
The effects of virtual business events on attitudes and behavioural intentions of Generation Z

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THE AIMS OF THE PAPER

The virtual form of business events has grown in popularity as a result of smart technology. The MICE industry is being challenged by the emergence of a new type of consumer on the business events market: members of Generation Z, who were born in the age of digital technology and some of them are currently enrolled in undergraduate programmes at universities. The relationship between members of Generation Z studying in higher education and virtual events is determined by unique characteristics. This paper focuses on identifying virtual business event challenges from the perspective of undergraduate students, as the younger generation becomes more involved in business events.

METHODOLOGY

Primary research was conducted among students enrolled in undergraduate economics programmes at two Hungarian universities. Our quantitative research reveals (1) roles in which university students tend to appear at virtual and face-to-face (F2F) business events and (2) lessons drawn regarding the organisation of virtual business events from the perspective of university students. We used an online self-filled questionnaire survey with 556 valid responses.

MOST IMPORTANT RESULTS

The main characteristic of Generation Z is their high level of knowledge of technology and their dependence on it. The results of the research show that students attend virtual business events as participants and speakers alike and that they find such events at least as useful as F2F business events. Nevertheless, it can be seen that university students represent a business potential for event organisers. Although university students found virtual events to be slightly more efficient, they still consider F2F events important.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of these findings, managerial implications are defined so that they represent innovative technologies and can encourage Generation Z members to become more involved in business events.

Keywords: MICE industry, virtual business events, Generation Z, higher education, smart technology

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INTRODUCTION

The Meetings-, Incentives-, Conferences- & Congresses- and Exhibitions (MICE) industry is one of the important sectors of the national economy (HTA 2017). The Hungarian government has treated the business events as a priority tourism product (HTA 2017), so it was important that the industry could restart as soon as possible after restrictions had been lifted. In the international competition on the market of association meetings Hungary and Budapest have strengthened their positions (ICCA 2022, UIA 2022), therefore Hungary lends itself as an excellent location for us to conduct our research.

Our research focuses on analysing two trends in the field of business events. One of these important trends is an age-related transformation of the target audience of business events and an increased presence of Generation Z at business events (Pavlučević *et al.* 2022). The other unavoidable trend is the popularity of virtual business events in the international events market (Le & Yung 2022). Based on these trends, our research reveals (1) roles in which university students tend to appear at virtual and face-to-face (hereafter referred to as F2F) business events and (2) lessons drawn regarding the organisation of virtual business events from the perspective of university students. Our research aims to examine the presence of students at F2F and virtual business events. Using the results of that examination, our other goal is to identify the most important characteristics of virtual business events from the perspective of Generation Z, as well as to determine a relationship between the events industry and higher education. As a theoretical contribution, our research complements international literature with the scientific results derived by combining the examination of the two areas. In our study, we formulate practical suggestions for organisers, helping them involve Generation Z in the process of active participation in virtual and F2F business events.

THE PRESENCE OF GENERATION Z AT BUSINESS EVENTS

More and more members of Generation Z are present in the world of work; they will represent 27.0% of the global workforce by 2025 (Cvent 2023). They can participate in various forms of F2F business events (corporate business trips, meetings, plant visits, study tours, as well as professional and scientific conferences) related to their work. The main characteristic of Generation Z is their high level of knowledge of technology and their dependence

on it; unlike previous generations, they did not live in a world without the Internet (Ozkan & Solmaz 2015). Compared to previous generations members of Generation Z have grown up in a completely transformed social and technological world, where being online and working from home have become commonplace (Csepregi - Csanády 2021).

Members of Generation Z are active problem solvers, independent learners, and social justice advocates (Eckleberry-Hunt *et al.* 2018) and this affects their learning methods as well. Generation Z students prefer an independent learning style along with visual and kinaesthetic learning. Problem-based learning is an ideal opportunity to fill in gaps in critical thinking and persistence, as well as to emphasize the strengths of Generation Z (Seibert 2021).

There are many opportunities to involve university students in the business events sector. There is a wide range of pedagogical methods enabling this kind of reflection, including internships, practical projects, case studies, and active participation in events (Murphy *et al.* 2012). The transfer of knowledge plays an important role in higher education (Juhász *et al.* 2022). One of the platforms for this can be the professional conferences organised at universities.

