions in hotels in Egypt were cancelled or delayed for three months from March to June 2020. Others stated that the events were postponed for more than three months after the reduction of travel restrictions. Specifically, interviewees (5M&S) and (18F&B) confirmed that the events were postponed to October 2020 and interviewees (6Q&D) and (7M&S) declared that they delayed the events to January 2021. Interviewees (1M&S) and (2B&E) asserted that the hotels gradually started organizing special events in July 2020. Furthermore, interviewees (3B&E), (4Q&D), (6Q&D), (10B&E), and (14B&E) added that they delayed around 35, 12, 25, 7, and 13 events, respectively, that were planned to occur during the period from April to August 2020.

During the pandemic, several companies stopped financial support to conferences and special events (Interviewee 15B&E).

On the other hand, interviewees (2B&E) and (10B&E) declared that during the pandemic the hotels in Egypt dramatically decrease the number of specialized event organizers to reduce costs.

The hotel management decided to reduce the number of employees responsible for organizing special events, and the food and beverage manager has become responsible for this task (interviewee 17M&S).

Months later, hotels have continued organizing conferences and special events.

At the beginning of 2021, particularly during the first 3 months of the year, the hotel started hosting a very limited number of conferences and special events fearing the spreading of the infection of COVID-19 (interviewee 7M&S).

Interviewees (4Q&D) and (10B&E) declared that the hotels adopted hybrid events after reducing travel restrictions, and combined participants with actual attendance and others with a virtual presence. In the same vein, interviewees (5M&S) and (6Q&D) added that they deal with special events organizing companies to arrange the events and conferences in a hybrid way.

Hybrid event way has become a crucial and effective alternative during the pandemic and travel restrictions and afterwards (interviewee 16F&B).

4.2. Facilities in hybrid events halls after the COVID-19 pandemic

All the interviewees mentioned several technical facilities that the COVID-19 pandemic made essential for the industry of conferences and special events in hotels. These facilities aim to ensure the efficiency of organizing hybrid events. Interviewees (1M&S), (2B&E), (4Q&D), (5M&S), (7M&S), (8B&E), (11M&S), and (15B&E) said that to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and continue organizing special events, the hotels upgraded the events and conferences' halls with new infrastructure, innovative audio, and video conference devices to cope with the trend of hybrid events. Interviewees (7M&S), (9Q&D), (10B&E), (12Q&D), (13B&E), (14B&E), and (18F&B) agreed that they fortified the internet speed, set up platforms that enable sharing of videos and multimedia of the event with the participants who couldn't attend it.

The hotel equipped 8 halls with new devices to host hybrid events such as conferences, exhibitions, and meetings (interviewee 14B&E).

4.3. Practices of hybrid events after the COVID-19 pandemic

All the interviewees confirmed that the hotels followed precautionary measures announced by WHO such as committing social distancing, wearing masks, and sanitizing with alcohol. There are other several practices explained as follows.

The hotel, at the beginning of 2021, allocated 60% of the guest rooms for events participants, and allow only 50% of the hall's capacity (interviewee 8B&E).

The 50% halls' capacity and the essentiality of the rapid test to enhance the early detection of the infection are the most important practices (interviewee 17M&S).

The hotel allows only 25% capacity inside halls and meeting rooms (interviewee 14B&E).

Interviewees (1M&S), (9Q&D), (11M&S), (13B&E), and (18F&B) clarified that the hotel set some conditions for participation in the special events such as decreasing the number of actual participants to be very limited and the rest of them attend virtually.

The hotel divides the participants into small groups to avoid overcrowding, and at the same time, the hotel encourages virtual participation (interviewee 3B&E).

Other crucial practices are showing the certificates of the COVID-19 vaccine and negative COVID-19 test and sanitizing halls. Interviewees (7M&S) and (14B&E) insisted that the hotels confirm sanitizing the halls, doors, microphones, chairs, etc.

The hotel doesn't allow participation in events inside the hotel for people showing symptoms of the infection, or people not presenting certificates of taking the COVID-19 vaccine (interviewee 15B&E).

It is essential to provide the hotel with certificates that confirm all the participants are negative COVID-19 tests before the event (interviewee 7M&S). The hotel has a medical team to ensure the healthcare for event participants (interviewee 17M&S).

Interviewees (11M&S) and (13B&E) agreed that the hotel for more than one year had not become dependent on self-service during breaks; however, instead, the staff were presenting food and beverages to the participants.

Interviewee (12Q&D) demonstrated that the hotel employed permanent technicians responsible for technical support when any errors occurred during the hybrid events.

