

What are the international ICT trends in the MICE industry and how could they be applied to the Swiss market taking the COVID-19 situation into consideration?



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Abstract

The research focuses on two main aspects, which are international ICT trends in the MICE industry before the COVID-19, as well as the changes in the MICE industry caused by the COVID-19 situation particularly in Switzerland. Therefore, aims to answer the research question which is “What are the international ICT trends in the MICE industry and how could they be applied to the Swiss market taking the COVID-19 situation into consideration?” In order to answer this question, the scholarly resources were collected and analyzed, as well as semi-structured interviews were done with the selected experts.

Previously seen as a threat by the industry professionals, virtual events may be considered as the only solution for the industry nowadays, due to the travel restrictions as well as prohibition of gatherings of more than 5 people. However, even though virtual and hybrid event may be considered as the main focus of the research, other ICT trends in the MICE industry also provides interest, as currently there is no information available about the future restrictions, as COVID-19 has not been completely studied yet. The particular interest in the MICE industry is due to the fact that in Switzerland MICE industry represents about 19% of all tourism overnights.

Key words: MICE, Switzerland, COVID-19, Bachelor Thesis, trends

Foreword and acknowledgements

This research was carried out as a part of the Bachelor Program in HES-SO. Having a particular interest in business tourism and especially MICE industry, I wanted firstly to write my Bachelor Thesis about the marketing innovations in MICE, however, after the discussion with Mr. Zuffi, the professor of Business Tourism in HES-SO, I have decided to study ICTs in the MICE industry.

Finally, the theme has been transformed one more time after the discussion about Mrs. Scaglione and also the spread of COVID-19 pandemics.

Thus, I would like to thank:

- Mrs. Scaglione, for her support and assistance with this research, without her remarks it would have not been feasible;
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Introduction

Today's environment is very changing, ICTs (information and communications technologies) evolve very fast and industries have to adapt their offers in order to be competitive. MICE industry is not an exception as it can also benefit from the developments in this area.

Technologies are applied in such processes as finding and booking venues, as online platforms provide all the necessary information about the properties, such as rates and characteristics, some resources are facilitating the process of communication with the suppliers (e.g., hotels and restaurants). Networking and e-commerce (products and services being sold online) are other examples of how ICT may be applied in the MICE industry, however those practices are mainly used for exhibitions (Davidson, Alford & Seaton, 2002).

If previously "being there" was an only solution available in order to participate in MICE events, nowadays, virtual events, as well as hybrid events provide an opportunity to get the similar experience without travelling. If the usage of several ICTs may be considered as common practices for the industry, as for example, many event planners use Internet in the marketing purposes (e.g., websites, social medias) or in order to optimize some processes (e.g., online registration), virtual and hybrid events have not been seen as common solutions.

Moreover, if most of the innovations were positively met by the industry professionals, virtual events were seen in a mostly negative way, as were previously considered as a threat. For example, Davidson (2002) states that "Webcast conferencing" or "virtual conferencing", as well as "virtual fairs" were perceived as a new challenge that industry may have to face (Davidson, 2002). At the same time, according to Denstadli et al. (2013) who have studied the influence of "videoconferencing" on the business travel, business travelers did not perceive videoconferencing as a substitute for the face-to-face communication, but those two methods were named interdependent. However, this research did not take virtual events and the MICE industry into consideration. Indeed, the lack of literature about virtual and hybrid events was noted by multiple researchers. For example, Sox (2014) explains this phenomenon by the rapid advancement of the technologies.

However, such factors as augmented risks of terrorism, ecological concerns as well as, in theory, pandemics, such as current spread of COVID-19 may contribute to the necessity to implement those digital solutions.

One of the objectives of this research is to identify the international ICT trends in the MICE industry, however, at the same time this paper particularly focuses on virtual and hybrid events due to the travel restrictions caused by COVID-19.

In Switzerland MICE industry represents about 19% of all tourism overnights, therefore, the focus on Switzerland is explained by the importance of the sub-sector for the tourism industry.

Problematic and Methodology

The research question of this research may be formulated as following: What are the international ICT trends in the MICE industry and how could they be applied to the Swiss market taking the COVID-19 situation into consideration?

The research aims to achieve the following objectives:

- to identify the international ICT trends in the MICE industry in order to see the situation on the market before the COVID-19.
- to underline the changes in the MICE industry caused by the COVID-19 in Switzerland.

In order to answer the research question, the first step to be undertaken was to analyze the existing literature and to proceed a literature review. The literature review aimed to define the MICE industry and all the components, underline the main characteristics of the industry, as well as its structure, cost and benefits, ICT trends in the MICE industry before the COVID-19 situation, as well as to provide the overview of COVID-19 situation globally and in Switzerland. Thus, it was decided not to underline the literature review as a separate part of the research, as information received was used for both objectives. The chosen

The elements of PEST-analysis (political, economic, social, technological) were used in order to understand the macro-environment in Switzerland in terms of MICE industry in order to be able to understand which factors may influence the demand.

Afterward, the qualitative research method was chosen (semi-structured interviews) with the industry professionals aiming to underline the evolution that the industry has faced before and after the COVID-19. This method was chosen in order to get a complex data about the subject, such as opinions, experiences and beliefs. Moreover, this method was chosen due to the lack of information (researches) covering the subject.

The interviews were realized in the format of calls with the following persons:

Table 1: The list of experts

Expert's name:	Richard Torriani	Jurg Tschanz	Silvano Schaer	Patrick Mengelt
Company:	MCI Group	Planitswiss Group	Congrex Switzerland	Vitalis Events SA
Position:	Managing Director of the MCI Geneva/ Chief Operating Officer for the Americas	Co-Founder of Planitswiss Group/ Imavox/AIO	Head of Sales and Marketing at Congrex Switzerland	Managing Partner at Vitalis Events SA

The same questions were asked to all the experts (see Appendix I) in order to facilitate the analysis of the results. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. In order to analyze the interviews, the thematic analysis was used that have allowed to underline the main themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Then, Sphinx was used in order to create a word cloud (lexical and semantical overview).

The SWOT-analysis was used in order to underline the current position of virtual events and the possibility influence of the COVID-19 on the MICE industry in the future, based on the literature review and results of the interviews.

1. The first objective: to identify the international ICT trends in the MICE industry in order to see the situation on the market before the COVID-19

1.1 Definition of the MICE, justification of the terminology

Since the beginning of civilization people used to assemble together in order to exchange knowledge and goods (Schlentrach, 2014). However, the significance of those gathering is constantly growing worldwide with the development, as communication has a major role due to the need of sharing know-how, experiences, knowledge, as well as exchanging goods and services. Therefore, nowadays MICE industry is commonly named a sub-sector of the tourism industry with the high potential (Schlentrach (2008). Despite the importance of the industry, according to Davidson (2018) there is no exact definition of business events and the related industry. The use of the terminology differs a lot depending on the geographic area. Thus, different terms could be found while describing the industry and the components. For example, such terms as “conference”, “convention and “congress” are all used while referring to large-scale meetings.

“The meetings industry” is the term introduced in 2006 by such organizations as World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and Affiliate Members Reed Travel Exhibitions, the International Congress & Convention Association (ICCA) and Meeting Professional International (MPI) in order to clarify the nature of the industry as well as to include all the components, such as “organization, promotion, sale and hosting of meetings and other events (Davidson, 2018). The industry unites multiple number of players such as transport (including international and domestic), accommodation, specific venues, catering services, tour providers, leisure programs, exhibition facilities, technical support (Mistilis & Dwyer, 2000). Based on this definition of UNWTO (2006) the terminology includes all the events with the purpose of socializing, learning, sharing the ideas, conducting business as well as motivating the participants with the minimum number of 10 participants with the duration of more than 4 hours (a half day) taking place in the for-payment venues. Thus, such events as corporate, associative and governmental meetings, seminars, congresses, conferences,

corporate incentives, conventions, fairs and exhibitions can be considered as the components of the industry.

MICE is not the only acronym used by the professionals of the industry, but it may be considered being the most common due to the frequent usage in academic sources. Again, there is no agreed definition of what this acronym stands for, as multiple decryptions may be found. For example, Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions as well as Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Events may be both found in academic sources, as well as “Conferences” may be replaced by “Congresses” (Davidson, 2018). For this research, the definition proposed by Schlentrich (2008) would be used, who states that MICE is a commonly used acronym and consists of four main segments of the group market, which are Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions.

The term “meetings” is commonly used to refer to the assembly of people for the different purposes such as for communicating, exchanging the ideas, finding solutions, training or teaching. Those can be organized in hotels, convention centers, offices, sport stadiums, universities and other different venues. The number of participants may vary from 10 to 10000 (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001; Schlentrich, 2008). The duration of those vary depending on the type of the meeting. Those may be both free-stand events or a combination, fusion of different events. The main examples of the meetings are:

- Assemblies: the large-scale meetings with the purpose to communicate an information to the members of a corporation/ an association;
- Award/Gala dinners: can be a free-stand event or a part of the convention, has an entertaining function as well as communicating (socializing);
- Educational sessions, such as clinics, colloquiums, forums, lectures, panel discussions, symposiums with the main aim of learning, sharing the information;
- Presentations: where the main purpose is to inform the attendees about the product, strategy or a budget;
- Roundtables: participants are divided into groups where each group has a leader represented by the field expert;
- Seminars: includes both discussion and lecture in order to share the experiences about a pre-defined topic;

- Workshops: a small-scale gathering of people in order to discuss a particular topic, workshops are mainly integrated to other events of a bigger scale;
- Special events: one-time or not on the frequent base; are organized for special reasons (Schlentrach, 2008).

Incentives or incentive travels represents 5.1% of the direct spending generated by MICE industry in US according to Convention Industry Council (2005). They are organized in order to motivate or reward and recognize employees for their performance, therefore, are mainly carried out at upscale destinations in such venues as resort hotels or cruise ships which are able to provide recreational activities and entertainment of a high quality. Usually participants are offered themed food and beverage, they are involved into entertaining activities and are provided with accommodation and exclusive transportation (Schlentrach, 2008).

The term “conventions” mainly refers to the large-scale meetings where the total number of participants may vary from hundreds to tens of thousands of participants who may be the representatives of political and religious groups, fraternal societies and other organizations (Schlentrach, 2008). The main purpose according to Rogers (2008) is the idea-sharing about the particular topic which would be a common interest for all the participants. Conventions are mainly organized by organizations; the individuals interested in participating would normally have to register and pay the registration fee, which gives an access to all the main events, for example congresses and conferences. The main difference between meetings would be the duration which is longer as conventions normally last several days and include social program. Moreover, those events are mainly periodic and are often hold on a yearly basis (Rogers, 2008).

