

COVID-19's impact on Italian MEEC industry workers and consumers' satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Fewer explorations are carried out on the world of tourist events which involves not only visitors with leisure purposes but also workers who considerably affect the economy and turnover of the Italian hôtellerie. Italy's Meetings, Exhibitions, Events, and Conferences (MEEC) industry during 2020 was tragically affected by the pandemic consequences, such as the social distance and the compulsory and mandatory "stay at home" quote. To investigate restrictions' influence on the Italian MEEC industry participants, the authors adopted a qualitative methodology for outcomes on the degree of satisfaction perceived by workers and costumers. Two hundred fifty data were collected and analyzed to yield the change that digital transformation performed in the MEEC enterprises. The meaningful results show that the lockdown effect in Italy has brought several different perceptions on workers and customers due to the distinct use in adopting some modern technologies. The transition from in-presence participation to online participation events affected chiefly the satisfaction of workers who perceived their work in a devaluing way. Hence, discrepancies in perception were identified according to the socio-demographic status (age, gender, Etc.), the frequency of attendants and the online fruition. The outcome evidence that the perception of satisfaction in workers has decreased, but the possibility of attendants of customers increased. In conclusion, the research marks underlined the usage of digital tools, reconsidering their role in this sector's management both from the workers' and customers' points of view. In conclusion, it can be stated that if, on the one hand, the consequences generated by COVID-19 have increased the usability of events, on the other hand, the diffusion

of technological tools has undoubtedly decreased the satisfaction of workers.

Keywords: Italian MEEC Industry; Workers and Customers' Satisfaction; Presence Vs. Remote Partecipation

1. INTRODUCTION

The current global pandemic of COVID-19, which has been hitting European Countries since the first months of 2020, is causing severe economic and social consequences, especially in the Italian MEEC industry.

The Italian MEEC industry represents an essential segment of the national tertiary sector and has a long tradition. For this reason, nowadays, Italy ranks fourth in the international fair with a significant weight for the national economy. The meetings, events, exhibitions, and convention industry arose in the 1980s and helped Italy display, sell products, and conduct commercial negotiations. Hence, the MEEC industry helped Italy overcome seasonality, attract tourists, and contribute to developing local or national businesses. The Italian MEEC industry and its economic dimension have recently gained in importance and, consequently, have become a subject of investigation (M. Robinson, 2004; G. Richards, 2004). In fact, in the last decade, the MEEC industry each year involves about 200,000 exhibitors and twenty million visitors. It generates business for sixty billion Euros, giving rise to 50% of the participating companies' exports (AEFI, 2020).

As the outbreak of COVID-19 began, the profit and the emergence of the MEEC (meetings, events, exhibitions, and convention) industry decreased. Due to the spread of the virus, the European Parliament cancelled approximately 640 fair-trade s (European Parliament, 2020) and various significant cultural events worldwide, such as the Olympics Games,

religious events, and award ceremonies, have been either cancelled or postponed.

Social distancing measures and other safety protocols required by many Government agencies during the pandemic significantly impacted most events' operations. The Presidential Decrees set down the guidelines and restrictions to contain the virus's infection. The Decrees consider fairs and the MEEC industry as part of the category of non-essential activities, therefore a rigid limitation of the same. With the end of the National lockdown, hospitality tourism businesses and customer service were the last to re-open due to their non-essential categorization (Hai, 2020). In order to deal with this problematic situation, various organizers are trying for the first time to tap innovative virtual methods of conducting large meetings. Fairs and events were organized with the support of diffusion innovation techniques (DOI) which allowed the realization of remote events. Moreover, DOI's technological tools as temperature detection and automatic sanitation of work environments, have guaranteed extra attention for the protection of customers and workers and the continuity and prosperity of the industry itself (B. Chander, 2021). Thanks to the online or hybrid formulas, the fair-trade companies adopted a strategy that allowed them to overcome the pandemic emergency and guarantee a return to budgetary growth.

Compared to the regular tertiary daily work, the MEEC industry considers a particular type of traveller: the business tourist. They are a smaller section of the population with different motivations and additional freedom-of-choice-limiting constraints imposed through the business aspects (John Lennon, 2003). Hence, the event's participation is obtained from the market demand, consisting of exhibitors or visitors who go to the exhibition site mainly for work reasons. For this reason, over the years, destinations worldwide have recognized the numerous benefits of hosting meetings and other events (Han and Hwang, 2017).

Events are both animators of destination attractiveness but, more fundamentally, are vital marketing propositions in promoting places, given the increasingly global competitiveness to attract visitor spending. Nether less, events are a significant motivator of tourism, the high-risk perception degree affected by the pandemic boots a less motivation and satisfaction in buyers and sellers.

For this reason, the present empirical work was used to investigate the MEEC industry of Italy as a crucial

element in the development and marketing plans of the destination by adopting the main research question: What transformation has COVID-19 given to the Italian exhibition sector?

Then, intending to investigate the above question, subsequent research questions were elaborated: How did the MEEC industry and its participants change? What factors have most influenced the change in the participant?

Moreover, could the change is given by COVID-19 favour a potential opportunity for the growth of the Italian exhibition sector?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the exhibition sector has increasingly benefited from using technological equipment to manage and create events. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, technological devices have supported this industry that has been strongly affected by the effects of social distancing regulations imposed by the government. For this reason, the first Chapter 2.1 deals with the theme of the exhibition sector's digitalization as support and alternative solution to the crisis management caused by the virus. Next, further factors that have increasingly influenced this massive digitization are presented in sub-Chapter 2.2: "Influencing Factors". Participation in the exhibition sector is changed, and the work's motivation, intention, and perception are changed. The above chapter probes how the satisfaction of workers and customers influences the MEEC industry during this COVID-19 pandemic. The conclusive Chapter 2.3 is entitled "Worker and Customer Satisfaction" for these bases.

With the new management and contributions perspective of technological innovations, the exhibition sector has increasingly benefited from using technological equipment to manage and create events in recent years.

2.1 VIRTUAL EVENT FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT

With the new management and contributions perspective of technological innovations, the exhibition sector has increasingly benefited from using technological equipment to manage and create events in recent years. COVID-19 pandemic carried the technological devices on the supported industry that has been strongly affected by the consequences of social distancing regulations imposed by the Government. Nowadays, digitalization is support and an alternative solution to the crisis management caused

by the impact, crises, and disasters of the MEEC industry. The story of this business sector is rich and varied in dire circumstances, but none of these, 2001 twins towers terrorist attacks in New York City; 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Outbreak; 2007-2009 global monetary crisis; 2015 the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Outbreak Etc., have ranked the level of COVID-19 pandemic or has surpassed it (Gössling, 2020; Goldblatt, 2012; Smeral E., 2009). Many examples confirm the possibility of bringing changes and innovations at all levels from a historical disaster. First, the consequences of disasters are linked to the ability, in different contexts, to find and make available adequate economic resources for reconstruction to respond to adverse events in the affected territories and populations. According to Ernst & Young and EEMA, a digital event is an event that brings an audience together where some or all the attendees are not physically present in the exact location but are connected in a shared digital environment. After 50 years of development, virtual reality (VR) has become commercially available to consumers. The events industry has started to adopt this transformational technology by implementing it into live events or as an alternative method for providing event experiences (O. Wreford, 2019). The key to the success of any virtual event is traffic volume—the greater the traffic, the happier the client. These innovations have affected the MEEC industry's prevalence that adapted good planning in managing the pandemic situation necessary for fewer losses and stable growth. Most face-to-face events are cancelled or postponed, and meetings have been switched to online delivery.