4.4. Opportunities for hybrid events after the COVID-19 pandemic

After the pandemic and the dependence on the hybrid method, several opportunities are presented to the events industry. Interviewees (2B&E), (5M&S), (6Q&D), (9Q&D), (11M&S), (12Q&D), and (14B&E) asserted that the hybrid way prevents the hotel from incurring losses regarding the cancellation of conferences, meetings, and exhibitions after the epidemic.

Holding events during the pandemic represents triumph evidence of the hotels' ability to overcome the crisis (interviewee 3B&E).

Interviewees (1M&S), (2B&E), and (12Q&D) demonstrated that hybrid events decrease the possibility of spreading the COVID-19 infection by reducing the number of actual attendees and following precautionary measures and social distance. Interviewees (7M&S), (10B&E), and (12Q&D) confirmed that the hybrid events, basically, save costs such as accommodation, food services, and transportation. Interviewees (6Q&D), (7M&S), and (8B&E) agreed that the hybrid method enables the virtual attending of a larger number of participants who could prevent themselves from the risk of infection. Interviewees (11M&S) and (13B&E) agreed that hybrid events strengthen the competitive advantage and enhance the image of hotels succeeding in the hybrid events organizing process. Interviewees (4Q&D), (8B&E), and (12Q&D) confirmed that the hybrid way enables people to participate in events regardless of the venue and break geographical barriers specifically after closing.

4.5 Challenges of hybrid events after the COVID-19 pandemic

The challenges facing the hybrid events after COVID-19 are explained as follows. Interviewees (1M&S) and (12Q&D) said that the hotel is facing challenges related to the fear of spreading the infection between participants.

Interviewees (17M&S), (3B&E), and (4Q&D) demonstrated that the events industry, after the COVID-19 and the essentiality of adopting the hybrid way, are confronting costs problems; as there is a persistent need of providing halls equipped with different technological facilities to enable hybrid meetings, exhibitions, and conferences.

Interviewees (2B&E), (6Q&D), and (11M&S) confirmed that slow internet speed or internet service interruption in hotels are also a barrier to holding a successful hybrid event.

Interviewees (15B&E), (11M&S), and (17M&S) declared that there is a lack in hotel halls of satisfactory and strong infrastructure and modern facilities such as visual and audio appliances.

Interviewee (9Q&D) insisted that weak technological support when errors occur results in an obstruction or prevention to complete the hybrid event.

Interviewees (2B&E) and (15B&E) explained that one of the important challenges is the inability of most of the participants to utilize the on-site technological appliances and off-site technological applications required for hybrid events.

Interviewees (3B&E) said that “one of the major challenges is the deficiency of face-to-face and social interactions between participants in the hybrid events and virtual attendance compared to actual attendance”.

Interviewees (5M&S), (16F&B), and (14B&E) asserted that several companies and business management are not convinced with the hybrid method regarding the lack of direct relationships between participants and vis-a-vis negotiations.

Interviewees (1M&S), and (18F&B) agreed that the special events industry is fronting issues related to the type of menus and the style of serving food and beverages; because of the disappearance of participants who prefer self-service and open buffet menus, and the hotel management who prefer to serve set menu meals by the hotel staff.

Interviewee (10B&E) stated that the hybrid way is not suitable for some kinds of events such as exhibitions that need actual attendance.

Interviewee (14B&E) emphasized that “the shortage of specialized organizers obstructs the perfect implementation of hybrid events, conferences, and exhibitions”.

4.6. Future trends of hybrid events

The future trends of hybrid events are declared as follows.

It is expected that hybrid events will be more dominant in the events industry based on political and health changes and global issues (interviewee 13B&E).

The hotels have become more dependent on specialized organizing companies or individuals to organize hybrid events (interviewee 6Q&D).

Hotels in Egypt have recognized the essentiality of digital platforms in organizing hybrid events, overcoming geographical barriers, and saving participants’ money and time (interviewee 17M&S).

Hotels are developing in providing well-equipped halls for holding hybrid events (interviewee 18F&B).

Adopting virtual reality software and hardware in hybrid has become crucial (Interviewee 11M&S).

5. Discussion

Generally, the special event industry in Egypt has been affected negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic. First, after the spread of the infection and the announcement by WHO, in March 2020, that COVID-19 is a pandemic, all the special events in Egypt were cancelled or postponed from three months to one year. Moreover, many international companies stopped financing meetings and conferences during the first months of the pandemic. Second, the special events employees in hotels have been dramatically affected, as the hotels decided to lay off many employees to decrease costs. Additionally, the food and beverage managers in some hotels in Egypt have become responsible for this task. As known, food and beverage managers do not have the suitable experience to organize special events such as conferences, meetings, and exhibitions, except for issues related to providing food and beverage. Regarding travel restrictions and the fear of the spreading of the COVID-19 infection, some hotels have begun hosting a limited number of events, while some others have adopted the hybrid way of organizing special events. The hybrid event which combined participants with actual attendance and others with a virtual presence has become a crucial and effective alternative during the pandemic. This result matched the studies of Baum (2020) and Howarth (2021) which have confirmed that hybrid events combine the flexibility and accessibility of virtual events with the prospect of connection and engagement that can only be found at an in-person event. Hybrid events need various technical facilities that are essential to ensure the efficacy of arranging hybrid events. The hotels in Egypt have started to provide facilities such as: renovating the events and conferences’ halls with new infrastructure, offering innovative audio, and video conference devices, fortifying the internet speed, and setting up platforms that enable sharing of videos and multimedia of the event with the participants who couldn’t attend it.