Exhibitions are the events hold on a regular basis and both date and location are normally predefined. The main purpose of those is to demonstrate goods and services from the particular industry to the potentially interested audience (Davidson, 2018). Davidson (2018) identifies two major groups of exhibitions, which are B2B (business to business) shows/fairs and B2C (business to costumers) shows/fairs. Trade shows/fairs (B2B) would gather the representators of the same industry or sector. The participation is limited as only businesses and professionals may participate and often the pre-registration or invitation is a mandatory requirement. In contrast, consumer show/fairs (B2C) are open to public and the main purpose

of those is reaching the end-user. Those exhibitions are often not free, and the wide range of goods and services are presented (Davidson, 2018).

1.2 The nature of the industry

Most of the events take place in cities or towns due to the availability of the venues, transport, accommodation and other infrastructure needed in order to host such events. However, this will not be the case for the incentives due to the recreational purpose and political conferences (such as G20 forum) for security reasons (Davidson, 2018). Business events are mostly held during the working days which are from Monday to Friday due to the availability of the majority of the participants, moreover, for the same reason summer months are generally avoided as summer months tend to be considered as “holiday time” in the majority of Western countries (Davidson, 2018; Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001). According to Davidson (2018) Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays are considered the peak periods and, thus, most of the venues have the highest rates for those days. Due to the flexibility of organizers while choosing a destination for the event, destinations try to influence this choice by implementing different marketing and promotion strategies (Davidson, 2018). The same dates were listed in the report of OM24 (2020) for the webinar’s attendance. The choice of time may be considered as a challenge in case of webinars as those may cover different time zones, therefore the primary market should be identified. According to the above-mentioned report most webinars are carried out at 10 a.m. GMT and at 2 p.m. and 3 p.m.

Even though each event may exist as a separate unit, the so-called fusion of different categories of the events is equally possible and is practiced by the industry. That means that events can be combined and organized in parallel. Davidson (2018) gives an example of exhibitions which are carried out during the conferences. The products or services presented at those exhibitions relate to the area of interest of the participants of the conference. Another example of the hybrid nature of the events would be the for-educative purpose seminars carried out by industry experts during the exhibition. This fusion can be considered as an additional value from the perception of the participants (Davidson, 2018). However, the term “hybrid events” is used while referring to the concrete fusion obtained by combining the elements of virtual and in-person events (ON24, 2020).

1.3 The structure of the MICE industry

Swarbrooke and Horner (2001) have proposed the model in order to describe the structure of business travel and tourism consisting of three parts which are “demand”, “intermediaries” and “supply”. The demand side is represented by individuals, companies and associations, which are considered as consumers or customers. Intermediaries including DMOs, incentive travel agencies, exhibition companies, event management companies, conference placement agencies may be assigned to the supply side but are majorly seen as a separate category. Transport operators, accommodation operators, catering and other ancillary services, venues, attractions, audio-visual equipment and information technology providers are seen as the suppliers in the context of the particular industry (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001).

1.3.1 The demand side of the industry

In contradistinction to leisure tourism, in terms of MICE industry customer and consumer cannot be seen as synonyms, as in some cases business travelers would not be the ones who pay for the travels (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001). For example, according to the definition given by Schlentrich (2008) incentive travels are organized in order to motivate, reward or recognize employees for their performance and, thus, are majorly paid by employers, while participants are offered accommodation, transportation, food and beverage, entertaining activities. Therefore, employers may be considered as customers and employees as consumers. However, in some cases consumer and customer may be the same person or persons (e.g., international associations).

1.3.2 Intermediaries

Events may be organized either directly by buyers, or by the specialists which, in this case, would act as the intermediaries. Those are external agencies with the common role of linking buyers and suppliers. If such intermediaries, as Professional Conference Organizers (PCOs), Destination Management Companies (DMOs), incentive travel agencies and exhibition organizers act mainly on behalf of buyers, the main aim of convention bureaus is to market destinations as the whole (Davidson, 2018). The table below gives an overview of the major intermediaries and their functions.

Table 2: The intermediaries

Types of events	Intermediary:	Functions:
Meetings and Conventions	Venue finding services	Suggest venue options based on the specific requirements of the clients (Davidson, 2018)
	Destination management companies	Venue finding, registration of the attendees, ground transportation, social program, temporary staff sourcing, dining options, entertainment and speakers, floral arrangements, photographers, logistical tasks (Davidson, 2018)
	Independent meeting planners/ PCOs	Venue sourcing, negotiations of the contract, accommodation booking, registration of attendees, logistical work (Davidson, 2018)
Incentives	Full-service incentive marketing companies	Organizing both travel and merchandise rewards (Davidson, 2018)

	Full service incentive houses	Organize incentive travels (Davidson, 2018)
	Incentive travel fulfilment houses	Mainly organize trips with some incentive promotion services (Davidson, 2018)
	Travel agents (incentive division)	Organize incentive travel programmes (Davidson, 2018)
	Retail travel agencies	Assistance with travel arrangements (Davidson, 2018)
Exhibitions	Exhibition organisers	Organise and implement exhibitions (Davidson, 2018)

Source: Analyses of the related literature

1.3.3 The supply side of the industry

The supply side of the industry has a complex structure as MICE industry consist of four different segments and, therefore, suppliers may differ for each of those. Swarbrooke and Horner (2001) classify the supply side as follows:

- Compulsory suppliers represented by the common suppliers for all the sectors;
- Sectoral suppliers while referring to those suppliers who are common for a particular sector;
- Optional suppliers proposing auxiliary services which are not stringent for the industry.

The five main categories of suppliers are destinations, venues, transport, accommodation and auxiliary services (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001). Those may benefit from the MICE industry by proposing their goods and services to the organizers and participants of the events.

The term “destination” is used to describe a particular area with the predefined boundaries which may be represented by a city, town, region or country. Destinations deliver venues, infrastructure, attractions, accommodation and other services. Even though those components are usually private-owned, they may be marketed by the public sector organizations as are considered being the parts of the particular destination.

The term “venues” refers to all the locations where the events may take place both purpose-built and those built for other purposes but used as a place for the event. Swarbrooke and Horner (2001) have noticed high demand for the unusual venues, such as historic building, theme parks, transport, such as cruise ships and trains and sporting venues due to the memorable experience which they can deliver to customers.

Transport plays a significant role in MICE industry as both to destination and in-destination transport is required, therefore all forms of transport such as air, rail, road and water transports are applied in the industry (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001). Moreover, besides its main function which is moving people from point A to B it may be equally used as a venue or a part of entertainment. The companies involved in transportation realize the significance of business travelers for their business, therefore, some airlines may be more flexible by allowing organizers modifying information about the passengers as well as most of them propose business lounges for group travelers. The availability of transport may be considered as one of the criteria for the choice of destination for international events as accessibility is an important factor (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001).

Accommodation is often one of the biggest expenses in the budget of the conference attendees. Even though it is impossible to deny that some travelers prefer staying with friends or relatives, the major part of business travelers chooses commercial accommodation, represented by hotels, cruise ships, youth hostels, self-catering complexes, university residences, timeshare developments, novel form of accommodation. Accommodation may also act as a venue for the event, however, it is not necessary that delegates choose the same

place for their stay, as organizers usually propose multiple options with different price ranges (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001).

Auxiliary services may also play a role in a choice of destination. According to Swarbrooke and Horner (2001) the examples of those would be audio-visual equipment suppliers, caterers, IT experts, florists, video-conferencing specialists, insurances, furniture providers etc.

1.4 Tourism-related and non-tourism benefits

Events may bring both tourism-related and non-tourism benefits. However, nowadays being competitive in the meetings industry requires skills and knowledge in such areas as tertiary (service sector), marketing and environmental resource management (Solberg & Preuss, 2005).

As from the traditional perspective the main benefits are related to the economic impact on the destination where those events are held, some innovations such as “Webcast conferencing” or “virtual conferencing”, as well as “virtual fairs” may be seen as a new challenge that industry has to face from the perception of the supply side (Davidson, 2002). This is due to the fact that the most evident and commonly mentioned benefits are related to the consumption of travel, tourism and hospitality goods and services such as hotel rooms, transport, food and beverage services, leisure activities as well as other expenses of those who attend the events. Moreover, the business tourists tend to spend more than those who travel for leisure and use premium services (Davidson, 2018; Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001). According to Clark (2004) business travelers spend more not only for accommodation and restaurants but also on leisure activities, such as sightseeing, visiting museums and theaters and shopping. In fact, they may spend up to 3 times more than those who travel for leisure (Campiranon & Arcodia, 2008). Swarbrooke & Horner (2001) states that business tourists tend to share the same services as leisure tourists, however, mostly in the different manner, by providing an example of private visits of tourist attractions organized for conference delegates after the opening hours, combined with cocktail reception. Moreover, some tourist attractions may be used as venues for the events or some parts of those, for example, Gala dinners organized in the castles, museums or theaters. Business tourists equally contribute

to the viability of the certain facilities which may be equally used by the local population. (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001).

As it was previously mentioned, business tourism helps to solve the problem of seasonality, as business events are mostly carried out during the working days and months which are considered to be a low season for the leisure tourism (Davidson, 2018). The participants of the events tend to be accompanied; therefore, the expenses of those persons can be considered an indirect benefit for the destination and tourism industry. Moreover, the participants themselves may consider an opportunity of spending few more days at the destination for the recreational purposes. They may equally return to the destination as leisure travelers with their friends or families in case if particular destination seemed attractive for them or recommend it to their private circle (Davidson, 2018; Kerr, Cliff & Dolnicar, 2012). According to Swarbrooke & Horner (2001) business tourists tend to cause fewer inconvenience to the host communities due to the appropriate behavior, which is sometimes not the case for the leisure tourists. Davidson (2018) states that multiple researches, for example Monge and Brandimarte (2011) speak about the increase of number of the facilities for business events in multiple destinations due to the evident benefits for the tourism industry. This equally create more working places, thus help to decrease the level of unemployment (Davidson, 2018). At the same time, the increase of economic and human resources in many destinations may provide additional opportunities for the development of the industry and thus, creation of additional working places as well as the development of human resources (Hiller, 2000). Thus, meetings industry may contribute to the sustainable development by decreasing the level of poverty in less developed countries by providing working places to the local population. For example, in US the MICE industry accounts 1.7 million full-time jobs (Schlentrach, 2008). Swarbrooke & Horner (2001) mention the contribution of business tourism to local businesses, as multiple services are required for the events, such as the services of photographers, florists, printing services.