For this reason, industry experts and practitioners predict the rise of hybrid and face-to-face meetings due to the lack of money spent. A primary challenge in the organization of the virtual conference is the identification of technological solutions that could be used to connect participants throughout the event. Critical factors, in this case, may be the possibility of holding all sessions live, having dedicated spaces for both plenary events and parallel sessions, and networking spaces that make interactions between speakers, attendees, and sponsor possible. However, it could also happen that none of the available conferencing platforms can provide a fully comprehensive set of tools. It, therefore, could be necessary to complement it with additional tools (M. Fortuna, 2020). The negative features could be the

smaller number of participants and the high number of online events organized to reach all the clients.

Nethertheless, the positive aspect is that with the use of technology, organizers can make meetings more international (virtual and hybrid events with the global audience), innovative, more accessible (barrier-free events, open to all individuals, particularly to those with disabilities), and, finally, more sustainable. Hence, the impact of travelling to meetings is minimized due to travel barriers and the coronavirus pandemic, and, in fact, in this global coronavirus pandemic, the attention to sustainability has become more critical than ever. In conclusion, the positive note could be developing sustainable megatrend rules that will continue to influence the industry (Davidson, 2018).

The consequences of the New Coronavirus pandemic have accelerated digital adoption. That is why the increased use of technology to work, play and stay in touch with the world has given birth to new digital habits. Google Trends search data shows that consumer behaviours have become increasingly digital. This awareness is not surprising, given the COVID-19 social distancing measures imposed in many countries. For many, the only way to communicate with other people has been through digital channels. However, the exciting aspects are the speed with which the adoption took place and the diversity of the online services offered and used. This trend's growth is due to businesses' response to the pandemic. Given this reality, any organization moving into the virtual arena is advised to develop and implement a marketing plan to generate traffic volume in the international arena, creating enthusiasm and business opportunities for participating clients. Continuing to market a virtual exhibition in the same manner as the complementing terrestrial event will limit its success. The event can now reach an international audience with ease. Therefore, developing an appropriate strategy that broadly increases awareness is essential (Edgar, 2008). A new report from McKinsey shows that nearly all organizations, from traditional companies to start-ups, are reorienting their business models to become more digital as a direct consequence of COVID-19's impact on changing consumer behaviour. Although employees in many companies are gradually returning to office work (when allowed by local state laws and current health conditions), more flexible work structures are expected, as 23% of workers say they want to work

from home more often. This worker necessity means an increasing need to digitize internal operations to ensure teams can continue working remotely. In these terms, this study's attention was to examine direct questions regarding workers' smart-working satisfaction, sector's customers' participation, and advantages and disadvantages of digitalization systems that have changed business rules during the last year. These considerations lead to a first hypothesis:

H1. The changes given by COVID-19 have favoured the use of technological supports, increasing their diffusion.

2.2 INFLUENCING FACTORS

Next, further factors that have increasingly influenced this massive digitization are presented. As mentioned before, the drastic shift from events in presence to online events mainly due to COVID-19 has led to a change in consumers' and workers' socioeconomic status and relational variables towards the MEEC industry.

A previous deep insight into the theoretical concept of business event tourism is necessary to investigate it. A defining element in business event tourism is the dominance of extrinsic motivators in explaining travel, necessitating doing business, advancing one's career, or because one's job requires it. For this reason, Getz underlines the motivational aspect of participating in events, physical, social, personal, and organizational (Getz & Page, 2016).

Moreover, Shone and Parry quote four kinds of potential demands for events: 'current demand', that demand which our event satisfies at the moment; 'future demand', that demand which our event could satisfy in the future, over an average growth period; 'latent demand', that demand which is sleeping until you provide an event for it, and 'suppressed demand', that demand which exists for our event, but cannot get to it due to being suppressed by price, time, availability, lack of disposable income or other reasons (Shone & Parry, 2004).

Consumers' satisfaction is obtained by comparing the company's performance and customer expectations (Oliver R. L., 1980). The comparison process between actual performance and expectations may be moderated by the presence of firm and environmental variable-comparing owner, customer size, rivalry, channel configuration, product line growth rate, supplier flexibility, and customer service. The four concepts cited by Shone and Perry are helpful for the

research in question to identify why soon the trade-fair industry will experience a relaunch and an increase in its work activities thanks to the negative impact and the lockdown that the sector has experienced in this period of a pandemic.

Furthermore, the customer perceived value is used as a fundamental construct within the service industry to understand better customers (Jensen, 1996; Iacobucci, 1995). Perceived value is "the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given" (Zeithaml, 1998). Perceived value could be viewed as a subjective construct that varies from customer to customer (Wikstom, 1994), culture to culture (Assael, 1995), and from time to time (Ravald, 1996). Holbrook (Holbrook, 1999) referred to the perceived three values as an interactive realistic preference experience. That is, the value depends not on the product characteristics but on how customers interact with a product (Kim, 2009).

Since its introduction, this theory has been applied to various settings (e.g., Wirtz, 1993). If the perceived performance meets a customer's expectation (Severt, 2007), a confirmation will occur, leading to satisfaction; otherwise, disconfirmation will appear, leading to dissatisfaction. Therefore, creating and delivering customer value is a precondition to understanding the behaviour of conference attendees meeting planners and destination organizers.

Given the exhibition sector's vast literature, the sensitivity is intended to characterize the satisfaction concept. For this reason, several parameters have been chosen to measure it, using the literature explained above. Emphasis was placed on the customer's and Worker's performance in the trade-fair industry to observe how external factors impact the work environment, and therefore, the socioeconomic status and relational variables was the critical element revealed in this study.

Due to the uprising COVID-19 epidemic, the financial and social crisis prompted serious challenges regarding socioeconomic determinants and behavioural variables. Economic uncertainty is the high-risk period for the overall mental well-being of individuals, their partners, and family member (Holland, 2016; Dohrenwend, 2000). In this regard, studies into how social distancing, panic buying, and other preventive measures have altered individuals' behavioural patterns in their interactions with other economic agents (Lahiri, 2021) continue to be the research subject.

An extended period of health emergency and economic crisis such as the one currently underway may cause cognitive and affective disturbances because of the combination of many devastating factors, such as unemployment, downsizing of medical and social services, and cuts in public spending (Meltzer H., 2010). In the same way, acceptance of strict regulations restricts social interaction, which is one of the main pillars of psychological well-being and resilient identity (Godinic D., 2020).

There is a substantial body of evidence indicating that individuals with lower SES has been linked to domestic crowding, a condition that has negative consequences for adults and children, including higher psychological stress and poor health outcomes (Melki, Beydoun, Khogali, Tamim, & Yunis, 2004). Therefore, individuals who are more dissatisfied with their SES at the same time use social network sites more.

Therefore, assessing the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on societies and economies is fundamental to inform and tailor the responses of governments and partners to recover from the crisis and ensure that no one is left behind in this effort.

For this reason, a second hypothesis is assumed:

H2. COVID-19 has affected the socioeconomic status and relational variables of workers and customers in the MEEC industry.

2.3 WORKERS AND CUSTOMERS SATISFACTION

Then, under what was said previously, there is a necessity of underlying the crucial importance of satisfaction concerns both customers and workers simultaneously to correct the national management of the MEEC industry.