There are numerous practices that the hotels in Egypt have committed to organizing hybrid events. The most important practice is the following precautionary measures announced by WHO such as performing social distancing, wearing masks, and sanitizing halls with alcohol. There are other several practices explained as follows: allow only 25% to 50% of the hall’s capacity, ensure the early detection of the infection depending on the rapid

test, decrease the number of actual participants to be very limited and the rest of them attend virtually, divide the participants into small groups to avoid overcrowding, obligate the participants to show the certificates of the COVID-19 vaccine, doesn't allow participation for people showing symptoms of the infection, depending on the food and beverage staff in presenting food and beverages to the participants instead of self-service, employ permanent technicians responsible for technical support when any errors occurred during the hybrid events.

Several opportunities are presented to the Egyptian hospitality industry when adopting the hybrid way of organizing special events after the epidemic. The hybrid method avoids suffering losses regarding cancellations of conferences, meetings, banquets, and exhibitions. Holding events (hybrid) during the pandemic represents triumph evidence that the hotels in Egypt could overcome the crisis. Further, the hybrid events, by decreasing the number of actual attendees, reduce the likelihood of spreading the COVID-19 infection. The hybrid events save expenses for accommodation, food services, and transportation. Finally, it strengthens the competitive advantage, enhances the image of hotels, and breaks geographical barriers.

Despite the opportunities of the hybrid method in holding special events, it has several challenges. Hotels in Egypt are facing challenges related to costs problems, as there is a constant need of supplying halls equipped with different technological facilities to enable hybrid meetings, exhibitions, banquets, and conferences. The lack of technical support when errors occur results in an obstruction or prevention to complete the hybrid event. The dissatisfactory and weak infrastructure and shortage of modern facilities such as visual and audio appliances. One of the major challenges is the inability of most of the participants to utilize the on-site technological appliances and off-site technological applications required for hybrid events. Slow internet speed or internet service interruption in hotels are also an obstacle to carrying out a successful hybrid event. The shortage of face-to-face and social interactions between participants in the virtual attendance compared to actual attendance. Moreover, the hybrid way is not suitable for some kinds of events such as exhibitions that need actual attendance.

Hybrid events will be more prevalent in the events industry based on political and health changes. This

result came to agree with the findings of Clarke et al. (2020) and Mia and Putul (2020) who concluded that hybrid events are the future of the event industry because they are a hybrid of virtual and physical events that incorporate the best aspects of each. The hotels in Egypt are developing more in providing well-equipped halls and adopting virtual reality software and hardware for organizing hybrid events. The hotels in Egypt will become more dependent on specialized organizing companies or individuals to organize hybrid events.

6. Implications

The results of the current study present crucial recommendations to managers regarding organizing hybrid events in hotels in Egypt after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hotels need to organize hybrid events during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as there is a mix of actual and virtual attendance at the event.

Hotels should adopt precautionary procedures and social distancing when planning hybrid events to limit the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hotels need to set some conditions for participation in special events such as decreasing the number of actual participants to very limited, and the rest attend virtually.

Hotels should depend on specialized organizing companies or individuals to organize hybrid events.

All staff and executive members in charge of venue preparations should be properly trained about the cleaning methods and use of efficient disinfectants. For disease prevention and control, no participants with symptoms of COVID-19 infection should be allowed to attend the event.

7. Limitation and Future Research

The current study has some limitations that can be addressed by future researchers. First, the current study adopted semi-structured interviews with M&S managers, B&E managers, Q&D managers, and F&B managers. Hence, future research can adopt questionnaire forms to obtain statistical data from the respondents. Second, the results of the study were based on one method into organize events, which is a hybrid. Thus, future research should conduct on other methods into organizing events like virtual method. Third, the current study focused on practices, facilities, challenges, opportunities, and future trends of hybrid events in hotels after the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore,

future research could highlight the other significant factors such as perceived value and satisfaction of hybrid method experience. Lastly, the data gathered for answering the research questions was relevant to only one crises, which is COVID-19. So, future research should uncover the significance of hybrid method during different types of crisis (e.g., terrorism, actual site damage, natural disasters, and other health risk crises).

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