Non-tourism benefits cannot be underestimated as according to UNWTO (2014) meetings are not only a segment of tourism but also a part of other economic sectors. Since one of the main purposes of the business events is to share knowledge, both the events themselves and the participants of those may bring benefits to local communities due to the business, professional and scientific nature of the events (UNWTO, 2014). The business decision makers

attending the events may bring benefits to the host community such as investments and trade as they discover local products and services. The business events also attract experts in different areas; therefore, the local community may also benefit from their knowledge. This knowledge may be used in the future in order to develop the services provided in the particular destination (UNWTO, 2014). The large-scale international events may also create a positive image of the destination, as stated by Davidson (2018). The prestige of hosting those events may be a source of pride and recognition among other countries which is especially important for certain less developed countries. The image created through hosting the major international events is beneficial for countries as it increases the level of credibility to the destination (Rogers, 2013). Davidson (2018) states that those events are also one of the main sources of adult learning which can respectively lead to innovations, improvement of organizational performance, personal development and obtaining of skills and knowledge also by end-users in another words the participants of those events.

1.5 The costs of business events

Business events may cause a negative environmental impact caused by travelling (Mair & Jago, 2009). This would be especially a case in terms of international events which may act as a cause of an increase of international air travel (Davidson, 2018). Many conferences, including ecology-related ones were criticized due to the CO₂ emissions caused by air travel (Bossdorf, Parepa & Fischer, 2010). However, if air travel is considered a significant environmental impact it is not the only one. Business events may equally change the biodiversity footprint of the destinations due to the land that is occupied by the venues as well as the process of the constructions as excavating is a general practice during the constructions. Moreover, the environment can be polluted during the constructions due to the usage of such materials as concrete, steel and aluminum as a huge number of CO₂ emissions are produced during their production (Davidson, 2018). Davidson (2018) refers to the research by Kleiwerks International and states that the production of 76 million tons of concrete creates 9.8 million tons of CO₂. At the same time those venues use a large number of energy and cause CO₂ emissions are also caused by the activities such as temperature control inside the buildings (Bossdorf, Parepa & Fischer, 2010).

Among the costs of the business events it is equally important to underline the economic costs of those. First of all, Davidson (2018) states that usually destinations run convention bureaus for the marketing purposes and those can be fully or partly financed by the public funds. This evokes another cost which is “an opportunity cost” of running and constructing the large-scale venues in order to host the events. In another words, funds used for those purposes could be used differently, for example, for the well-being of the local population. While some countries may not consider this industry as a priority as they would prefer investing money in social sector or medicine, countries like Singapore, Honk-Kong, Indonesia have constructed world-class venues due to the governmental support (Dwyer & Mistilis, 1999; Seebaluck et al., 2015). MICE industry depends on the infrastructure available at the destination; the existing infrastructure should favor the increased demand for the events (Getz, 2008). In another words, in order to benefit from the business events, destinations should equally develop such sectors as transport, IT, as well as specific venues with the capacities to host the events (Ranchold, 2004; Getz, 2008).

1.6 Information and Communication Technologies

Technologies are playing a major role in all kind of businesses. Today’s environment is very changing, technological innovation and trends evolve very fast and multiple industries have to adopt their offers in order to be competitive. MICE industry is not an exception as it can also benefit from the progress (Smith & Kline, 2010). Moreover, there are multiple factors which may act as driving ones, such as augmented risks of terrorism, ecological concerns as well as risks of crises and other external factors (Davidson, Alford & Seaton, 2002). Nowadays technologies are one of the causes of the changes in the behavior of the population, especially in terms of communications and the perception of goods and services as well as the way people seek the information (Davidson, 2018). The major factor that has contributed to this transformation is the worldwide spread of the Internet, as the access to it has augmented due to the popularity of smartphones and tablets (Davidson, 2018). The representatives of “Generation Y” have only vague memories about how the world was before the introduction of World Wide Web and as they start being the biggest part of the workforce, they naturally want to bring changes to political, cultural and business spheres (Davidson, 2018). Nowadays, the development of technologies is one of the major external forces contributing to the

innovations in the MICE industry. According to Krug et al. (1994) personal computer has dramatically changed the operations in the way that it allowed meeting planners to be more efficient. For example, some meeting planners may remember that previously a significant part of registrations to conferences was done via fax and banking transfers and, therefore, this procedure was more complex in comparison with its modern analogue which is online registration (Davidson, 2018).

At the same time, ICTs may be equally used for the marketing purposes. Swarbrooke & Horner (2001) suggest that VR (virtual reality) may be used as a promotional tool by allowing the customer to discover the potential destination for the event.

Holtgrewe (2014) speaks about “omnipresent connectivity” that was obtained after the diffusion of mobile devices as they provide their users with the access to data, social networks, multimedia and other functions of the computer from multiple locations. ICTs may be applied in order to optimize decision-making, and analytical processes, they may help being more “resource-efficient” in terms of manufacturing processes, they erase the boundaries between people creating such a phenomenon as “global village” and make information more accessible (Zuppo, 2012; Holtgrewe, 2014). ICTs change the markets, business-models and ways in which individuals interact. Services become more personalized and demand oriented, manufacturing process more efficient (EU Skills Panorama, 2012).

ICTs change working processes, the way of life for many societies (especially in BRICS countries) as well as economies (Holtgrewe, 2014).

Holtgrewe (2014) underlines the following technological trends:

- Combination of telecommunications and IT;
- Internet connectivity may become omnipresent, therefore web-based services would be used in multiple spheres and sectors;
- “Cloud computing” meaning that hardware like services or storage may be replaced by network-connected facilities;
- “Big data” technologies for commercial and public purpose

1.7 General ICT trends in the MICE industry

1.7.1 Social media

Nowadays, digital communication is playing a significant role in marketing strategies of multiple companies. Those companies communicate through social media, email and their website in order to inform their stakeholders. Those digital channels allow companies to interact and be more demand-oriented (Davidson, 2018). If previously marketing was used in order to send a message from one vendor to many recipients with the introduction of Web 2.0, he went through significant changes. New technologies have changed the traditional perception of marketing, as users got a possibility to share and create content and to communicate through multiple digital channels, such as, for example social networks (Davidson & Keup, 2014). In the MICE industry those channels play an important role as are used not only in marketing purposes, but also in order to provide a better experience to the participants of the events. Even before the introduction of Web 2.0 the process of attracting business clients was seen as more complex in comparison to leisure tourists as those consider more factors, including economic, financial and technical (Vitale, Giglierano, & Pfoertsch, 2011; Davidson & Keup, 2014). Davidson and Rogers (2006) state that CBs tend to use multiple marketing tools, such as customer relationship management, PR, publications, trade shows, direct marketing and also propose familiarization trips to potential customers with the aim to introduce the destination and particular facilities. However, with the introduction of Web 2.0 this list went through some changes and was equally extended (Davidson & Keup, 2014).

The MICE industry is considered one of the most profitable sub-sectors of tourism industry with rather intense competition between cities aiming to attract meetings. Destination marketing organizations also known as CB (convention bureaus) were created by cities for the marketing purposes, more precisely in order to create the image of destinations attractive for both business and leisure tourism (Davidson & Keup, 2014). The list published by Cvent (2020) consist of 1515 CVBs (Convention and Visitors Bureaus) situated across the European continent. However, if in North America those entities focus on attracting both leisure and business tourists, European organizations prioritize business events by focusing on professional meeting planners who act as intermediaries between the supply and demand sides (Davidson & Keup, 2014).

According to Hamil et al. (2012) the process of adoption of social media marketing by European national DMO's was rather slow. Even in 2014 most of the North American DMOs were mostly using traditional marketing, however, the role of social media has increased.

The study carried out by Davidson and Keup (2014) has shown that the main means used by European convention bureaus in their marketing strategies are YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter as well as blogs, Flickr and SlideShare but in lesser degree.

YouTube and Flickr can be categorized as file-sharing communities where peer-to-peer users may share particular types of content, for example, videos in case of YouTube and photos in case of Flickr. Facebook and LinkedIn are both examples of social networks where users may create their personal profiles and communicate with other users by using private messages or share digital content, such as photos or audio files. Social networks may be general, such as Facebook or for-professional purposes, for example LinkedIn. In case of blogs web publications are mostly done by one or more users (authors). Another commonly used activities and applications are wikis, websites where users act as co-creators of content by editing; mashups or websites and applications with the mixed content from multiple sources; Really Simple Syndication, a web feed allowing users to receive updated content from various sources and podcasts, digital audio files available for downloading and commonly distributed through RSS (Davidson & Keup, 2014).

In their study Davidson and Keup (2014) have underlined the possible ways of using web 2.0 tools by CBs, such as sharing information about the destination, as well as photos and videos taken by CB, keeping users updated about the developments, communicating with the audience by answering to comments and questions, finding potential customers and hosting a page, channel or group about the CB in order to encourage customers to interact.

This research has equally underlined the main problem related to the usage of those tools, as a significant number of CBs did not have any concrete techniques for measuring the return on investments (Davidson & Keup, 2014). However, this step should not be ignored as Rogers and Davidson (2016) state that the success of digital marketing actions depends on the usefulness of the content as well as additional value created through the selected content.

At the same time Rogers and Davidson (2016) with the reference to the Marketing Challenges International have stated that sometimes Web 2.0 tools were mostly seen as sales and broadcasting tools and the engaging component was almost ignored, therefore, those tools were not used to their full extend.

Event planners equally use social media in order to create awareness, communicate information about the event, increase attendance and to engage the audience (Davidson, 2018). At the same time those may be used during the events in order to facilitate meetings by making them more interactive (Maritz, 2012; Lee, 2011). For example, some parts of the event may be shared with those who are not physically present in a form of livestreaming on social media. Moreover, Facebook and Tweeter allow audience to be more engaged as provide an opportunity to leave comment during the event, therefore make the events more interactive (Zhu, 2017; Lee, 2011). At the same time, those means may equally act as a marketing for the future editions in case of repetitive events (Davidson, 2018). The Web 2.0 tools may be equally used in order to summarize the highlights of the event afterwards as well as for polling and surveys in order to get the feedback from the attendees. According to Davidson (2018) the feedback can be collected both during and after the event not only by using polls but also through the comments and other content shared by the participants. In another words, ICT technologies may significantly change the feedback collection process by combining informal feedback with the more traditional formal one received through the polls (Davidson, 2018).

1.7.2 Event apps

Davidson (2018) defines mobile apps as computer programs which can be downloaded and used on the mobile devices. Those programs are nowadays commonly used in the MICE industry due to their functionality which may also vary depending. Some applications may simply replace the printed programs that were previously distributed during the events, others allow their users to create their personal schedule, communicate with other participants, share content and search information. Therefore, this tool may be used to increase the engagement of the participants not only during the event but even afterwards as some apps may be equipped with internal email system (Parry, 2014).