Extensive literature conceptualizes the customer satisfaction construct and its relationship to the service quality construct (Dabholkar, 1995). From the "Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory" of Lewin (1938), customer satisfaction is when the perception of the consumption reaches the customers before utilizing a product or service. The customer could evaluate the product or service by using that expectation, and if the satisfaction of the products or services surpasses the previous judgment, consumers develop a positive attitude towards the product or service, pointing to positive behavioural intention (Carpenter, 2007; Tse & Peter, 1988). Conversely, when consumption does not meet their expectations, they will develop hostile

attitudes, leading to dissatisfaction (Ha & Jang, 2010). Oliver (1997) named customer satisfaction as "the consumer's fulfilment response, the degree to which the level of fulfilment is pleasant or unpleasant" (p. 28). Thus, satisfaction can be defined as "efforts to comply with something" or "to make something adequate" (Hüseyin, 2007). Indeed, satisfaction is a positive feeling, and it is anything that brings gratification, pleasure, or contentment (LAWLER III & Porter, 1967). Spector (1996), for instance, refers to worker satisfaction as an effective response to an employee's results of actual rewards and outcomes, where a pleasurable positive emotional state comes from the appraisal of work/task or job experience (Locke, 1964). Hackman and Oldham believe many characteristics should be considered when defining work satisfaction. Viewed satisfaction resulting from an account, satisfaction can be explained as a function of goal-directed behaviour.

On the other side, work satisfaction directly impacts productivity: if the higher level of job satisfaction among employees in business operations increases, a higher level of productivity would be expected. The feedback of degree of attention, stress, level of commitment, gain, number of assignments, etcetera, are the primary characteristics that could be job satisfaction determinants. For this reason, the researchers integrated these characteristics into a single index model known as the "Job Characteristics Model" (Hackman, 1975).

Earlier researchers discovered many factors behind the higher level of job satisfaction. The most common factors are demographic characteristics such as marital status, age, working experience, and gender (Hezberg et al., 1957; Lee and Chan, 1996; Quarstein et al., 1993; Ramayah & Aizzat, 2003; Aizzat et al., 2001). They are coated with numerous factors which could contribute to job satisfaction. Smith, Kendall, and Hulin (1969) produced what is known as the "Job Descriptive Index" (Samuel, 1981). The main elements of this index, among others, include satisfaction with payment, supervisor, promotion, work, and coworkers. If satisfaction is high could also be because of significant interaction and acceptance among workers with a similar attitude (Steers, 1976). Satisfaction may also prevail through job promotion because it can lead to a more significant future career path (Silverman & Heming, 1975).

Consequently, the work itself influences employees to an elevated level of satisfaction, especially when they

can control the pace and mode of operating, use or utilize their skills and abilities in several ways, and complete the given task (Hackman & Lawler, 1971).

In conclusion, customer and worker satisfaction are vital concepts in marketing and management theory because it involves the perception of fulfilling consumers' and workers' needs and desires (Spreng, MacKenzie, & Olshavsky, 1993). Numerous studies have examined the link between Worker or customer satisfaction, service quality, and expected behavioural aim measures (Martin, 2008). Research to date has focused on the cognitive components of both Worker, and Customer Satisfaction, as much of this has used disconfirmation frameworks to compare a perceived performance level with some form of benchmark standard or external variables (Liljander and Strandvik, 1997; Yu and Dean, 2001). This paper addresses using practical (emotional) components as measures and predictors of behavioural intention (Barsky and Nash, 2002). There is an increasing variety of literature that suggests that positive and negative emotions associated with the service are given, and encounter plays an essential role in defining satisfaction and predicting imminent behavioural aim (Allen et al., 1992; Oliver, 1993; Richins, 1997; Barsky and Nash, 2002). Therefore, this research aims to demonstrate which factors affect customer and worker satisfaction in the event planning industry. Specifically, the following hypothesis is investigated:

H3. The changes given by COVID-19 have negatively affected the satisfaction of workers and customers in the exhibition sector.

In this regard, it can be stated that satisfying customers is the primary obligation of a company, but this result cannot be achieved if the employees are not working well. A good organization's human resources quality can make an organization more competitive than another. Therefore, customer and worker satisfaction are defensible and appropriate company objectives.

Conceptually, all virtual and face-to-face activities of companies, their programs, and policies should be evaluated regarding their contribution to satisfying customers and workers. The digital area increasingly for consumers and businesspeople to make more use of technology in their daily lives and, for this reason, to detect customer or worker satisfaction appears to use online surveys (McNeal, 1979) most typically. Surveys provide formal feedback to interpret and effectively degree customer and worker satisfaction ratings to

understand what determines their buyer's or workers' performance.

From the workers' perspectives, workers' motivations influence their satisfaction to the extent that workers who are driven, for example, by the desire for self-fulfilment and better on-the-job relations, may be more satisfied, given their proactive attitude toward work. Motivations are essential in influencing workers' overall satisfaction with their jobs. Finally, satisfied workers are more loyal to their organizations (C. Borzaga, 2006). When performance leads to equitable rewards, it is predicted that high satisfaction will result. Therefore, satisfaction rather than causing performance is caused by it. Performance and satisfaction can be dependent variables (Locke E., 1976; Ford, 1970; Jacobs, 1977; Iaffaldano & Muchinsky, 1985; Podsakoff, 1996). However, maintain that performance and satisfaction will be more strongly related when rewards are contingent upon performance than when they are not. Standard or goal setting and performance feedback are considered to have motivating effects on worker performance and affect worker satisfaction.

Managing organizational crises that emerge from health pandemics with global scope is more complicated than managing the ones originating from traditional "financial" crises because a global pandemic is the rarest type in recent human history and can be characterized as an unpredictable event that is beyond what is typically expected of a situation and has potentially severe consequences (Bogle, 2009). From a management research perspective, the crisis is defined as a low-probability, high-impact event threatening the organization's viability. It is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution and a belief that decisions must be made swiftly (Pearson C. M., 1998). The conventional crisis management planning process includes "a series of checklists or a template" (Thayer, 1998) which can help the organization goes into autopilot; communicate pertinent information to respond to key stakeholders, including employees, clients, and government authorities, media, and press, Etc.

Significantly, the system's behaviour cannot be determined by some central controlling mechanism but by each agent or component's perception of the situation (Zhong Y., 2009). Indeed, health and safety innovation strategies must navigate a delicate balance between government-mandated policies and client satisfaction. To respond to a crisis context

characterized by complexity and deregulation, practitioners in all kinds of organizations were expected to use health and hygiene guidelines that were given to prevent dispersion of the virus, to support the organization's sustainability and adaptability via their work experience, knowledge, and innovative skills, and finally to withstand the crisis (Maritsa, 2020).

Then with all these considerations summed together, the following hypothesis will be tested in this research:

H4. The changes due to COVID-19 have generated an unsatisfactory readiness in managing the crisis in the fair-trade sector.

Regarding the workers' perspective, it is known that a more satisfying proactive attitude towards work can positively influence motivations and their degree of satisfaction. With a superior level of satisfactory perception of work activity, workers can more easily achieve self-fulfilment and, at the same time, improve their social relations with job relations or consumers.

Therefore, this research will use two primary methodologies. The first qualitative method is represented by a questionnaire that will allow a descriptive data analysis. Following this analysis, a second quantitative method is possible by using the analysis of Variance (ANOVA) calculating information about levels of variability within a regression model and form a basis for tests of significance.

The Materials and Methods Chapter illustrates the technical approach adopted for the investigation, where a paragraph related to the questionnaire development is reported. Therefore, the Results and Discussion illustrate the data analysis contributions with their demographical and objective results referred to the hypothesis formulated and argued the nature, evolution, and development of Italian fair-trade events and satisfaction perceived in the MEEC industry attendants' behaviour during a health crisis.

