

An Evaluation of the Feasibility of Transforming Physical Events to Suit an Online Platform Following the Covid-19 Pandemic: Music Festival Case Studies

A recent business impact study has shown that the event industry must recalibrate and adjust to survive the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Parry, 2020). Dr James Morgan's global survey of July 2020 resulted in nearly 40% of the participants disclosing that their events business or place of employment, would cease to exist within the next 6 to 12 months if their current format is not reassessed (Morgan, 2020).

One key benefit of the age in which this devastation has happened is the extent of technological advancements (Whitelaw, Et. al, 2020). As a whole, digital resources have been greatly relied upon by all business sectors and provided essential socialisation platforms to the public throughout this time (Hern & Wong, 2020). As for event businesses, online systems may have been the most prominent key factor in ensuring the survival of the industry (Costa, 2020).

When the Coronavirus prevented individuals from leaving their homes for leisure, the traditional nature of events became unattainable. With the primary concept of events being to encourage socialisation and to gather those with a common interest (Bowdin, 2011), the inability to host people in one venue brought the industry to an impasse. To overcome these issues, many companies decided to transform their events into an online format in an attempt to ensure preservation (Schmelzer, 2020).

The feasibility of this transition differs between event types with each experiencing different repercussions and benefits. For example, the conference sector has seen some prominent economic advantages from conversing digitally by preserving airfare and accommodation funds (Brown, 2020). However, other events businesses, especially those specialising in music, festivals and larger-scale activities (Peisner, 2020), have encountered a variety of complications. These issues are regarding technological hindrances, providing the desired atmosphere and guest distraction when attending from an external location (Arjun, 2020).

To fully evaluate the possibility of transitioning online, it is crucial to examine the impacts and strategical implications this may have on existing event examples to

assess the industry as a whole. Feasibility studies are an effective and precise way to complete this analysis (O'Toole, 2011).

Before launching a product or event, the completion of a feasibility study determines the attainability of the designer's concept and goal (Arain, 2010). The study provides an insight into the current market and assesses the key factors which will fundamentally establish whether the event will be achievable (Gov, 2020). As the events industry is considering a significant structural change, examining the primary elements which will be affected, should establish whether the transition online will be feasible and with minimal negative impacts.

Excluding not for profit organisations, some may argue that the economic element of a feasibility study is the most important. Ensuring that an event will produce a positive increase in a company's capital rather than diminishing it is a crucial factor in determining its success (O'Toole, 2011).

In 2019, the BVEP recorded that the events industry was accountable for approximately 70 billion pounds worth of revenue for the United Kingdom through direct spend (BVEP, 2020). This figure incorporates the profit from all eight sectors of the industry which provide entertainment, leisure, and business events.

Although the economic advantages of events benefit the UK as a whole, it can also have a great impact on the hosts local economy. For example; In 2018, Radio 1's Big Weekend opted to host its yearly festival at Swansea's Singleton Park (BBC, 2018). This was the second time Swansea was chosen to accommodate this event which provided music and entertainment for approximately 60,000 people from in and around the Swansea area (Dalling, 2019). It was reported that this collaboration accumulated £2.4 million for Swansea's local economy and was deemed a huge success by the local council and its residents (Farell-Roig, 2018).

In 2018/19 reports began to emerge, announcing that Swansea was to start a vast reinvention development to attract events, tourism and residential living into the city centre (BBC, 2019). It could be argued that the economic success from events such as Radio 1's Big Weekend had an impact on the decision to innovate. As one of the primary features of this expansion is a 3,500 seat indoor arena (Bannon, 2020),

choosing to create an infrastructure to produce event driven economic growth may correlate with the profit gained from this previous event.

However, because of the virus, the event was cancelled for 2020 (BBC, 2020). Due to the nature of this events type and its lack of online attendee demand, its success may be severely affected when fully transitioned online.

The event ordinarily costs £18 to £25 per person depending on location, with the majority of the hosts' profits occurring from secondary spend (BBC, 2019). When the event evolved into an online format, Radio 1's strategy was to opt to remove the attendance fee and host a free digital event (O'connor, 2020). This decision eliminated any economic growth the event could accumulate, as it had in previous years, and the 2020 host city, Dundee, was omitted from receiving financial gain (Main, 2020).