According to Riazanova (2020) modern event apps may provide such features as private social network for the event, photo and video gallery, accessible in real time dynamic event analytics, in-app sponsor platform, gamification options, such as photo contests, treasure hunt or best response/comment contests, private messengers or group chats, document library in order to hold important documents, streaming, polls, interactive maps etc. Sennik (2020) identify six main reasons to use an Event App, which are 1.) reduced costs as it is a paperless option; 2.) content may be updated in case of last-minute changes; 3.) networking is simplified as participants may create their online profiles within the app; 4.) feedback can be received during and after the event due to the integrated polls and ratings facilities; 5.) in-app sponsor platforms allowing monetization of the app; 6.) engagement may be easier analyzed in the form of number of downloads, posts, likes as well as participation in polls and surveys.

However, beside the various advantages, those apps may equally distract users from real-life conversations (Kwok, 2013; Davidson, 2018), may be expensive with the low ROIs, not compatible with some hardware technologies. At the same time, some potential users may have concerns about the security and privacy of their personal data (Davidson, 2018).

1.7.3 Virtual and hybrid events

The development of ICT technologies has offered meeting planners some opportunities related to the enrichment of participants experience (Kim & Park, 2009; Sox, Kline & Crews, 2013). The examples of these practices are Virtual and Hybrid meetings which may be realized by using incorporating remote conferencing technology (Baker, 2009; Sox, Kline & Crews, 2013). If previously “being there” was considered as the only solution, today more options may be provided (Davidson, 2002). Beside the traditional face-to-face or “collocated” events, virtual or “distributed” and hybrid events, as a combination of face-to-face events with virtual elements, become more accessible. For example, The Marriott International and Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide have considered an option of implementing the required technologies in order to host hybrid meetings (Davidson, 2018; Sox, Kline & Crews, 2013). If previously those technologies were seen in a more negative way, as were considered as a risk by the meeting planners (Davidson & Seaton, 2008), more recent research (Sox, Kline & Crews, 2013) outline the opportunities that those technologies may offer to both meeting

planners and attendees. For example, hybrid meetings may combine the best components of both virtual and face-to-face meetings.

Virtual meetings require the use of technologies, such as “webcasting (streaming media), virtual environments (2D and 3D)” (Sox et al, 2017). This term refers equally to virtual events, virtual trade shows, conferences, campuses as well as business environments (Sox et al, 2017). According to Pearlman and Gates (2010) multiple examples of VR applications can be found in the MICE industry. Those may be virtual large-scale events like conferences and trade shows organized on the ON24 Platform, desktop sharing, webcasts or virtual environments (e.g., Second Life).

According to Davidson (2018) virtual meeting allow participants to meet in a virtual environment while being physically based in different locations. With a reference to the definition of Virtual Edge Institute, Sox et al. (2017) state that virtual meetings are majorly organized on the virtual platforms or take place in virtual words such as Second Life and require the usage of audio-visual technologies (Davidson, 2018). According to ON24 (2020) virtual events can be hosted as a live session, but also may be pre-recorded and translated during the live session for the audience via the online platform. They are often marketed as more convenient solution in comparison to F2F meetings as provide certain flexibility to the attendees who may participate from their homes or working places. Virtual meeting may be organized in a shorter period of time as those are not dependent on the availability of venues, transport or accommodational facilities (Davidson, 2018). ON24 (2020) consider virtual meetings less costly in terms of money, time and resources. Moreover, virtual events do not depend on the external factors such as weather or world events, therefore, attendance may be considered more predictable. On the other hand, Face-to-face meetings provide more engagement solutions (Sox et al., 2017), participation in virtual meetings implies the availability of required equipment. Moreover, virtual meetings may be difficult to schedule due to the different time zones depending on the location of the participants (Davidson, 2018).

Hybrid events combine both virtual and F2F meetings components and, therefore, are often seen as best meeting formats (Sox et al., 2017). Those may be delivered through webcasting, in other words through live broadcast of a face-to-face event via Internet. This technique may

increase the impact of the event as it would be available worldwide and not only one chosen destination (Fadini, 2020). According to Davidson (2018) the main advantages of these events are an ability to register some parts of the event for the future use as well as an opportunity to increase the attendance by attracting the participant who may not have a possibility to travel to the destination chosen for the event or are partly interested in the event. In another words, hybrid events may increase the revenue as a fee may be charged for both, virtual participation and further access to the registered content (Davidson, 2018). Hybrid meetings are commonly seen as the meetings of future; therefore, industry professionals confirm the need of further studies in this area in order to make use of the full potential of this phenomenon (Sox, Kline & Crews, 2013; Davidson, 2018).

For example, hybrid events may help in erasing geographical borders in the sense that technologies may be used for the multi-site events in order to maintain the same level of quality for all the locations. This may be realized through the broadcasting as the same message may be shared across the multiple sites. Modern hybrid platforms allow no delayed communication between the sites (Fadini, 2020).

In the future the “humagrams” may be equally used for hybrid events as this technology would allow ultra-realistic telepresence. This technology could help in reducing travelling costs but also bring multi-site events to the new level (Fadini, 2020).

New tactics may need to be developed in order to increase the level of engagement of the remote participants. Referring to Carey (2015), Davidson (2018) suggests that due to the specifics of the format the topic may need to be changed more frequently. This would make sessions shorter and therefore, help the participants to stay concentrated. ON24 (2020) recommend implementing Q&A sessions in order to drive the interaction. Carey (2015) suggests using a talk-show-host format instead of one speaker giving a presentation.

Despite the above mentioned, some industry professionals are concerned about the possible decrease of face-to-face participants that may be caused by the hybrid events (Fryatt et al., 2012). Indeed, the opponents of hybrid events suggest that some face-to-face participants may prefer to participate virtually. However, Carey (2015) states that based on the previous experiences the situation is rather reverse as virtual attendees used to start participating in face-to-face events after attending a correctly organized hybrid event.

Despite the spread of the electronic communication, the face-to-face events are still favored due to the following advantages outlined by Arvey (2009):

- Possibility to observe verbal and non-verbal behavior.
- Technical problems which could occur during computer-mediated communication
- They happen in “real-time”.
- Human beings are social creatures; therefore, human contact is an important factor.
- They are more transparent; therefore, participants tend to have a higher level of trust for each other.
- It is easier to evaluate competencies and skills of other participants or leaders.

1.7.4 Artificial intelligence

Leaser (2019) predicts an AI (artificial intelligence) driven future assuming that based on the historical evidence, technologies do not only decrease the number of working places, but also create jobs and in the greater amount. Leaser (2019) refers to the report from the World Economic Forum (2018) according to which the displacement of 75 million jobs would be recompensated by the emergence of 133 million new ones with the development of the AI (artificial intelligence) by 2022. Moreover, significant number of companies have already started to implement strategies which could reduce the risks of the future skills gaps by providing training to their existing employees and by hiring new qualified staff. Leaser (2019) equally predicts the revaluation of human skills by stating that such skills as creativity, analytical thinking, originality and innovation would be considered more important with the implementation of the AI to the professional sphere.

Davidson (2018) states that advancements in AI may offer a lot of opportunities to MICE industry. The usage of facial recognition has been planned during the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games. The system developed by NEC was supposed to recognize over 300,000 people, such as staff (volunteers, media etc.) and athletes. The biometric authentication technology involves the usage of IC (integrated circuit) cards and photo data, meaning that only the initial card holder would be able to get an access to the venue (Byford, 2018).

In the future facial recognition technologies may be used not only to provide access to venues but also in order to recognize the emotions by analyzing facial expressions. For the MICE industry professional that would provide an ability to analyze the level of engagement of the attendees or their feelings. For example, this technology may be used in order to analyze the necessity to change the temperature or the lighting in the venue (Cal, 2019). Even though, face recognition technology may be considered as a useful tool, Davidson (2019) states that it may be equally seen as a violation of the personal right to privacy. Therefore, the industry professionals should clearly identify what data they want to collect and communicate it to the attendees as well as to guaranty the responsible usage of the personal data (Davidson, 2018).

AI may be equally applied to networking; “interest-matching” may be used in order to “pair up” the participant based on the data provided by them, such as interests or professional goals (Cal, 2019; Davidson, 2018).

Another possible implementation of AI is predictive pricing. Davidson (2018) suggests that AI may improve the revenue management by setting the best rate for the venue by using prediction algorithms. The platforms like Perfect Price take into consideration multiple factors, for example supply and competitors’ prices in order to generate an accurate demand function and calculate a price (Unemyr, 2019).

Chatbots or bots, like Siri (Apple) or Amazon Echo may be equally used in the MICE industry as a part of the events app as a more user-friendly alternative of the traditional FAQs sections. A special bot for the meeting industry has already been created; The Concierge EventBot is able to provide text answers to the participants’ questions (e.g. What is the Wifi password?) (Davidson, 2018).

Simultaneous translation to foreign languages may be a good practice for the international events carried out in English. If previously it was done by hiring professional translators, with the development of AI it can be done by applications powered by Advanced Natural Language Processing and AI. Modern apps may translate both audio and text and support multiple languages (Davidson, 2019).