Finally, in the Conclusion Chapter, findings and suggestions are presented by identifying the management and profiles of Italian MEEC during the outbreak and presenting this academic document's considerations and future implications.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study aims to detect the service quality affected by the technical and functional quality performance to match the clients' and the workers' needs during this sanitary emergency. The service sector is both

psychometrically and practically exigencies. Criticism of disconfirmation approaches has been based on the measurement and conceptual considerations regarding crisis management. The ambition regards it binged our research or analyzing our respondents' thinking regarding the national management of the emergency by considering the exhibitor sector. Indeed, this paper's center derives from their narrow locus on cognitive dimensions quality and satisfaction for workers and customers to help the fair industry in this catastrophic crisis management.

3.1 QUESTIONNAIRE DEVELOPMENT

Therefore, before spreading our questionnaire on the leading social networks, it was decided to investigate our target audience and what our interviewees would have thought about the research and survey. A pilot survey was conducted, considered the most effective method to receive helpful feedback in real-time about our study, from February 3 to March 21, and 58 Italian and English questionnaires were collected. Thanks to it, it was decided to add specific questions and delete or modify others. It was also discovered and then used just one specific social media, Facebook, since a larger group of interviewers with a range of ages between 18-25 years was reached. Later, our standard Google Form questionnaires were shared online and were administered by publishing a Google Form URL code via social media (like Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and WeChat), and the collection was completed in June 2021.

The survey shared online helped in obtaining research availability and elaborating information and opinion of:

- a) Fifty-eight respondents in the pilot survey.
- b) 259 respondents in the official collection: 128 respondents for the English version and 131 for the Italian one.

The method used in writing the questionnaire was designed to measure different aspects of their participation in the MEEC industry's events during 2020. The survey included questions about general socio-demographic information and units for the main variables of interest in the study (socio demographic status and satisfaction). No incentives were offered to induce users to participate in the questionnaire; therefore, it was necessary to adopt sharing tactics via Facebook pages to maximize the compilation.

The textual parts included in the announcement for sharing the questionnaire were short and tried to

summarize the theme in a few words; moreover, they were directly addressed to the target of the questionnaire. The headline was chosen to emphasize the brevity of participation in the survey.

Afterwards, data were entered into Excel (Microsoft Office, Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, USA) and analyzed using it. Qualitative variables were summarized with absolute and relative percentage frequencies.

Below are only summarized and briefly discussed the units proposed in the questionnaire, and the judgment grid is chosen to perform the data analysis.

Firstly, socio-demographic variables have been adapted to collect personal information that can help us understand our participants' specific aspects, such as age, gender, marital status, education level, monthly income, Etc. This Section 5 was created to focus on socio-cultural issues about events (e.g., host community and motivation and perception of event participants and tourists and residents' perceptions of and attitudes towards events) (see DaMatta, 1984; Falassi, 1987; Hall, 1992; Earls, 1993; Hinch and Delamere, 1993; Soutar and McLeod, 1993).

Then, before Section 7, Section 6 was formulated to ask our participants which modalities they attended meetings/exhibitions/events/conferences if online as a worker or customer, in presence or both the formulas. Then, the following Section 7, entitled "Satisfaction 2.0", was formulated to gather information on the degree of satisfaction perceived by those who participated in virtual events. For the following questions two numerical scales have been set as a reference grid: - I don't know how to answer, 1 = useless, 2 = not very useful, 3 = quite useful, 4 = useful, 5 = very useful, 6 = very useful; - I can't answer, 1 = insufficient, 2 = sufficient, 3 = good, 4 = very good, 5 = excellent.

Next, Section 8, named "Frequency and methods: Meetings, Exhibitions, Events or Conferences in 2020", formulated questions to gather information on the degree of satisfaction perceived by those who participated in virtual events. The questions were collected by using two numerical scales that have been set as a reference grid: I don't know how to answer, 1 = useless, 2 = not very useful, 3 = quite useful, 4 = useful, 5 = very useful, 6 = very useful; - I can't answer, 1 = insufficient, 2 = sufficient, 3 = good, 4 = very good, 5 = excellent.

Finally, Section 10, "Perception towards crisis management", has been adapted to gather information on the management strategies your company or the MEEC sector adopted during the crisis due to COVID-

19. For the following questions, a numerical scale has been set as a reference grid: I do not know how to answer, 1 = insufficient, 2 = sufficient, 3 = good, four = very good, 5 = excellent.

Therefore, the linker scale value, with an assignment of an increasing score from never (0) to very always (5), always helped us to discover the degree of satisfaction ranked by both customers and worker participants in the presence or online events (Jarvis, 1999).

Then, for the data analysis, in this research, two distinct methods of analysis were adopted: the descriptive and regression methods, valuable tools for exploring and modelling the relationship between a variable and predicting quantitative response variables. Moreover, descriptive analyses were conducted to analyze demographic information (gender, age, education level, salary, type of the conference) of the samples and describe the relationships among perceived conference quality dimensions (e.g., professional & social networking, site attractiveness, travel ability, and site environment), conference experience quality dimensions (i.e., learning, self-esteem, and excitement) in the events conference setting and the attendee behaviours, judgment (satisfaction) and crisis management perception within the conference participation experience. They are techniques that can find different applications and occurs in almost every field, including management.

Finally, a multiple linear regression model was built with the variables found to be statistically significant (p value > 0.05). However, the ANOVA analysis of variance has been used as a method to avoid hypothesis testing errors.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This Section presents and discusses the data analysis of both descriptive and quantitative research methodologies. Thus, results are shown according to the relationships between Socio-demographic customers and workers' participation in the MEEC industry, Satisfaction 2.0, Frequency & Methods, and Perception towards Crisis Management's questionnaire Sections.

The characteristics and influence of these variables on the workers' and customers' 2020 participation are then registered and analysed by the hypotheses assumed previously. Due to the hypothesis identified, changes in the MEEC industry and investigation results are now reported below in chronological and discursive order.

At the beginning of the questionnaire, it was decided to select interviewers based on their participation in events held in 2020, presence, online or both (see Appendix A, first question: “Have you participated in meetings / exhibitions / events / conferences (in presence or online) in 2020?”).

Out of the 258 questionnaires obtained from both English and Italian versions, it was found that 26% did not participate in meetings, exhibitions, events, and conferences online, while 74% did.

Discarding the negative answers (66 answers “No”), it was then asked to 192 interviewees how they participated in these events in order to precisely understand the specific work unit and the viability of our respondents (see Appendix A, question 2: “In 2020 you participated as a ...”).

Respondents were asked to identify themselves as workers, customers, or both, because the target sensitivity could be different for customer and worker, rather than another. Therefore, the workers' perceptions of health and safety risks can influence occupational choices, and the impact of COVID-19 crises could influence the numbers of employees in this sector. Indeed, customer information can influence participation in business activity (Leoni, 2010).

In the results 22% of respondents replied that they participated in events as workers, 17% answered they attended the events as both workers and customers, while 61% participated in events only as customers.

Next, in the following order, it was investigated the related variables of workers: it had firstly asked them in which market area they worked (see Appendix A, question 3: “In 2020 you worked in particular in the ...”). The results clearly show that 59% of interviewers worked in the private sector, 32% in the public sector, only 3% in the public sector with European Institutions, and 5% in both the public and private sectors. A small percentage of 1% stated instead of having worked with “No-profit associations”.

At this point, it was questioned to workers' respondents what their occupation was (q. 4: “Your occupation:”) and different answers were obtained, of which a good 18% declared they worked in the direct circuit of the exhibition sector. To this question, the questionnaire provided five answer options which were as follows (Table 1).

Table 1 Survey question number 4, entitled “Your occupation”, authors close answers options

Occupation	Results
Belonging to direct trade fairs (hospitality, catering, and transport)	18%
Designer	13%
Expositor	11%
Organizer (fair or congress)	9%
Other:	49%

In the "Other" option, 49% respondents were able to describe their employment.