However, a low number of university students participate in professional conferences (Flaherty *et al.* 2018). In order to overcome students' anxiety, mentoring would be useful for helping them get prepared for conferences (Mabrouk 2009). A sense of belonging to the community is crucial for Generation Z, so engagement should be ensured even in virtual events. For example, by allowing audiences to engage in the chat box, in breakout rooms, or in a live Q&A (Wizard Studios 2023).

Members of Generation Z are active users of Instagram and other social networks where they can gain a social experience (Bulović *et al.* 2023). According to a fall 2020 survey's results among respondents of Generation Z worldwide, 66.3% of respondents said they would likely interact with business events on LinkedIn, while 66.1% said they would do so on Instagram. Email was cited by 59.2% of respondents, while 35.8% said they would interact with business events on YouTube (Statista 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Currently, students in higher education are potential participants in business events, since when they enter the labour market, in which they may be present even while pursuing their higher education studies, their presence at business events (e.g., business meetings,

workshops, conferences) becomes possible and sometimes necessary. The purpose of this study is to reveal the forms in which undergraduate students in the field of economics appear at business events, as well as their motivation for and expectations towards them. After exploring the relevant literature, we formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: In what roles do university students with an active legal relationship appear at virtual and F2F business events?

RQ2: What lessons can be identified regarding the organisation of virtual business events from the perspective of university students?

Selected from among non-random sampling forms, convenience sampling was used, which does not ensure representativeness. The quantitative research was conducted among Hungarian university students studying undergraduate courses of economics (BA/BSc) in Budapest. Their passive student status was considered an exclusion criterion. Using a standardised, online self-filled questionnaire, the survey was carried out among students at the Corvinus University of Budapest and Budapest Metropolitan University, with the former university prioritising theoretical training and the latter preferring project-based training in their courses.

Members of the examined generation grew up at the time when e-learning appeared and became popular, so using an online self-filled questionnaire proved to be relevant for assessing their experiences and expectations. The referenced method is also supported by the results of research conducted by Fricker and Schonlau (2002), who found no difference in validity between the Internet and traditional research methods. Mertler (2002) noted that in the case of students, online data acquisition is more effective than traditional information collection methods. Some researchers (Ilieva *et al.* 2002) even argue that using an online questionnaire survey will potentially guarantee a better response rate; but there is no consensus among researchers on this issue.

The preliminary questionnaire was pretested on a convenience sample of 20 respondents for comprehension of the instructions and terminology. All respondents had attended MICE events before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the findings and suggestions of the pre-test group, the questionnaire was accepted and formatted. A total of 30 questions were included in the questionnaire, covering business event attendance patterns as participants and speakers before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. The questions covered all types of MICE events. With the help of the questionnaire, we can explore the advantages and disadvantages of virtual business events. There were some closed-ended

questions, and some statements were rated on a 5-point Likert-like scale from 5 = *strongly agree* to 1 = *strongly disagree*. Six questions covered the demographic characteristics of research participants (e.g., gender, residential region, education, age). We carried out our analysis by using the IBM SPSS statistical software version 27.0, applying descriptive statistical methods for processing, and performing cross-tabulation analyses and statistical tests.

DATA SOURCES AND DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Responses were requested on a voluntary and anonymous basis between the second week of September 2021 and the middle of December 2021 during the study period at the university. According to data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO) (2022), in the 2021/2022 academic year, 112,200 students took part in undergraduate programmes in Hungary, excluding foreign students. The online questionnaire was filled out by 676 people on a voluntary basis, of whom the answers of 120 people proved to be impossible to evaluate due to incomplete filling, so 556 valid responses were processed, that is, 82.3% of the responses could be used for the analysis. Examining the entire population, the response rate was 0.5%.

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are illustrated in Table 1, which shows that women are overrepresented, as they account for 67.8% of the respondents. Based on their age, the majority of respondents (89.9%) are members of Generation Z, which corresponds to the average age of undergraduate students at Hungarian universities (HCSO 2022). A minimum number of Generation Y members also attend undergraduate courses, as they are completing their higher education studies under the correspondence system, so they were also included in the sample to a small extent (10.1%). Further examining the demographic factors, it can be established that 90.5% of respondents live in the capital or a city in Hungary.