1.7.5 On-site data capture

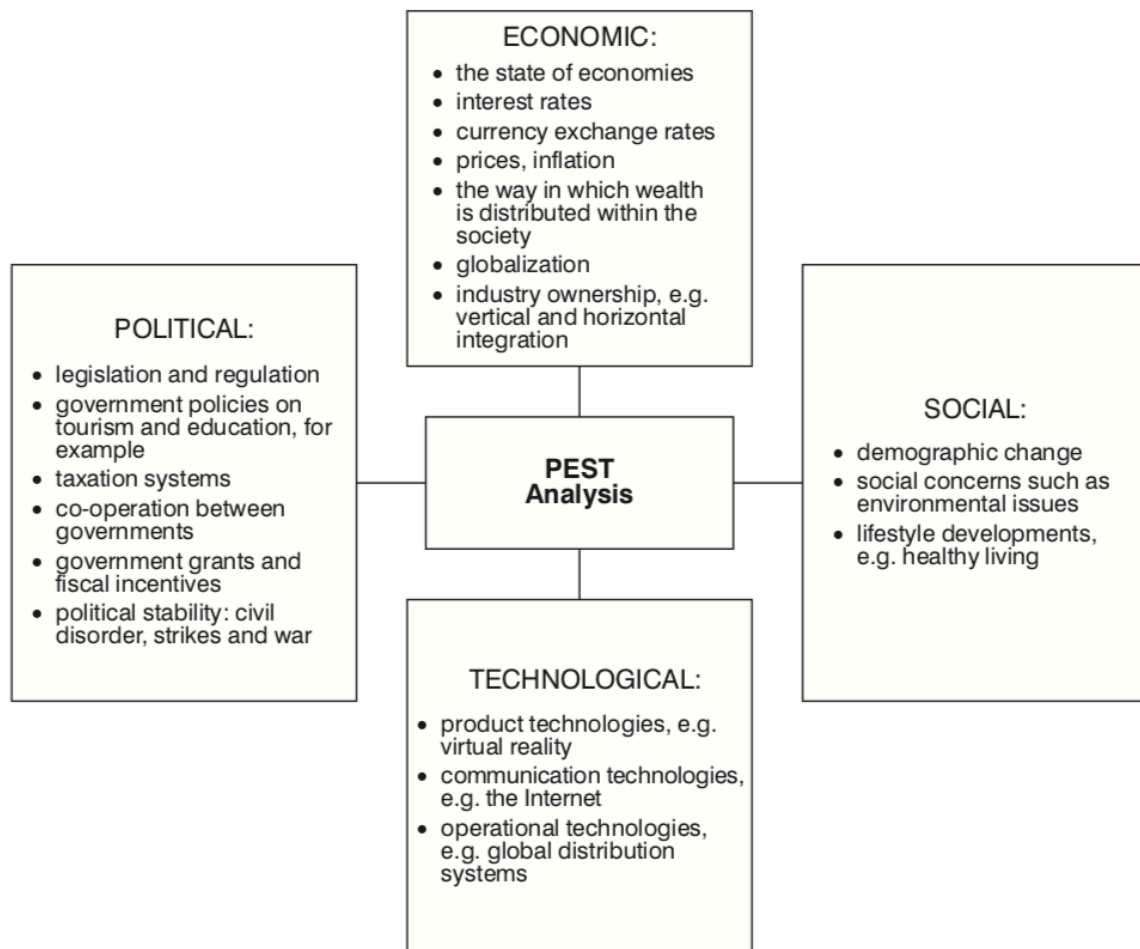
The analysis of data is extremely significant for the MICE industry, therefore both RFID (radio frequency identification) and NFC (near field communications) IT technologies were attempted to be applied in order to track the movements of the attendees (Kim, Park, Sun & Lee, 2016). Davidson (2018) provides an example of the usage of RFID bracelets during the Comic-Con event. Those technologies may allow industry professionals to measure the success of particular parts of the events (for example stand, during the events) by analyzing the average length of visit as well as the interests of the participants. In order to apply those technologies, the special readers or antennae should be placed in the venues; those would capture the signals from the mobile phones of the participants (Davidson, 2018).

Kim et al. (2016) suggest the collection of big data through IoT beacon-based platform that may be applied in the context of MICE industry. The smart platform used in the study includes “the beacon engine, exhibition solution and analytics platform; exhibition service app used as a direct channel to provide services to visitors; back-office system in which the MICE is operated and managed by organizers and participating firms” (Kim, Park, Sun & Lee, 2016, p.763). Through this technology visitors of exhibitions may receive the information about real-time crowdedness and, therefore, choose less crowded booths. Moreover, the application equally gives recommendations based on the data provided by user. Participating companies may measure the effectiveness of their marketing efforts and receive information about the visitor’s behavior patterns and interests (Kim, Park, Sun & Lee, 2016).

1.8 Factors influencing business travel and tourism demand in Switzerland

The elements of PEST-analysis were used in order to identify the impact of the macro-environment on the MICE industry in Switzerland which could affect the demand. According to Swarbrooke & Horner (2001) those factors are:

Figure 1: PEST Analysis factors



Source: Swarbrooke & Horner (2001; p.68)

1.8.1 Political

The Switzerland Convention & Incentive Bureau is a national nonprofit organization with the main goal of promoting Switzerland as a MICE destination. It represents the local players, such as national event organizers, conference destinations and transport companies. The development of business tourism in Switzerland is supported by the government due to the importance of the meeting sector for the tourism industry in Switzerland, as in 2011 this sector has generated 19% of hotel overnights in Switzerland. For the decades Switzerland has been a neutral state, meaning that it would not participate in any armed conflict unless the country is attacked. Switzerland has three level of government, which are federal, cantonal and communal. This federal structure prevents each of the authorities limits the powerfulness

of every level. Moreover, popular votes exist at all the levels meaning that people have a direct voice (The Federal Council, 2012). In Switzerland left-wing, right-wing and centrist parties all share executive power and all the largest parties are represented in the Federal Council (The Federal Council, 2017). Therefore, the political situation in Switzerland may be considered as stable, according to Swarbrooke & Horner (2001) political stability increase the demand. The Federal Council implements policies in order to support the competitiveness of Switzerland as tourist destination. The key elements of the strategy are to improve framework conditions, to promote entrepreneurship, to use the opportunities provided by the digital economy (including digital transformation of business models and processes, digitalization of tourism market development activities), to increase the attractiveness of the offers and the market presence (State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO, 2018). Switzerland's foreign policy as for 2012-2015 was to maintain and develop relations with the neighbor countries, as well as to strengthen relations with the European Union, to contribute to the stability in other countries and to establish strategic partnership with the countries outside of the Europe. Moreover, promoting Geneva as a MICE destination was considered as one of the priorities of the Foreign Policy (The Federal Council, 2017). Being a member of the Schengen Area but not the EU member, Switzerland share one common visa with the European bloc ("Foreign policy", 2018). Tourists may be exempted from the tax for the goods purchased during their trip for all the goods with the price above CHF 300 including VAT if those goods were purchased for the personal use of the tourist (a person domiciled abroad) or as a gift. At the same time, the special rules are applied for the foreign guided tourist group who has purchased an organized tour from the tour operator. Suppliers may sell goods to the tourist group or its members without the VAT (FTA Federal Tax Administration, 2019). However, tourists may be required to pay a tourist tax depending on the location which would be included to the final bill for the accommodation (Christine, 2019). However, in some cities, for example, Lausanne tourists would be able to benefit from the free transport card valid during their stay (Bureau de la communication, 2020).

1.8.2 Economic

As stated in Meeting Report Switzerland (2016), strong swiss franc may be seen as a threat for the competitiveness of Switzerland as a MICE destination due to the price-sensitivity of the travelers from some regions. Switzerland has a strong and competitive economy with the

second highest GDP in the world (CHF 77.943 in the end of 2015), while service sector accounts as 74% of the GDP. More than CHF 18.5 billion is spent annually on the research in development. At the same time, Switzerland has the lowest VAT rate in Europe, which is 8% on the majority of goods and services, 2.5% on the goods of the first necessity and 3.8% on accommodation (“Swiss Economy – Facts and Figures”, 2020). Tourism sector contributes to the job creation and wellbeing of local population in less industrial locations (“Service sector”, 2016). According to Whiting (2019) Switzerland was ranked the 5th in the Global Competitiveness Report and the 1st for skills. Switzerland has a relatively high cost of living due to the high quality of life (Schweiz Tourismus, 2020). Switzerland was ranked the 1st in globalization according to the study performed by Bertelsmann Foundation, as industrialized countries tend to benefit more from the interconnectedness (Ari, 2018). It was also ranked 3rd after the Netherlands and Singapore in the Global Connectedness Index realized by DHL (“Switzerland is in the top for globalization”, 2019). Switzerland is a rich country with the relatively equal wealth distribution (Sharma, 2019). Switzerland invests in education, research and development, as well as currently promotes the importance of innovation (The Federal Council, 2012). Competition Law and Policy contribute to the welfare of the society by promoting the market opening (OECD, 2006). In order to ensure the competitiveness of Switzerland as a destination for congresses multiple investments were done, for example, the construction of The Swiss Tech Convention Center with the overall capacity for 3000 people. This center is the first one in Europe to be equipped with the technology allowing to transform the rooms depending on the number of the participants and the type of the event. At the same time In Zurich 2 hotels as well as the congress center are built, called The Circle which would welcome 1500 people (“La Suisse mise sur le Mice”, 2012). CHF 240 million were invested to the renovation of Kongresshaus Zürich, the conference center with the largest meeting room being able to greet 2000 persons (Schweiz Tourismus, 2020).

1.8.3 Socio-cultural

Switzerland has one of the best health cares in the world, however one of the most expensive at the same time. Tourists are strongly recommended to have a travel insurance. In 2014 11.7% of the GDP was spent on the healthcare. Switzerland has a low level of unemployment and relatively high salaries in comparison with other European countries. In 2016 the average wage in Switzerland was CHF 6,427 (Presence Switzerland, 2020). About 8 million people that

represents over 22.7% of the country's population are not Swiss citizens. Switzerland has 4 official languages, which are German (spoken by 63.5% of the population), French (22.5%), Italian (8.1%) and Romansh (0.5%) and other languages (6.6%). 1% of the population considers English as the main language. Therefore, cultural diversity is an intrinsic feature of the country, which allows multiple nationalities to create a link with the destination. Switzerland is safe and secure: tap water is safe to drink and the crime rate is considered as one of the lowest (Schweiz Tourismus, 2020). Being a country with rich culture, Switzerland has multiple attractions to offer as the natural heritage represented by the variety of landscapes and related activities and more than 1000 museums located in the country ("Museums", 2018). Swiss Tourism proposes multiple offers allowing to discover Swiss culture and customs, including gastronomic tours, factory tours or active leisure activities (Schweiz Tourismus, 2020), which may be perceived as an additional value for choosing a destination.

1.8.4 Technological

Such companies as Google, IBM and Microsoft drive their AI research in Switzerland. ETH Zurich, EPFL, University of St. Gallen and IDSIA are internationally recognized research institutes located in Switzerland and reputed for their research in this field. Swiss authorities support innovation as well as due to the location, companies based in Switzerland may benefit from the technology transfer (Switzerland Global Enterprise, 2019). Switzerland is considered one of the leaders for ICTs with the overall number of 13500 ICT companies located in the country (Schweiz Tourismus, 2020). Moreover, the WWW (World Wide Web) was invented by Tim Berners-Lee while he was working at CERN (CERN, 2020). Government invest in R&D through Swiss National Science Foundation (Research and Innovation SERN, 2020). According to ICT Development Index, Switzerland ranks #3 in 2017, however based on the IDI Access Sub-Index, some other countries have better results as for 2005. For example, the International Internet bandwidth per internet user is higher in Singapore and the percentage of households with Internet access is higher in Republic of Korea, even though Switzerland has a relatively high performance (90,60%) (Tucci, Gautschi & Viscusi, 2016).