Table 2 Survey question number 4, entitled “Your occupation”, option “Other”

Other	Results	Other	Results
Teacher	8%	Attendant	1%
Student	4%	Psychologist	1%
Social operator	3%	Designer, Belonging to direct trade fairs (hospitality, catering, and transport)	1%
Educator	3%	Bookseller	1%
Digital Marketing Analyst	3%	Clinical Trial	1%
Marketing	3%	Business analyst	1%
Direction of live events	3%	Your occupation:	1%
Dancer	3%	Translator	1%
PM nonprofit	1%	Graduate Student in Clinical Psychology	1%
Organizer (fair or congress), Designer	1%	I work in tech (was a speaker at events, moderated chat rooms or attended as a participant)	1%
Quality, Customer satisfaction	1%	Intern	1%
Shop assistant	1%	Sum	49%

PhD student	1%		
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Finally, to the next question had asked whether they changed businesses in 2020 or not (q. 5: *Did you change your business sector in 2020?*) and a net percentage of 80% of workers declared they did not change their business in 2020, while the remaining 20% stated they did.

Afterwards, in Section 4 were presented relation to the customer’s variables with reference to the purpose of attending MEEC (see Appendix, q. 6: *“Usually, you attend meetings / exhibitions / events / conferences for...”*). In the results was find that a considerable 86% attended meetings, exhibitions, events, and conferences for academic or educational reasons, while a good 49% attended events for entertainment purposes. A small percentage of 8% claimed to have participated for business and public relations reasons.

Turning now to the socio-demographic variables (see Appendix, Section 5), the knowledge used in the literature of Hughes, Camden, & Yangchen (2016) was adopted to investigate the socioeconomic status (SES) as a control variable. It was crucial to outline a profile for both event organizers (workers) and attendees (customers) involves in the event process (Shone & Parry), studying the needs, the target audience and considering the relevance that satisfaction have on them. Socio-demographic and satisfaction variables are, therefore, strongly correlated each other: occupation, gender, age, and other demographic information influence the satisfaction perceived (Leoni, 2010).

By analyzing the data, it was managed to obtain a good majority of respondents from Europe, 83%, of which 52% were from Italy, and 11% from Asia. A fair portion of feedback also comes from America and Asia, whose percentages are respectively equal to 4% and 3%.

Regarding the age range, it was found that, as previously mentioned, the majority was made up of individuals aged between 18 and 25 (53%). Furthermore, lesser to the age group from 26 to 40 years (39%) and the minority for the over forty age group (7%).

In detail, most of respondents seem to be represented by females (69%), respect a minority of males (31%). With regard to the marital status, a high margin of single emerged (54%), respect engaged respondents (27%), married (12%) or who didn’t answer (6,74%). In our study, in fact, it was decided to give the opportunity not to express our opinion on different questions considered too personal because of gender and economic discrimination (Porumbescu & Pogan, 2021).

Then, proceeding to educational background question, it was found that 52% got a bachelor's degree, 23% got a master's degree, 19% got a high school diploma, and only 1% got a PhD or a middle school diploma.

With regards to the average monthly salary in dollars, it was revealed that the highest percentage (30%) earn between \$800 and \$1600 per month, a 21% of our respondents earn less than \$800 per month, 19% earn more than \$1600 or, equal percentage, do not receive any salary, and the 11% preferred not to express themselves about this matter.

Therefore, summarizing what was previously expressed regarding socio-demographic information but by dividing the data based on occupation variables it was found that both the three interviewees match to some gender, age, and education target characteristic of the questionnaire administrators (see Table 3).

The results demonstrate that workers (n. 42) are principally from North-Italy, have an age between the 26–40-year-old, are female, engaged, they have a bachelor’s degree, and a salary from 800 to 1,600\$ or more than 1,600\$.

The salary and the education background, aspects and indicators of Socioeconomic status and job satisfaction, are one of the service conditions and a necessity for meeting employee needs. (Muhammad Shahzad Chaudhrya, 2011) described salary or pay as a form of episodic compensation from a firm to its workers, which is wholly stated in an employment contract. In the context of this study, salary is defined as all sequences of events in which compensation, particularly monetary rewards, play a significant role. Therefore, individual pay is an essential factor in job satisfaction discourse. (Singh P., 2010) stated that employee dissatisfaction with pay could have a crucial and undesirable impact on the overall employee

Variables	Observation	Workers (42)	Customers (117)	Both (33)
Provenience	Europe	79%	82%	61%
Age	18–25-year-old	31%	64%	52%
	26–40-year-old	69%	30%	38%
Sex	Female	69%	72%	66%
Marital status	Single	47%	58%	55%
Education	Bachelor's degree	57%	57%	42%
Monthly income (in dollars)	From 800 to 1,600\$	38%	24%	42%
	More than 1,600\$.	29%	12%	19%
	I don't receive income	9%	28%	4%
In 2020 you participated in meetings/exhibitions /events/conferences...	Online as a worker or customer	70%	77%	64%

performance. On the other hand, the level of education impacts job satisfaction and undergraduate and graduate levels of education affect trust relations with the company owner and customers. The leadership style and trust lead to differences in job satisfaction needs, and these expectations vary with distinct levels of education (Lien-Tung Chen, 2010).

Then, the results for the customers (n. 117) revealed that the majority of 18–25-year-old audience are from Europe, with a high percentage of North-Italian, are female, single, with a three-year university course and without a salary.

The consumers socio-demographic outcomes collected are important due to monetary availability of them in attendings and in purchasing the products offered by the online and in presence events. Hence, the female gender gives a future demonstration related to the attendance of them in using digital items respect the boys (Korlat S., 2021). The age, gender, and marital status, in fact, influenced the satisfaction and (Winefield H., 1991) demonstrated that the outcomes

of workers and costumers' satisfaction have higher impact for females than for males.

Finally, the results for the both the positions, for who attended and also worked in the same years in the MEEC industry (n. 33) revealed that they were from Europe, with an age between 18–25-year-old audience, females, single, with a three-year university course and a salary from 800 to 1,600\$.

Table 1 Summary of Socio-demographic information of questionnaire Section 5

Furthermore, this interview is oriented to investigate the participation on events held in 2020 and due to it was asked the following question: "In 2020 you participated in meetings / exhibitions / events / conferences...". Most of the interviewers attends events online and this is a clear demonstration of how the pandemic have influence their lifestyle.

Post socio-demographic introduction, now is necessary proceed on turning the attention to the first hypothesis:

H1. The changes given by COVID-19 will favour a potential opportunity for growth for the Italian exhibition sector.

This hypothesis was defined with the idea of finding out which transformation COVID-19 gave to the Italian exhibition sector, and to verify its reliability of it, the answers obtained in Section 8 ("Frequency and methods: Meetings, Exhibitions, Events or Conferences in 2020") were selected and put in correlation them with the answers in Section 9 ("Perception towards crisis management"). In Section 8 of questionnaire, the aim was to understand how often, how long and how respondents participated in the exhibitions held in 2020. In the first question, related to the "Frequency of participation in 2020 in the presence ..." it was received that the 65% did not participate in Italy, 73% did not participate in Europe, and 82% did not participate abroad.

Subsequently, it was verified how their participation as a customer, seller or both roles (dependent variable) were related to their participation in events in the presence (Italy, Europe or abroad). Knowing that the epidemic waves in 2020 hit the Western countries the most, which later closed their borders, it seemed of significant importance to understand how the location

of the fair events had influenced the participatory choice in presence (independent variable).