The sample included only undergraduate students pursuing studies with an economic focus. 397 of the students surveyed had participated in business events before March 2020. 90.4% of respondents participated only in domestic business events, 1.5% of them participated only in international business events, while 8.1% of the students questioned participated in Hungarian and international business events.

It can be beneficial for students to participate in business events even during their years at university, thereby building their professional relationships and supporting their future careers, whether they are in

Table 1. Profile of sample (N = 556)

Profile characteristics	Frequency	%
Gender		
Female	377	67.8
Male	179	32.2
Generation groups		
Gen Y (born between 1980 and 1994)	56	10.1
Gen Z (born between 1995 and 2009)	500	89.9
Residence location		
Capital	258	46.4
City	245	44.1
Village	53	9.5

Source: edited by the authors

academia or the competitive sector. Analysing data from the questionnaire survey, it can be concluded that, before the coronavirus pandemic, 71.4% of the respondents had participated in F2F business events, while 9.7% of them had participated as speakers. Of business events realised as F2F events, students had mostly participated in exhibitions / fairs (258 mentions), workshops / further education / trainings (214 mentions) and corporate meetings (109 mentions), however, participation in conferences / congresses / symposia (99 mentions) had also been popular among students in the pre-Covid era. Each student could mark their participation in several types of events in the questionnaire, as it is important to get to know all types of events that are relevant for students. Among business events organised in virtual form, workshops / further education / trainings were popular also during the pandemic (130 mentions), although a smaller proportion of respondents participated in them compared to events organised in F2F form. A new type of business event, the webinar, appeared in the online space, which immediately became popular among students, as 52 students participated in 106 webinars. 34.3% of the virtual events in which students participated took the form of a webinar, and each student participated in two webinars on average.

Regarding the topic of business events, we used the categories of ICCA, which analyses association conferences and congresses, as a basis. This international association distinguishes 25 topics, of which trade was considered the most popular business event topic in our primary research (33.1%) for students appearing only as participants at business events. Other business event topics to attract students included scientific (32.2%), technological (16.2%), agricultural

(8.5%), cultural (5.3%), industrial (4.4%), and sports and leisure (0.3%) themes in the case of F2F events. For students participating also as speakers at business events, the scientific business event offered the most popular themes (42.4%). Business events with trade as a topic (30.5%) were also attractive to students participating at events as speakers, followed by business events featuring technological and cultural (6.8%-6.8%), industrial and agricultural (5.1%-5.1%), and finally sports and leisure (3.3%) themes.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Virtual business events are becoming more and more important, and they were the only possibility for the transfer of knowledge, exchange of experience and interaction between professionals during the time of travel restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the ban on the organisation of F2F events. Despite the advanced technological skills of Generation Z, the virtual environment did not motivate students to participate in more business events. Fewer students took part in virtual business events as participants and speakers (55.6% as participants, 7.6% as speakers) than in F2F events (71.4% as participants, 9.7% as speakers). Slightly more than half (55.6%) of the surveyed university students participated in virtual business events. Pearson correlation was used to examine students' willingness to act as speakers at virtual events (Table 2). The correlation coefficient is significant, since $p < 0.05$. Its value is 0.243, which indicates a weak positive relationship between the two variables, so even though students participate in virtual business events, their role as speakers at these events has not increased significantly.

Table 2. Pearson correlations between willingness to present at virtual and F2F events

		Willingness to present at F2F events	Willingness to present at virtual events
Willingness to present at F2F events	Pearson Correlation	1	0.243**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		<0.001
	N	556	556
Willingness to present at virtual events	Pearson Correlation	0.243**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	<0.001	
	N	556	556

Notes: *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Source: edited by the authors

We performed a variance analysis using one aspect in order to find out whether, in the judgement of participants, there is any difference between virtual events and F2F events in terms of effectiveness. Based on the opinion of participants in both F2F and virtual business events, the effectiveness of the two event types does not differ significantly. In the entire sample, the effectiveness of virtual business events compared to F2F events is 3.17 on average (on a 5-point Likert-like scale from 5 = *completely effective* to 1 = *not effective at all*, N = 556 people), which means that, although fewer students attended

virtual business events than F2F business events, respondents consider virtual business events to be even more effective compared to F2F events.