2. The second objective: to identify the changes in the MICE industry caused by the COVID-19 in Switzerland

2.1 COVID-19 situation overview

According to WHO, a pneumonia of unknown case was first detected in Wuhan, China and was reported to the WHO on 31 December 2019 (World Health Organization WHO, 2020). Federal Office of Public Health (2020) suggests that the possible origin of the new coronavirus may be a fish market in Wuhan where besides fish and seafood, exotic animals could be equally purchased. The virus might be transmitted via animals, particularly by bats which could be found at the market or indirectly via pangolins. The above-mentioned market was closed by the authorities at the beginning of January. However, since then the new coronavirus has already started to be transmitted from person to person. The name COVID-19 was announced by WHO on 11 February 2020. As for 17.06.20 the number of confirmed cases was 8,282,500, COVID-19 has caused 446,500 deaths (Federal Office of Public Health FOPH, 2020). The situation caused by Coronavirus had a dramatic influence on all types of business and global economy. According to Jurczenko (2020) the first country to be influence by the COVID-19 was China where economy has slowed down. The possible consequences for the global economy may be even worse than after the economic crisis of 2007-2008 as some businesses had to completely stop their activities while most of the companies had to slow down their activities. In China, where the propagation of the virus has almost stopped, the manufacturers have recommenced their activities, however as other countries are going through the same situation as China before, Chinese economy would equally suffer as international demand represents 20% of the economy of the country. At the same time the economists from Morgan Stanley predict that the level of consumption in USA might reduce by 30% in the seconder trimester. Jurczenko (2020) states that the impact of the pandemic shall not be underestimated as all the countries would be affected (Jurczenko, 2020).

2.2 Travel restrictions caused by COVID-19

Tourism industry may be considered one of the most affected due to the travel restrictions across the globe. Indeed, most of the countries have imposed travel restrictions as for May 2020 with the aim to decrease the spread of the disease. According to Salcedo, Yar & Cherelus

(2020) about 3 billion people live in the countries that have completely closed their borders for the foreign travelers, as well as at least 93% of the population reside in the countries which have implemented some travel restrictions.

According to IATA (2020), even in the mid-July 2020, 101 countries out of 195 analyzed (51.79%) had “totally restrictive” travel regulations (see Appendix II). The main restrictions that were introduced by those countries may be formulated as following:

- Airports being closed
- Ports being closed
- Borders being closed
- Flights being suspended (with few exceptions)
- Prohibition to enter the country, mostly for non-residents

84 countries (43.07%) have partially restricted travelling, the major restrictions introduced may be categorized as:

- Countries, requiring passengers to hold a medical certificate on their arrival or to proceed a medical screening on their arrival or/and be placed on quarantine for 14 days
- Flights being suspended (with the list of exceptions for some destinations/ purposes)
- Limited number of the airports operating
- Suspension of visa on-arrival facilities and/or visas exemptions and/or short-term visas cancellation
- Borders being closed (with the list of exceptions)
- Prohibition to enter the country (with the list of exceptions for passengers arriving from some countries)
- Prohibition to enter the country for the passengers arriving from certain destinations/ passengers, who have recently transited or been in the list of the countries

Only 4 countries (0.02%) have opened their borders, however, some countries from this “not restrictive” category, like Turkey or Ukraine, demand passengers to either self-quarantine, or to proceed a medical screening on their arrival.

The impact of the Covid-19 was studied in France, where 752 MICE events were analyzed. As the result, only 29% of those were totally cancelled, while 49% were postponed. The study has showed the need of implementing digital solutions, especially during this period, especially newsletters and webinars (TendanceHotellerie, 2020).

2.3 Restrictions in Switzerland implemented due to the COVID-19

The first measures supposed to stop the propagation of the COVID-19 in Switzerland were communicated on the 28.02.2020. From this day and until 15.03.2020 all the events with the number of the participants above 1000 were prohibited. Due to this order, the authorities of Geneva had decided to cancel the 90th edition of the Geneva International Motor Show, an annual event that attracted 600,000 visitors in 2019 (Ianni, 2020). On 13th March 2020 Federal Council has announced a list of the further restrictions related to the propagation of the new coronavirus. All the private and public events of more than 100 people were prohibited, schools were closed until the 4.04.2020, restaurant and bars could not receive more that 50 customers. At the same time, the arrivals from Italy were limited. Swiss authorities represented by the Federal Council have allocated 10 milliards of swiss francs in order to support the economy (Le Conseil fédéral, 2020). On 16.03.2020 those restrictions were reinforced as the situation in Switzerland was qualified as “extraordinary”. The list of the measurements valid from the 16.03.2020 is as follows:

- Prohibition of all the public and private events
- Closure of all the shops (except for the grocery stores), markets, bars, restaurants, entertainment establishments (such, as libraries, cinemas, theaters, concert halls, sport centers, swimming pools, museums and ski stations)
- Closure of all the establishments where social distances could not be respected, such as beauty salons and other aesthetic centers.
- Reinforced control on the borders (Le Conseil fédéral, 2020).

As communicated on 18.03.2020, the Federal Council has limited the entrance to the country for non-citizens or residents of Switzerland coming from such countries as Italy, France, Spain, Austria and Germany and all non-Schengen countries, except for the professional reasons or in cases of emergency. Switzerland has equally stopped to issue the national visas with some exceptions for family members of Swiss citizens or medical specialists, as for the 20.03.2020 all the gatherings of more than 5 persons were prohibited. On 25.03.2020 the Federal Council has communicated that the entrance restrictions were extended to all the Schengen countries, however with the same exceptions (Le Conseil federal, 2020).

On 20th April Federal Council has announced the opening of the borders with neighbor countries, in particularly Germany, France and Austria from the 15th June.

2.4 Interviews with the experts

Expert's name:	Richard Torriani	Jurg Tschanz	Silvano Schaer	Patrick Mengelt
Company:	MCI Group	Planitswiss Group	Congrex Switzerland	Vitalis Events SA
Position:	Managing Director of the MCI Geneva/ Chief Operating Officer for the Americas	Co-Founder of Planitswiss Group/ Imavox/AIO	Head of Sales and Marketing at Congrex Switzerland	Managing Partner at Vitalis Events SA
Information about the company:	Independently owned agency, HQ in Geneva, offices in 32 countries, 60 cities	An international event agency, HQ in Switzerland, offices in Europe (Switzerland	Professional Conference Organiser (PCO)	Swiss boutique (event) agency

		and France), Africa (Rwanda) and Asia (China and Singapore)		
Proportion of local vs international events:	90% outside of Switzerland, mostly European	99% is local	50% of congresses within (Switzerland) and the rest are outside, mostly in Europe	70% international and 30% in Switzerland
Target markets:	Large conferences 15,000-20,000 people Different niches	Big, multinationals All types of events	Associations Congress Market, “do not organize any events for companies or do incentives or small meetings” (see Appendix I)	90% corporate clients; 10-15% Associations All types of events

Table 3: Background information about the experts

2.4.1 The evolution of the role of ICT in the MICE industry at international level and in Switzerland

Both Richard Torriani (see Appendix I) and Patrick Mengelt (see Appendix I) have mentioned online registration as one of the tools that are essential for the industry while underlining the changes that ICTs have brought to the processes. Jurg Tschanz (see Appendix I) has also underlined the importance of registration tools, however he has stated that this tool was not warmly welcomed in Switzerland and may be perceived as a recent change. However, Mr.

Tschanz has stated that online registration was a common practice for the Asian market. At the same time, he has equally observed that Asian market was more interested in event apps and webpages already before the COVID-19. According to Richard Torriani the submission of scientific content online is another possible implication of the ICTs in the MICE industry. However, the COVID-19 has completely changed the perception: the demand for virtual events is stronger in Switzerland, as “the Asian market is still very paralyzed” (see Appendix I); clients from this market prefer not running any events at all rather than virtual. Mr. Torriani has equally mentioned digital and hybrid events while describing the evolution that industry has faced. Silvano Schaer has highlighted the importance of virtual events, especially during the COVID-19 situation, as participant may be located in different parts of the world, “like one participant can be in the Congo, or the other in Brazil, the other is in China” (see Appendix I).

2.4.2 Digital solutions mainly used during the face-to-face (in-person) events in Switzerland

Mr. Torriani states that most of the ICT technologies are used in the MICE industry, however with the different purposes. Solutions, like online registration technologies or hotel sales technologies provide certain efficiency in comparison with their manual equivalents which were used before. Both Mr. and Mr. Mengelt (see Appendix I) have mentioned Excel files exchange as a previous less sophisticated and efficient solution for the purpose of registering the participants. Silvano Schaer confirms that in Congrex they “work with countless technologies” (see Appendix): multiple solutions (software) are applied in order to register the participants, “for the abstract submission and selection” (see Appendix), to proceed rooms reservation, as well as a special software is used for sponsors and exhibitors.

Thus, the common solution mentioned by all the respondents was online registration. However, according to Mr. Torriani generalization would not be the right solution in the context of the MICE industry due to the complexity of the phenomenon. Both, Richard Torriani and Patrick state that the usage of ICTs in MICE industry would differ from one event to another, as there is no “one-fit-all” solution. “the generic answer is - sure, all mobile, all face to face meetings of anything above 50 people will have a mobile application just because it's, it's cheap and easy to do. Not because it's anything else” (see Appendix I) This tool mentioned by Mr. Torriani, Mr. Mengelt and Mr. Tschanz may be considered relatively cheap

and easy to realize, thus it would be used during the majority of the events, however due to the complexity of the MICE industry and the differences between the events in terms of budget or purposes, those apps would differ in terms of functionalities. Mobile apps may be perceived as a replacement of the paper program as would provide the same information but in different format, however, may be also used in order to enhance the experience, as, for example, one-on-one meeting apps (see Appendix I). According to Mr. Tschanz apps may provide participants with valuable information about the rooms, may equally offer (depending on the app) a possibility to communicate between the participants, as well as may be used in order to create a personalized agenda or for direct translation. According to Mr. Torriani the functionality of the apps would equally depend on the objectives which are needed to be achieved. Mr. Mengelt states that with the spread of smartphones, this tool became more available and less costly. It may be equally used for the Q&A sessions or voting as facilitates the process (in comparison with non-technological equivalent: manual recording and transfer of the questions by the staff) in order to increase interactivity “because even if the technologies existed 10 years ago already, but not everybody had smartphones at that time” (see Appendix I).

2.4.3 The influence of COVID-19 on the event agencies in Switzerland

According to Richard Torriani, in-person events cannot be replaced despite the availability of digital solutions (e.g., AI) due to the importance of human contact. Even before the COVID-19 some content was available online for free (e.g., Ted conferences), but people were still willing to spend money in order to attend in-person conferences. However, with the COVID-19 industry had to adapt the offer as the face-to-face business, as due to the implemented restrictions, face-to-face events could not take place and virtual events were the only solutions.