It was possible to do this by setting a multiple regression model for "In 2020 you participated in meetings/exhibitions/events/conferences both, online as a worker or customer or in presence as worker or customer" on "Frequency of participation: I did not participate, 1 time, 2 or 3 times, and more than 3 times" (βF) and "Location: In Italy, Europe, and abroad" (βL) and test the hypothesis:

$$H1 + \beta F = \beta L$$

The values, in Table 4, show the multiple R, or correlation coefficient which measures the strength of a multiple relationships between two or more variables, is (0.1). Considering that the correlation coefficient can be any value between 1 and -1, its absolute value indicates the strength of the relationship, which is average. While R squared and adjusted R square, measure the proportion of the variation of the dependent variables, and must always be a value between 0 and 1. In this specific case, R squared is (0.02) while the adjusted R square is (0.01). These values represent the determination coefficient which is used as an indicator of the accuracy of the fitting.

Table 4 Summary of regression statistics related to Section 6 and Section 8 of the questionnaire

Regression Statistics	Results
Multiple R	0,16736
R Square	0,02801
Adjusted R Square	0,01135
Standard Error	0,50405
Observations	179

The standard error turns out to be relatively small: 0.5. The p-value corresponding to the F statistic is (0.05) concerning Italy, (0.6) regarding Europe and (0.3) with reference to abroad. This indicates that the hypothesis assumed for the independent variable of Italy is statistically significant.

Table 5 Summary of regression statistics related to question 19 of Section 8 and Section 9

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	2,076	0,260	7,978	1,871
In Italy	-0,074	0,037	-1,972	0,050
In Europe	-0,018	0,043	-0,423	0,672
Abroad	0,043	0,045	0,935	0,350

It can be concluded, therefore, that multiple regression allows us to understand that the data for Italy are valid and by summarizing the results for both, online or presence workers or customers, there is not an increasingly desire to attend future events, which means that the COVID-19 pandemic affected their future participation.

Analyzing now the data collected thanks to the next question ("Frequency of participation in 2020 online ...") it was found that 43% did not participate in Italy, 54% did not participate in Europe, and 64% did not participate abroad, respectively.

Then, it was verified how their participation as a customer, seller or both roles were related to the participation in events online for Italy, Europe or abroad. The same regression model used previously was set up, changing only the dataset, to test the hypothesis:

$$H1 + \beta F = \beta L$$

where βF was the "Frequency of participation in 2020 online" and βL the events online located or in Italy, or in Europe or abroad (Table 6)

Table 6 Regression statistic summary of question number 20, Section 8, and Section 9

Regression Statistics	Results
Multiple R	0,144927483
R Square	0,021003975
Adjusted R Square	0,004221186
Standard Error	0,505864079
Observations	179

In the analysis of variance (see Table 7 and 8), the significance F is (0.2) while the P-value is (0.07)

concerning Italy, (0.5) regarding Europe and (0.6) respect abroad. This indicates that the hypothesis assumed for the independent variable of Italy is statistically significant while, about Europe and abroad, the difference between the observed result and the hypothesized one is due to the randomness introduced by the sampling.

Table 7 Summary Output related to Section 8 and Section 10

ANOVA					
	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	3	0,960	0,320	1,251	0,292
Residual	175	44,782	0,255		
Total	178	45,743			

Table 8 Summary Output related to Section 8 and Section 10

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	2,112	0,204	10,32	7,870
In Italy	-0,067	0,037	-1,78	0,076
In Europe	0,0199	0,0376	0,530	0,596
Abroad	-0,0165	0,0405	-0,40	0,684

Thanks to multiple regression, the data regarding Italy are valid, and, understandably, those who participated more than three times in online events in 2020 will continue to have an ever-decreasing desire to attend fair-trade events.

Probably this desire to continue to attend meeting is due to the "strategic mercantile space" that the Italian MEEC industry represent. Italy, in fact, to spread its home-made products promotes and active participate to international fair-trade events. Moreover, for Italian company join events is a fundamental factor in promoting the Country abroad in economic terms. This study strongly believes that the changes given by COVID-19, due to the positive average of answer obtained in the whole survey, will foster a greater opportunity for growth in the process of internationalization.

Certainly, the current situation reveals a need for a "unitary direction," which consistently outlines strategic guidelines and support measures for enterprises like:

1. Less fragmentation and greater regulatory, information, organizational and operational coordination at the level of institutions (MISE, ICE, Regions, Chambers of Commerce, Sace, Simest, etc.) and at the level of choices and types of interventions.
2. Focus on international fair-trade events as a primary standing to maximize the expected benefits, resources, investments and strengthens which led to a global scale positive repercussion.
3. Emphasis on business sectors (SMEs) that have greater potential in exports, through appropriate measures compatible with state aid (finance subsidy or any other aid provided by a government like grants; tax relief or tax credits).
4. Greater continuity and certainty of strategic guidelines and support measures for businesses to allow them to develop realistic and medium/long-term investment plans, encouraging optimal and innovative use of resources. To this end, a clear and coherent communication strategy is required for the success of Made in Italy with a view to "creating a system" in cooperation between public and private sectors.
5. Monitoring and accountability about the measures support companies and the correct use of resources about the objectives set and the expected benefits to allow transparent and profitable results liked to the principles of business ethics and "social responsibility." (Fondazione 'Costruiamo il Futuro', 2019).
6. Investments in a strategic and sustainable recovery plan with involves the use of technological tools for maintain constant and increase the opportunity of hybrid events which will allow to manage future disruptive financial or sanitary crises or emergency (Yung, Le, Moyle, & Arcodia, 2022).

Subsequently, on the base of the last point stated previously, the questionnaire was aimed at asking interrogations about the satisfaction on using technological and digital tools to participate at meetings, exhibitions, events, and conferences in 2020, for turning attention to the second hypothesis:

H2. The changes given by COVID-19 have favored the use of technological supports, increasing their diffusion.

To verify how the effect of COVID-19 on increase the use of technological devices in the MEEC's events participation can be accurately estimated, the answers collected to determine if the data provide empirical evidence of an association between the answers obtained in Section 9 (Satisfaction 2.0) and the results collected on the first hypothesis were elaborated and the results collected on the first hypothesis.

The questions asked yielded results related frequency of online meetings. At the first question, "Have you ever used or participated in online events?" the 93% of affirmative answers (180 respondents) and the 7% of negative were received.

Then, in the following question "How many times have you attended or joined in online events?" the 31% of these replies they attended less than twice. Thus, identifying a relatively low frequency. On the contrary, 69% stated that they have participated in online events more than twice, thus taking advantage on technological support which led to manage their work or interests and influence their satisfaction.

The affirmative responses received with the Frequency of attendance, and the two questions elaborated to verify the Satisfaction 2.0 have been correlated, in order to investigate the future trend in using innovative technologies for online events.

By setting a multiple regression the hypothesis 2 was tested:

$$H2 + \beta EM + \beta M = \beta T$$

Where "How many times have you attended or joined in online events" is (βT) and "How do you evaluate the support that the modern technologies have given?" is (βM) and "How much do you perceive the use of new technologies as a beneficial potential for the future?" is (βBP).

Table 9 Summary Output related to questionnaire Section 10 and 8

Regression Statistics	Results
Multiple R	0,183482

R Square	0,033666
Adjusted R Square	0,022685
Standard Error	0,442029
Observations	179

Reading the values shown (Table 10) the p-value corresponding to the F-statistic in the table is exceptionally low; this clearly indicates that there is a relationship between Satisfaction 2.0 and Frequency. It is known, therefore, that the supposed hypothesis is not null.