Based on students' experiences, we summarised the advantages and disadvantages of virtual business events and then collected the five most frequently mentioned (TOP5) advantages and disadvantages found in answers (Table 3). We cleaned words in answers to open questions from suffixes and created a list of words and frequencies, and finally set up categories.

Table 3. TOP5 advantages and disadvantages of virtual events (N = 309)

TOP	Advantage	Disadvantage
1	comfort / calmer environment	impersonal event
2	available to several interested parties	technical / internet problems
3	no travel cost / time reduction	lack of interaction / communication
4	rewatchable performances	monotonous lectures, more difficult focusing of attention
5	flexibility	lack of experience

Source: edited by the authors

Respondents cited comfort and a calmer environment as the most important advantages, but this did not ensure a better immersion in information, as monotonous presentations and an unstimulating environment made it difficult for participants to focus their attention. Students emphasised that even though they do not have to physically travel to the location of a business event, the experience provided by a destination and a physical location “*is considered an adventure. There is a special atmosphere of sitting in a lecture hall and listening to a lecture.*” (20-year-old woman)

Awareness can also be observed among university students, as they highlighted the importance of recorded lectures, which can be viewed several times. So, on the one hand, the information given will be available to a higher number of interested people, and on the other hand, learning can be deepened through repeated viewings. The definition ‘available to a higher number of interested people’ appeared also in an additional context, namely, that, due to lower costs (as there are no travel and accommodation costs, in some cases participation fees are lower than for F2F events). Due to efficiency in time requirement,

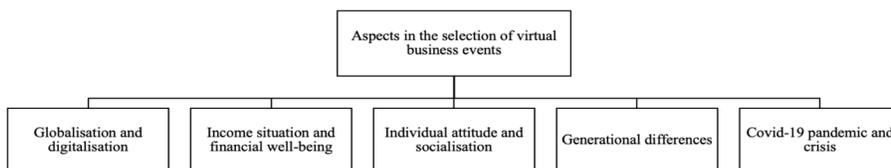
some participants can join virtual business events who otherwise could not attend F2F business events. *“Without travelling, it takes less time, so more speakers and interested people may be able to attend, and the number of participants is unlimited.”* (21-year-old woman)

Costs for virtual business events vary, largely depending on the platform and features used. In addition to reducing costs, new technical features can also aesthetically contribute to the satisfaction of participants, and, in addition, they provide a more special experience to participants.

Virtual business events were considered by 14.2% of students to be smoother than F2F business

events, however, 12.6% of respondents claimed the opposite. The latter answer applied to those students who had participated in virtual business events but had not yet participated in a F2F business event (they represented 11.5% of the sample). Responses from university students show that F2F business events are more beneficial due to the nurturing of personal relationships, which is the essence of events. Lessons learned from virtual events should be applied to the future development of F2F events. As our research results show, the preferred choices of Generation Z for virtual business events are influenced by five factors significantly (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Aspects of Generation Z in the selection of virtual business events



Source: edited by the authors

Thanks to virtual events, and thanks to information and communication technologies (ICT), students can participate in virtual events held anywhere in the world. Participation depends on university students' financial situation, high participation fees cannot be financed by university students from their scholarships and/or salaries, so this is a deterrent factor. The difficulty of building social relationships is a general characteristic of members of Generation Z, which is determined by the individual attitude and the socialisation processes in which a given person has grown up (Kárpáti 2019). So, university students prefer to consume educational content in the virtual space rather than trying to establish new relationships during virtual events. The popularity of virtual business events remains, so event managers must prepare for the organisation of such events, at which Generation Z members will increasingly be present.

DISCUSSION

Using descriptive statistical and cross-tabulation analyses and statistical tests of data from the questionnaire survey, this study sheds light on the relationship between Generation Z and virtual business events as well as trends in the development of business events. Applying generation analysis, this research expands knowledge in the MICE industry, providing managers and event organisers with valuable practical suggestions for the development of business events with relevance to the expectations of Generation Z.

Our research was focused on Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2009. Results of our primary research show that the answer to our research question (aimed at revealing the roles taken on by university students with an active legal relationship who participate at virtual and F2F business events) is that students with an active legal relationship who participate in undergraduate programmes with a focus on economics tend to be present at business events. However, their distribution depends on the type of business event and the form in which it is organised. Summarising the available data, we can determine that 61.7% of students involved in our research had participated in live business events

in the pre-Covid era, while 48.0% participated in virtual business events during the pandemic. A low number of students tend to be present as speakers at business events. Their proportion was only worsened by the pandemic, as 9.7% of students had participated as speakers in live business events in the pre-Covid era, and 7.6% of them participated in virtual business events during the pandemic.