Jurg Tschanz states that the traditional “business was dead from one day to the other all over the world” (see Appendix I) starting from the March 15, so that caused the decrease of the revenue and the vague of cancellations. Therefore, the agencies had only two options available: “either you run out of business and you layoff everyone - that would be one option, or the other option is that we pushed our technology that we had already developed not for the COVID” (see Appendix I). In case of Planitswiss Group, according to Mr. Tschanz those

solutions were developed before the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, the company had to transform the company and promote those solutions to their clients. “Of course, it doesn't, economically speaking, replace an event on site, but still at least you are there on the market and you have some revenue.” (see Appendix I). Thus, even though, those measures could not completely restore the financial indicators, but would allow companies to stay on the market

Silvano Schaer describes the similar situation in case of Congrex. “95 % of our congresses this year are either canceled or postponed to next year or take place virtually, so we haven't got any physical events planned for the whole year.” (see Appendix I). Due to the familiarity with the virtual solutions of the company and the availability of the required software, according to Mr. Schaer, Congrex has reacted immediately by starting to provide trainings to the employees, explaining how to use the virtual exhibitions software. “Since then we have already conducted first projects and we have extremely high demand in that area, for virtual meetings and exhibitions, so we have already times where we are sold out and cannot take any new mandate anymore” (see Appendix). Thus, as stated by multiple experts the quick reaction to the situation has helped multiple agencies to stay on the market despite the crisis.

According to Patrick Mengelt, all of the events planned for the period from March to mid-September were cancelled, as well as some events in October, November and one which have been planned for the June 2021. Due to the high level of uncertainties related to the duration of the crisis and future evolution of the situation, especially related to the possibility of the second wave of restrictions limiting the gathering of people or travel restrictions, event agencies cannot plan the future events in a traditional (in-person) format. However, Vitalis Events SA has also started to transform face-to-face events into virtual alternatives, as the same as other players, company believes that it is the only solution available due to the circumstances, “We have one event, it was the inauguration of headquarter, of a new headquarter which is in Lausanne, and for this one the event has been turned digitally and we will do this on Monday” stated Mr. Mengelt (see Appendix I).

2.4.4 Virtual and Hybrid events during the COVID-19 period

Richard Torriani states that COVID-19 has contributed to the interest towards Virtual events or at least digital components and solutions. The same idea was communicated by Jurg Tschanz who has seen the change in the behavioral patterns on the swiss market “now with

the COVID we have a clear-clear tendency that Switzerland is catching up really fast” (see Appendix I).

For the moment, as Hybrid events could not be realized, the fully virtual events were proposed as a respond to the demand. Indeed, despite the COVID-19 situation, clients had their events plans, for example related to the products launches or a need to share the information. However, due to the lack of experience in the organization of Virtual events, Mr. Torriani states that some of them very lacking professionalism due to the belief that physical experience may be transformed into a digital event without going through certain modifications. Indeed, consumers would act and react differently during the Virtual event, as “nobody is going to sit behind their screen for 8 hours” (see Appendix I), however, some actors were lacking this understanding. In order to organize a successful Virtual Events, meeting planners should understand the strengths and weaknesses of virtual elements and face-to-face events elements, respectively: “What is good in digital is actually learning. You can do a better job of learning in digital, because you can structure your content in a way that's much more engaging than face to face.” (see Appendix).

According to Jurg Tschanz, there are different ways of organizing virtual events, as sometimes the main speakers could be filmed in a studio, so they are the only ones who are on-site. However, due to the traveling restrictions, this solution could not be always provided. In some cases, nobody is actually on-site, including the speakers. Thus, in this case all the actors would participate from their locations, “sometimes the speakers are filmed in a studio, so they are on site, but this is not even possible for some of the events, because there's all these flight problems and travel issues, so that fully virtually events sometimes are, even the speakers are from home and participants are from home as well.” (see Appendix I). The same definition is given by Silvano Schaer, “so we have got, like, solutions where we can work in a fixed studio somewhere, where all the speakers go to the studio and the sessions are streamed out of there, or we have our technological solutions where the speakers can be anywhere in the world” (see Appendix I). Moreover, Congrex equally proposes the Virtual Exhibitions organized by using exhibition software. This experience is very alike with the in-person exhibitions, as according to Mr. Schaer, participants may visit the booths as well as may communicate with the exhibitors and sponsors.

Mr. Tschanz explains that Hybrid events is a combination of the characteristics of in-person and Virtual events. He states that some participants would be presented on-site while others would participate virtually, “either you're sitting in your room, or you're sitting at home you still can put your questions to the moderator and there's no real difference if you were sitting in the room or outside the room. It's exactly the same experience” (see Appendix), however in order to provide the same level of interaction and thus, experience, the event app should be implemented as a part of experience in order to provide the same opportunities to both categories of the participants, for example a possibility to ask questions.

At the same time, Mr. Torriani believes that providing a hybrid experience may be challenging; “The merger of hybrid events is going to be complicated, because how do you entertain a face-to-face audience and at the same point entertain the digital audience? Because they have different SPEEDS.” (see Appendix I).

And if during this special period, Hybrid events could not be considered as one of the possible solutions due to the internal restrictions in Switzerland (“Because even today you are not allowed to have a meeting in Switzerland of more than five people.” (see Appendix I), Mr. Torriani believes that, even though, currently there is a demand for the Virtual Events, the main reason for this is the non-availability of other options.

According to Patrick Mengelt the demand for the Hybrid events has increased in the end of the February, “in the end of February when we had organized a congress in Geneva and some people couldn't come because of the COVID already and they were afraid to come from the US or Canada...” (see Appendix I). Indeed, even though no restrictions were introduced by Switzerland, some other countries have already faced the COVID-19 and, thus, the particular congress has been transformed into Hybrid event by using Skype and Zoom as audio-visual solutions.

As for the face-to-face events, the usage of digital solutions depends on the particular event and its budget. Some of the tools may be free, like Zoom, however, according to Mr. Torriani, those solutions may not be comparable to the pre-recorded video due to the possible quality issues caused by the connection. Due to COVID-19 situation multiple agencies provide digital solutions, some of which may be rather expensive, but in this case, clients would receive a completely different experience accomplished by AI technologies or virtual 3D exhibitions,

“But we also have clients spending a \$1,000,000 on the digital component of it, with artificial intelligence or product that proposes content to people based on their needs and virtual 3D exhibitions and stuff like that, so, again, like I said, there's 900 meeting application, there's also, especially after COVID, a hundred and fifty companies are offering some level of virtual conferencing.” (see Appendix I). The choice of digital solution or solutions would again depend on the needs of the client and the type of the event. “So, clearly you can't do that on zoom. So, you have to have much more robust technology than that and we probably are using 15 different applications right now and again no single tool does everything you need.” (see Appendix)

At the same time Mr.Tschanz highlights the importance of adapting digital solutions based on each particular request: “Well again, that depends very much on what you are looking for, I mean, if you have a conference for five people then you can you Zoom or WebEx or whatever; there's so many solutions out there.” (see Appendix I).

Some of digital solutions that were mentioned during the interviews are WebEx, YouTube, BlueJeans, Zoom, Vimeo and Skype however, those tools could not be considered as “one-fit-all solutions” as should be implemented to the platform in order to provide a full experience or be combined.

2.4.5 The possible scenario of the future of the MICE industry in Switzerland

All the experts have agreed that the future of MICE industry would not be 100% virtual. This may be explained by the need of human contact and networking. According to Richard Torriani “COVID has helped people to understand that in the future hybrid events, if you want, elements of digital should always permeate meetings.” (see Appendix I). According to Silvano Schaer, Richard and Jurg Tschanz (personal communication, June 03, 2020), future would be rather hybrid. Mr.Tschanz explains, that “with all these sustainability movements and also travel bands and budget constraints” (see Appendix), some people may prefer not to travel to the chosen destination if the same level of experience could be provided in the digital format. Silvano Schaer believes that in-person events would not lose their importance, however, by implementing digital solutions, those events may increase the number of participants as could attract new customers who would not have the possibility to participate otherwise, “the hybrid parts or the virtual parts to the conference can boost their reach and

you can, like, attract delegate who otherwise wouldn't have had the possibility to attend the conference.” (see Appendix I). Richard Torriani suggests that some events may be held virtually as this format would be beneficial for the learning purposes, as the content may be structured. At the same time, those Virtual Events would provide more opportunities for Q&A sessions. Currently, “a lot of effort goes into producing content for a two or three day event and, the minute the conference is over, that content disappears and it's a waste of time and effort to do that” (see Appendix I) , thus, according to Richard Torriani clients should definitely implement some digital solutions in order to enregister the content “so that people come back to that content more frequently over the next months after the event, not just during the event.” (see Appendix I).

2.4.6 Lexical and semantical overview (word cloud)

The word cloud was created using Sphinx; however, all the themes were previously underlined manually.

Figure 2: Lexical and semantical overview of the interviews



Source: the data was obtained from the multiple sources and interpreted

The word “event” is situated in the center of the word cloud; this is not surprising in case of the MICE industry. Other words which were used more frequently are “virtual”, “digital”, “people”, “technology”, “conference”, “solution”, “company”. Therefore, we may observe that those words correspond to the themes underlined. The word “people” was used by the industry professionals while referring to clients, customers and professionals.

2.5. SWOT Analysis of the Virtual events

Table 4: SWOT Analysis

<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Possibility to register and store the content - Polls and engagement tools - No dependency on the external factors - More data (statistics) obtained via the technologies - Low costs in terms of money, time and resources - Higher reach 	<p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dependency on the connection/equipment - No human contact - Almost no networking - Less duration - Do not create benefits for the destination - Lower level of trust between the participants - Not all the participants know how to use the technologies - Body language cannot be observed
<p>Opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rising ecological concerns - Uncertainties about the COVID-19 caused travel restrictions - Fear of travelling - Switzerland is an innovation hub 	<p>Threats:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Impossible to schedule due to different time zones - GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People do not provide their real details - Key figures facing technical problems - Higher competition
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Source: the data was obtained from the multiple sources and interpreted

2.5.1 Strengths

The content may be registered and then used by the company/association for the internal purposes, such as R&D, staff trainings as well as the access may be provided after the event for those who could not attend on particular date, thus the additional revenue might be generated. Polls and Q&A sessions are easier to organize, as those may be implemented directly to the platform. Virtual events would not depend on the external factors, such as weather, currency exchange (thus, for example, strong Swiss franc would not influence the demand as Virtual Events are not related to the particular destination). Participants and their engagement may be observed as in some cases platforms may analyze the participation and interaction automatically and provide the reports (ON24, 2020). There are less charges related to the location of the site, catering and other expenses, as Virtual Events are not linked to the particular location, it takes less time to plan the events as, there is no need to rent the site, thus, there is more flexibility in terms of day and time choice. Moreover, less staff is needed (human resources), as all the procedures like meeting, greeting is done online, service during the event etc. are not applicable. By organizing a Virtual Event you could reach those participants who would not participate otherwise due to the high cost of the transportation and accommodation, busy schedule, medical indications not allowing to travel, people suffering from aerophobia.