Table 10 Summary ANOVA related questionnaire Section 9 and Section 10

ANOVA					
	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	2	1,198	0,599	3,065	0,049
Residual	176	34,388	0,195		
Total	178	35,586			

Table 11 Summary Output related to questionnaire Section 9 and Section 10

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	1,552	0,125	12,39	8,95
How do you evaluate the support that the new technologies have given?	-0,061	0,037	-1,64	0,102
How much do you perceive the use of new technologies as a beneficial potential for	-0,008	0,038	-0,20	0,836

the future?				
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The result obtained from this multiple regression shows that based on the two predictors ("How do you evaluate the support that the new technologies have given?" and "How much do you perceive the use of innovative technologies as a beneficial potential for the future?"; $\beta_E = \beta_{BP}$) the respondents who participated in "less than two online events", found a sufficient degree of satisfaction (useful = 4). Instead, for those who participated in "more than two online events", the degree of satisfaction was between "quite useful"(3) and "useful"(4). However, data for both the regressions shows that there is a general dissatisfaction with using technologies as an effective, beneficial, and necessary support for future online events. The coefficient of "How do you evaluate the support that the new technologies have given?" and "How much do you perceive the use of new technologies as a beneficial potential for the future?" indicates that for each type of presence, both for those who were able to participate less than twice a year and for those who were able to participate in online events more than twice a year, the perceived degree of satisfaction is decreasing by -0.061 to -0.008. This represents valuable information that can predict satisfaction with the technologies that attendants are experience during online events.

Instead, thanks to the next question, it was investigated the degree of satisfaction perceived by the electronic equipment in organizing the online events of 2020. The answers were then correlated with those obtained from the second question of the previous Section 10. In this way it is possible to understood which elements digital events have influenced and will affect the frequency of participation in online events in the future.

Table 12 Summary Output related to questionnaire Section 8 and Frequency of attendance Section 9

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	1,2308	0,141	8,687	2,893
Platform	-0,046	0,044	-1,043	0,297
Loudspeakers	-0,052	0,035	-1,474	0,142
Quality of the sessions	0,0775	0,050	1,537	0,126
Price of the	-0,0291	0,026	-1,093	0,275

sessions				
Number of participants / customers	-0,022	0,032	-0,699	0,485
Profits from sessions	0,044	0,028	1,569	0,118
Technical support and supervision	0,051	0,032	1,591	0,113

Generally speaking, there are three crucial elements in managing and disseminating innovation: trust, resilience, and time. Maintaining the level of trust between companies and customers despite using new virtual platforms was undoubtedly a challenge. Still, at the same time, it represents a bet for the future. The study of "Journal of Convention & Event Tourism 19" (2019) confirms the hypothesis in line with the present research, according to which the dynamics established through the virtual management of events are probably changing the future of the industry, also in a positive way.

In the same way, it supports the hypothesis that considers a crisis as an opportunity. It is understood that at the moment, it is as if the first initial phase of the innovation process has just been passed. Following Miles and Shipway (2020), resilience will undoubtedly play an essential role in the later stages of diffusion and change.

Instead, looking at the future, the Italian Government has put in place a series of tools for the comprehensive support of the fair-trade system. The Relaunch Decree has brought the resources for credit to thirty-five million euros tax of 30% of the costs for non-participation in international fairs by starting with companies. In the 2021 Budget Law, the "Simest revolving fund 394/81" was refinanced for the internationalization of companies with approximately 1.1 billion euros. Indeed, the Integrated Promotion Fund established 465 million euros and the excellent plan for Made in Italy 100 million euros per year. Therefore, the focus is on digitization and restarts, mainly through the "Fiera Smart 365" project, which aims to consolidate relations with buyers throughout the year. In fact, "Smart 365", a name chosen for the platform, allows Italian companies to maintain contact with their foreign counterparts, who cannot yet meet in person or welcome at our events in Italy, except to a minimal extent and among a thousand restrictions and

constraints. The platform accompanies the offer of physical fairs, which is increasingly interconnected with the digital space but remain irreplaceable moments of presence in the markets, Italy, and the world.

With the return to normality, Italian companies are going to find multiple opportunities to access this tool: from political-led institutional missions to initiatives on distant or difficult-to-reach markets, from the remote study of contacts activated in presence to the preparation of meetings with new counterparties, all with the added value of the scouting of foreign markets by the ICE network in the world and with the possibility of building personalized agendas on the occasion of digital initiatives with direct participation.

Then, it was proceeded with the study of hypothesis three to verify is there a relationship between how are involved in the MEEC sector the socio-demographic status of workers and customers and how much is strong the relationship between them. Therefore, the following third hypothesis was postulated:

H3. The COVID-19 has affected the socio-economic status and relational variables of workers and customers in the MEEC industry.

To verify the reliability of this hypothesis, it will proceed by comparing the answers obtained from Section 1 (“How are you involved in the MEEC sector”) with the answers obtained from Section 2 (“Worker’s variables”), with the answers obtained from Section 4 (“Customer variables”) and the answers obtained from Section 5 (“Socio-demographic variables”).

Despite the apparent importance of eliciting guests' positive emotional responses, no record can be found that fairs trade has ever measured or used consumer emotions as a management tool. The importance of social needs and connecting with other human beings in a global pandemic is providing critical pathways for understanding the decision process of gathering and meeting during the pandemic. In recent months, multidisciplinary scholars have highlighted the social effects of not meeting and seeing others as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, including loneliness and social isolation in older adults (BergWeger & Morley, 2020), suicidal behavior (Sher, 2020), and mental health (Huang & Zhao, 2020). For example, Yu and Dean suggest that neglecting happiness's emotional

components may be insufficient to obtain reliable consumer response predictions; the same can happen with workers. For this reason, in the present study, it was decided to take in consideration the satisfaction of both of the participants by giving them a wide possibility of expressing themselves and their cultural and demographical background were taken into consideration.

The result demonstrates that 22% of workers are females (15%) and they participate in events by working in the private sector (9%). Therefore, a big predominance of them are teachers or organizers and with a range of age comprised between the 26-40 years old (6%). Their marital status has a predominance of engaged (7%), their educational background arrives until the bachelor's degree (6%) and their salaries is lower than 800\$ (4%).

Moreover, the result demonstrates that 61% of costumers is having a predominance of participate in event due to “entertainment, academic/educational reasons” (29%), “academic/educational reasons” (22%) and “academic/educational reasons, disclosure” (19%). Therefore, a big predominance of them are females (71%) and is in a range of age comprised between the 18-25 years old (52%). Their marital status has a predominance of single (40%), their educational background arrives until the bachelor's degree (25%) and their salaries is lower than 800\$ (3%).

Next, it can be affirmed that summing up all the variables just mentioned, such as the socio-economic status or frequency and method of attendances, it can lead to the whole concept of satisfaction, which also represents the focus of this research. Then, for investigate how the satisfaction of workers and customer on events participation correlated with the management of 2020 MEEC industry crisis negatively affects the future participation on events it was decided to elaborate the following hypothesis:

H4. The changes given by COVID-19 will negatively affected the degree of satisfaction of workers and customer in the exhibition sector due to the management of MEEC industry crisis.

To verify the reliability of this hypothesis, it was checked the degree of satisfaction perceived in Section 9 (Satisfaction 2.0) and they were added to the answers

obtained from the first two questions of Section 11 (“Perception towards crisis management”).

The first question that was asked (“Have you ever used or participated in online events?”) had the task of excluding respondents who had not participated in online events (5%). The remaining 95% continued the survey of which 45% were customers, 16% workers, while 13% were both. To the following question (“How many times have you attended or joined in online events?”) 43% responded that they had participated in “More than 2 times” while 57% in “Less than 2 times”.