Managerial implications

Five lessons can be defined about virtual business events. The characteristics of Generation Z as an age group determine that F2F events are more popular among them than virtual events (1). University students' answers to open questions confirmed that they also require personal participation at these events. Building relationships is a personal challenge for members of Generation Z and the "cold" nature of the virtual space makes it even more difficult for them. There is still a need for business events with personal presence in the classical sense, as they provide an opportunity to exchange experiences, nurture business relationships and trust, and develop university students' relationship-building skills. Members of Generation Z prefer to use the achievements of technology in their written conversations, which is why they do not know enough about some basic rules of personal communication, such as how to listen to others, ask questions, and solve problems and conflicts in real-time (Pew Research Center 2012).

Universities also have an important role in preparing students to participate in business events, since university education should not only be about teaching theories, but also about developing competencies and skills. In university education, there is an increasing emphasis on adapting to changing circumstances, the ability to continuously expand knowledge, critical thinking, creativity, intercultural communication and teamwork (European Commission 2020). All of which skills are necessary for Generation Z members to successfully join business events. The opportunities provided by technology should be included in university education, as Generation Z members are constantly connected to the digital space, therefore their knowledge and experience can be deepened. University instructors are advised to use embedded digital visual-based content in their traditional materials (Mocek 2017). This is an advice event managers can also consider, together with other aspects, such as using shorter introductions, digital storytelling or emojis during feedback.

Our research results show that students participating in higher education do not yet act as speakers. However, as participants, they represent a strong business potential for event managers, who must pay special attention to the special needs of different types of consumers and to reducing students' anxieties (such as the difficulty of building relationships or the lack of student initiative) at business events when organising them (2). Event organisers should involve members of Generation Z in the organisation so that events suitable for their contemporaries can be created as much as possible.

Although students consider virtual business events more effective than F2F business events, the time factor must be taken into account to avoid biasing the results. Our results highlight the critical situation that event organisers also experienced after the outbreak of the pandemic. As a result of government restrictions imposed to contain the pandemic, event managers had to quickly switch to online events, which did not go smoothly. For those surveyed, poor Internet connection quality and poor Internet access are still a disadvantage concerning virtual events (3). In addition, excessive use of virtual platforms can also cause fatigue, anxiety or worry, which results reflect the research results of Hacker *et al.* (2020).

Another disadvantage of virtual events is that they can less actively involve the participants; however, according to Sox *et al.* (2014), the effectiveness of virtual business events can be increased by incorporating various interactive elements. Through virtual business events, participants will save time, energy and money, which factors also appeared in the answers of students when we asked them about the advantages and disadvantages of virtual events. Students considered these events to be smoother than F2F events, the organisation of which requires cost-effective implementation and a high degree of professionalism on the part of organisers (4), as it is described in the study by Sharma (2021).

In order to involve members of Generation Z in business events, it is recommended to take advantage of the opportunities offered by ICT, whose importance and areas of application have greatly increased due to the pandemic (Falk & Hagsten 2021, Sox *et al.* 2014). The advantages of virtual events should be emphasised in promotion materials for members of Generation Z (5). Experiences from virtual business events can be used together with digital solutions to increase the experience of participants at F2F events; and programmes organised in an interactive, playful form can contribute to improving the communication skills of university students.

Limitations of and suggestions for future research

The group of participants involved in the research did not cover all universities in Hungary; therefore, the data obtained by us cannot be considered representative. Another limiting factor was that only students studying economics at two universities were questioned. The time factor was an important factor in our research, as students have had more opportunities to participate in F2F business events than in virtual business events, which is also reflected in their participation rates.

As a continuation of the quantitative research, it is necessary to extend the study to more fields and to include students from rural areas in the analysis. Our research is worthwhile to continue as part of a qualitative methodology, using the in-depth interview method, during which we aim to explore deeper psychological and socio-cultural connections. To conduct in-depth interviews, we will contact the Portfolio Group, the organisers of the Gen Z Festival in Hungary, to deepen the findings of the current research.

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