2.5.2 Weaknesses

Though, the success of the event depends on the connection to internet, problems with the internet access or some problems with the equipment just before/during the event may influence the quality of the event and the participants experience. According to Arvey (2009)

as human beings are social creatures, the absence of the real human contact between the participants and the speakers may influence the interaction. Networking is considered an important part on the business events; however, this benefit could not be fully created during the Virtual Event. As it is hard to stay concentrated in front of the screen during the whole day, the duration of the Virtual Events is usually shorter or, otherwise, would be split, thus, would last for bigger amount of days (ON24, 2020). As previously discussed, MICE events generate multiple benefits for the destination, such as direct spending of the participants, indirect spending of accompanying persons, those business travelers may either chose the same destination for the leisure tourism or recommend the destination to the friends/family. Moreover, MICE tourism contributes to the development of the infrastructure that could be equally used by local communities. In Switzerland, MICE tourism has generated 19% of the total number of overnights in 2011 (The Federal Council, 2012). Virtual Events are considered less transparent, thus the level of trust between the participants and speakers might be lower. Elderly generations may not be familiar with the complex technologies, thus would not be willing to participate (Sox, Crews & Kline, 2014). Body language cannot be observed; thus, the level of engagement and appreciation would be harder to analyze (Davidson, 2018).

2.5.3 Opportunities

International events provoke the increase of international air travel and the level of CO2 emissions, respectively. The same as the usage of climate control during the events in the venues equally contribute the CO2 emissions, as well as requires a lot of energy (Davidson, 2018; Bossdorf, Parepa & Fischer, 2010). As Virtual Events do not require travelling to the destination, neither venue, they may be judged less damaging for the environment. Due to the COVID-19 Switzerland had to introduce the travel restrictions and to limit public gatherings (max 5 participants), thus all the events from March to mid-September were cancelled. Some people would not plan any travels as they are afraid to get infected with COVID-19, thus, they would prefer to participate from their own locations. ETH Zurich, EPFL, University of St.Gallen and IDSIA are located in Switzerland and are reputed due to their research in the field of AI (Switzerland Global Enterprise, 2019) and Switzerland is considered one of the leaders for ICTs with the overall number of 13500 ICT companies located in the country (Schweiz Tourismus, 2020), thus, Switzerland has all the necessary infrastructure and reputation in order to “host” Virtual events.

2.5.4 Threats

According to ON24 (2020) as participants of Virtual Events are located in different parts of the world, finding convenient hours that would suit all the participants might become a challenge, especially in case of international events, when the main market cannot be identified. Due to the GDPR, sometimes it may be hard or impossible to analyze the data about the participants of the event, to collect it with respect to all the regulations. As no prove of the identity is usually asked, the wrong information may be given, thus, the results obtained through the analysis of the data may be wrong (source: personal observation). Due to the cultural diversity of the participants and speakers, technical problems sometimes could not be avoided (e.g., given by R. Torriani, Netflix Global Rock Concert). In case of MICE industry in Switzerland, macro-economic factors give Swiss destinations a competitive advantage (e.g., political and economic stability, cultural heritage), however, in terms of Virtual Events most of those factors could not be used in the marketing purposes, as visitors would not travel to the destination. Moreover, due to the virtual format of the event, the location does not matter, neither the infrastructure, thus, more competitors would be able to enter the market.

As we can observe, the overall number of negative factors (weaknesses and threats) is superior to the number of positive points, thus, this point should be taken into consideration. However, as previously mentioned by experts, due to the restrictions implemented by governments because of the spread of COVID-19, in case of pandemics, this format may be the only available for a particular period of time.

According to Sox et al. (2017), hybrid events are often seen as best meeting formats as combine both virtual and F2F meetings components. Thus, in theory, may equally inherit the strengths and opportunities of virtual and face-to-face events that were previously identified in this research. For example, as mentioned by Jurg Tschanz all the concerns and restrictions about travelling could equally act as opportunities for the Hybrid Events, but at the same time, key figures and those who are close to the site could still participate being on-site, thus most of the factors underlined as threats for Virtual Events may be eliminated.

3 Conclusion

3.1 Scientific conclusion

As underlined from the literature review, the situation caused by Coronavirus had a dramatic influence on all types of business and global economy and tourism was one of the most affected industries. The MICE industry being a sub-sector of the tourism industry was not an exception, thus, industry professionals had to react very fast and implement new solutions in order to stay on the market.

Despite the travel restrictions introduced in most of the countries, as well as the restrictions concerning the gatherings of more than 5 people in Switzerland, events were not fully canceled due to the constant need of sharing know-how, experiences, knowledge, as well as exchanging goods and services. For example, in France only 29% of MICE events were totally cancelled, while 49% were postponed. Thus, industry professionals could propose a solution, that was virtual events, as there was a right response on the market.

However, if COVID-19 did not completely stopped the industry, MICE industry has faced major changes. For example, previously, virtual events were either concerned as a threat, while now meeting planners would rather use this option then completely stop to operate. Thus, even though before the pandemics ICTs were used by the industry, nowadays, their significance has rather increased, as it was seen from the interviews.

Before the COVID-19, ICTs were used in marketing purposes (social media), in order to replace traditional processes, like registration or brochures or even in order to enhance the experience (e.g., chatbots, translation) or to collect information about the participants, like behavior patterns and interests, however, mostly in the context of face-to-face events.

Moreover, from the technological perception, virtual events could be realized even before the COVID-19 situation, however, meeting professionals were perceiving this option as a threat.

Indeed, face-to-face events bring a lot of benefits to the organization where the particular event is organized. For example, business tourism helps to solve multiple problems: such as seasonality, unemployment, as well as it contributes to the amelioration of the infrastructure

and is considered one of the main sources of adult-learning. Unfortunately, virtual events may not provide all those benefits to the destination, as well as it would usually be not the first option, as do not provide the required human contact, possibility to observe verbal and non-verbal behavior as well as cannot create the same level of trust between the participants and for the leaders (as competencies are harder to evaluate), moreover in case of prerecorded videos, virtual events do not happen in real time, thus, may be considered as less valuable, as they do not provide networking and this factor plays an important role in the MICE industry.

However, at the same time virtual event may help to reduce “costs” of the events, as the level of CO2 emissions, economic costs for the destinations and opportunity costs of running the events.

The macro-environment in Switzerland may be considered favorable for both: demand for face-to-face and virtual events. Despite the strong swiss franc that in this case may be seen as a factor that would have a negative influence on the demand, Switzerland benefit from the stable political situation, developed infrastructure supported by the government, being a part of a Schengen it is accessible for the EU countries (no need of visa, “European bloc”) and due to the location is rather accessible. Even though there is a tourist tax that should be paid by the tourists depending on the location which would be included to the final bill for the accommodation, foreign travelers coming to Switzerland would be able to benefit from the exemption from the VAT for the goods with the price above CHF 300 purchased either for personal purposes, either as souvenirs. Switzerland is a multicultural country with multiple official languages, cultural heritage and beautiful nature landscapes – as social program is usually being a part of the events, those factors as well as previously listed economic and political ones may be perceived as factors positively influencing the demand for the face-to-face events.

Even though, the fact that internationally recognized institutes and companies driving AI research and rank #3 in the ICT Development Index may be seen as “favorable environment” for the virtual events, the same factors may have a positive influence on the demand for the face-to-face events, as Switzerland has necessary infrastructure.

However, currently nobody knows when face-to-face events would be possible again. Even if some countries plan to open their borders before September, other do not provide any

information. However, even though virtual events are perceived as temporary solution, the COVID-19 has showed that industry should be ready for possible threats related to the consequences of COVID-19, such as “fear to travel”. In this case, hybrid events as was mentioned in by 3 experts interviewed as a part of the qualitative research, the may be future of the MICE industry may most probably be hybrid, moreover, industry has already implemented some technologies, as well as had an opportunity to demonstrate them to the clients through fully-virtual events.

Even though, some virtual solutions were mentioned during the interview, the experts have agreed that “best practices” are not the digital solutions themselves, but their implementations.

3.2 Managerial Conclusion

As mentioned in a previous chapter, the COVID-19 situation has shown the importance of digital solutions. It has clearly underlined the necessity of the crisis planning, but also the importance of knowing to adapt to the new conditions.

Even though, the “best practices” in relation of the usage of ICTs in the MICE industry could not be determined, as every single event is different in terms of the budget, as well as goals and objectives that should be achieved, the role of the ICTs is important, as digital solutions are used on multiple levels. The interesting observation that I could underline is that event apps may be used for virtual, face-to-face and hybrid events, thus, that might be essential for the industry professionals to have at least the general knowledge about this practice in order to be able to propose this solution to clients, not only in the case of emergency, like the spread of COVID-19, but on the regular basis. As nowadays there are multiple software providers (e.g., ON24, Cvent), agencies do not need to develop digital solutions by themselves, however, what is important is being able to suggest the right solution corresponding to the budget and on what client want to achieve.

An interesting practice that has been underlined from the literature review is “interest-matching” that could be realized by using AI in order to “pair up” the participant according to the data provided by them, for example, interests or goals. Moreover, according to PEST-analysis, Switzerland is one of the leaders in this area, thus, the required technology, in

theory, should be available. This solution may help to reduce the importance of one of the most-frequently mentioned disadvantages of the virtual events, such as less networking in comparison to face-to-face events.

In theory, as future is perceived as hybrid, more technologies would be developed for this form of the event, thus, the “humagrams” listed in the literature review could actually be applied, especially as 3D technologies were equally mentioned during the interviews.

However, the main difficulty in giving clear recommendations is related to the uncertainties caused by the constantly changing situation, thus, both long-term and short-term recommendations are hard to provide.

3.3 Limitations and Future Research

As previously mentioned, due to the constant development of the technologies, there is a lack of the sources covering virtual and hybrid event. Moreover, due to the COVID-19 the situation was changing even faster, meaning that information should have been monitored on the daily-basis. Moreover, as the situation is not managed yet, as the majority of countries still have internal restrictions as well as travel restrictions, thus the same research could be repeated after the pandemics, as currently the MICE industry is going through the transformations, which could not be fully underlined.

Unfortunately, qualitative research method as well as global theme were chosen before the restrictions implemented by the Federal Council. However, finally the only option available was to proceed interviews by calling the experts. Thus, multiple options aimed to establish trust (eye contact or being sensitive to the signs of emotional reaction) were not available. Moreover, even though generally speaking the quality of the connection may be judged satisfying, some phrases were hard to transcript, thus there is always a possibility that some words were misunderstood and some of them missed. Moreover, normally a time period from 30 mins to 1h were planned for each interview, however, in reality not a single interview has a duration of more than 20 minutes.

Due to the necessity to manage the complicated crisis situation, I have faced a difficulty while reaching the experts for the interview.

For this research, only one point of view is studied, the point of view of intermediaries, the opinions of supply and demand sides of the market were not studied. Thus, the same subject may be analyzed from the perception of other actors.

Finally, as the 5th interview was conducted on 22.06.2020, the results of this could not be presented in this research due to the lack of the time.

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Author's declaration

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