Next, the question “How do you evaluate the support that the new technologies have given?” 33% answered by choosing “useful”, 26% believe they are very helpful, an 11% said they did not know how to explain their judgment (“I don’t know how to answer”) while 2% think they are “useless”. Then, to the next question “How much do you perceive the use of new technologies as a beneficial potential for the future?” 32% replied that they consider them “useful”, 31% who consider them “very useful” while 1% answered “useless”. At 9% they said they did not know what to answer.

Subsequently, a table gave them the opportunity to express their opinion regarding the virtual event in which they had participated:

Table 13 Summary section 8 (Satisfaction 2.0)

Questions	Answers		
	4 very good or 5 excellent	3 good	2 sufficient
Platform	63%,	28%	6%
Loudspeakers	59%	30%	7%
Quality of the sessions	63%	24%	9.7%
Price of the sessions	62%	26%	8%
Number of participants / customers	60%	35%	8%
Profits from sessions	50%	34.7%	11%

Technical support and supervision	51%	39%	7%
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In the conclusion of Section 8, it had asked them to exhale their own opinion about the perceived safety in participating in the event (“Do you feel safer participating/organize an event ...”) “online” or “in presence”. Sixty-one percent said they felt more confident attending online events, while 47% felt more confident. Moreover, it was asked if they felt more valued and considered their work in presence or online (“You feel that your work is more recognized in the organization / attending an event ...”) and 86% responded in presence while 21% online.

Considering now the answers obtained from Section 11 (“Perception towards crisis management”) it can be said that when it was asked, “How would you rate the work performance of the MEEC sector in 2020?”, the majority of respondents (28%) choose the answer three “good”, instead a 21% said that they did not know how to answer (“I don’t know how to answer”). To the next question (“How would you rate the reaction of the MEEC sector to the economic crisis?”) 23% answered positively (“good”) while 22% said they did not know how to answer the question. Only 11% said the MEEC sector had worked on the crisis in an “excellent” way.

Interested in collecting information and opinions related to Italy, however, it was asked to respondents if they knew how to express their opinion on the following question: “How would you rate the plan for crisis management for the Italian MEEC industry?” Fifty-four percent of our respondents said they did not know how to answer while 22% said they did not know how to answer responded by expressing a favorable opinion and the rest expressed opinions that were not sufficient.

Knowing that it would then attract the attention of several foreigners, the question “How would you rate the plan for crisis management abroad for the Extra-European MEEC industry?” was adopted to be entered. Fifty-two percent replied that they did not know how to answer the question while 22% answered in a negative way (expressing as judgments 1 = insufficient, 2 = sufficient). Finally, 19% responded positively.

Finally, to conclude Section 11 and the questionnaire it was asked to international respondents if they

perceived the COVID-19 crisis as a factor of likely future opportunities ("Have you perceived the crisis generated by COVID-19 as a factor of potential opportunity?"). Twenty-six percent answered "Maybe", 27% "No", 41% "Yes" and 7% "I don't know how to answer".

Finally, to the question "Do you think that the size of a company can be a strength in dealing with the crisis?" 57% answered "Yes", 20% said "Maybe", 12% "No" and 11% said they did not know what to answer.

The answers described recognition abroad of workers and customers community. Both the professional teams' sectors genuinely cared about the fair-trade industry and showed a great willingness to take an active part in coping with the situation. This fact could greatly help the events function well during this extraordinary time.

The results showed us that what operated as the biggest obstacle to the fair-trade industry work was the political tensions that characterized the pandemic. Political issues revealed themselves during the pandemic globally (Balmford A. H., 2020; Greer, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, like all crises, is deeply political: It has mined deep into the fault lines of inequality, neglect, and marginalization; it has exposed the underfunding of essential services and the lack of attention to known risks (Rahman, 2020; Taylor, 2020). Political tensions during the pandemic were also found among decision-makers due to preexisting distrust and bureaucratic politics that prevent smooth coordination among national, regional, and local governments (Castells, 2008). Digital support may also be related to the third theme unveiled in the present study: the ability to recognize specific opportunities or benefits of the crisis. In this paper, we saw several things rethinking ways of working and participate to events, recognizing new target populations (females), using digital tools in daily work and for communicating with customers and new interpersonal satisfaction forged during the pandemic; these results could very well be essential to future work as well, when life would presumably return to "normal".

5. CONCLUSION

The protracting COVID-19 pandemic has critically impacted the tourism sector in general and that of fairs and events in the specific case of this study. In this way, a crisis was generated, which led to inevitable

changes in MEEC industry management and operation. One of the most evident changes was using technological tools and supports, as stated by O. Wreford, which promote and increase the frequency of virtual events. The literature on this topic appears vast and valuable in defining and understanding this phenomenon. In these terms, the satisfaction regarding all the players involved in the MEEC industry was the research object of this study. Indeed, from the analysis of data obtained by a qualitative method of the questionnaire and quantitative model represented by the analysis of variance, there is a significant correlation between the methods of participation and the satisfaction of workers and customers in the MEEC industry, based on their gender, educations, and socioeconomic status. The same uncertainty resulted in a general crisis that affected every aspect of the Country. This study investigated the changes following the pandemic, which meant that all pre-COVID-19 operating modes were questioned. Given these results, it is affirmed that a difference in data between in presence and online participants exists, confirming what Meltzer stated. According to this psychiatrist, a long period characterized by health emergencies and consequent economic crises can result in criticalities. Hence, changes given by COVID-19 negatively affected the satisfaction of workers and customers in the exhibition sector due to the disruptive and lousy management of the MEEC crisis. The results of this investigation help to evidence the necessity of organizing, managing, and adapting the business through the internet. The product's transformation of events into a digital format does not merely imply an alteration of how the material is accessed but also their incorporation within a broad digital and particularly visually oriented appreciation and satisfaction. Thus, digital technologies are not simply functional to the work experience, but they profoundly shape the essence of such experience, as Korlat (2021) affirmed. In other words, the technology is not neutral and mediates how human individuals access business products and work positions. Therefore, the digital transformation in the MEEC industry is a mandatory requirement, and the initiative should not be passively accepted as a perfect replacement for other forms of fruition. It is necessary a constant empirical and philosophical research regarding workers' and customers satisfaction because the critical discussion of this research wants to involve the wider audience to reflect upon the role of technology, not only as an instrument but also as a mediator and an interpreter of business in the fair-trade sector.

Significance of the study revealed costumers and workers participation to in the MEEC industry based on sociodemographic status and perceived satisfaction. Studied in hospitality research to explain workers and costumers' behavioral intentions are manly (e.g., Baker D. A., 2000; Petrick, 2002) but studies of conferences are limited. Therefore, this study attempts to fill a gap in the research by suggesting two theoretical models for association conferences. The findings provide theoretical and practical implications for understanding components that describe workers and costumers' behaviors within the conference participation experience. In theory, this study investigates and develops a robust empirical model:

1. To understand workers and costumers' behavior by examining multidimensional conference quality dimensions and using them to evaluate conference performance.
2. To introduce dimensions associated with the quality of the digital conference experience, such as learning, excitement and self-esteem.
3. To investigate the relationships between perceived conference quality and conference experience quality both from the workers and costumers' satisfaction and risk management perception.
4. To propose multidimensional values in the event industry context.
5. To examine the interrelationships among perceived online or in presence events value, satisfaction, and future behavioral intentions.

Finally, the study benefits meeting planners, hold destinations' events, convention centers or host organizers by maximizing the workers unsatisfaction or the costumers' experiences and perception, allowing efficient product management, and attracting potential attendees while retaining repeat attendees both in presence and online.

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