As the event is transient in type and is always live-streamed online, the majority of its physical attendee demand often derives from the residents of the host area (BBC, 2018). Cancelling ticket charges can be an effective strategy to attract the audience to follow the event's transition online (Rasheeda, 2020). However as the online screenings were a free option anyway, some may argue that the customers who chose to attend the physical event may already not appreciate the atmosphere of the digital version (Skandalis, 2020). This could demonstrate the lack of the events online demand as thousands of individuals would choose to pay for the physical gathering over a free alternative.

To combat the decrease in demand, some festivals chose to collaborate to increase attendee potential. British heavy metal festival Bloodstock's coronavirus strategy was to unite with 12 other European festivals and create the European Metal Festival Alliance. (Munro, 2020) This reduced price digital alternative enabled attendees to watch existing and unreleased recordings of artists from all across Europe, rather than only the ones they could have viewed at the events individually (metalfestivalalliance, 2020). This collaboration brought artists and attendees to one singular festival to make a collective profit rather than attempting to run several smaller events (Weaver, 2020). This could be deemed an effective feasibility strategy as the participants are receiving more content than expected from the live viewing and is a cheaper alternative to cancelling the events completely.

However, there are some digital hindrances that may affect attendance. Depending on the servers used, streaming software can only manage a particular amount of attendees before the system begins to malfunction and glitch (Perlman & Van der Laan, 2015). Although there are methods available online to attempt to address this issue, the quickest and most effective way would be to set a limit of how many can access the server at one time to ensure an optimal viewing experience (Turusov, 2020). This boundary then, in turn, restricts the accessibility for attendees.

Some events have the potential to successfully transition online solely due to the nature of their engagement. For example, it has been reported that fitness and healthy lifestyle events have encountered minimal strategic complications as an instructor can engage in a non-physical format, and the session will still be successful (Litman, 2015). Companies such as Peloton inspired a vast spinning community to remain healthy during the pandemic and reaped great economic rewards (BBC, 2020). The company used effective strategic marketing to promote their at-home exercise packages when potential quarantine actions began to arise. Even though their fitness equipment and digital classes were already an existing product, Peloton mass advertised how their business does not require any physical contact with others and complies with all lockdown requirements (Petter, 2020). A collaboration with companies such as Peloton would provide a platform for many fitness events to take place during or post-coronavirus.

However, unlike the fitness events industry, music festivals or events are synonymous with the atmosphere and engaging environment it creates for its attendees (Lesić, 2017). In some cases, festivals such as Tomorrowland require 1,500 trade and design staff over four weeks work to ensure that the venue's scenography creates a particular ambience that is fully immersive and sometimes transportive (Little, 2017).

An engaging music event encompasses every desirable attribute a participant may expect. A large crowd, electric atmosphere, loud music and a celebrity presence (Brown & Sharpley, 2019). These factors create a sense of involvement within the event and encourages attendees to be entirely present and experiencing the moment (Sobitan & Vlachos, 2020). Attempting to replicate this experience when transitioning to an online format may not be as easily achievable.

One of the most effective strategies in approaching this transformation was the aforementioned Tomorrowland Festival (Tomorrowland, 2020).

Tomorrowland: Around the World's two-day festival, was an interactive, 3D environment using avatars to traverse the landscape individually or as a group of friends wishing to experience and socialise together (Tomorrowland, 2020).

More than 60 artists performed in one of four large green screen studios situated around the world. These recordings were then digitised and calibrated to allow attendees to witness one of a kind, exclusive, 3D performances of their favourite music and dance artists on one of the eight different digital stages (Nugent, 2020). Hundreds of digital and design experts worked continuously to create an immersive experience showcasing artists, webinars, games, workshops and their famous firework and laser displays for its attendees (Tomorrowland, 2020). The event included an easy-to-follow navigational tutorial, multiple camera angles, realistically changing environment (sun setting, audience members moving), and a revolutionary interaction feature between the artist and the mass of audience members to replicate a music festival's traditional engagement level (Wells, 2020).

Even though this example was highly successful, the funding and workforce supporting the event were exponentially larger than most events businesses. This strategy may not be effective for those who do not have the resources to create such an extravagant digital experience.

One American Newspaper considers the reality of low-budget digital music events and the effects it has on the performer (Peisner, 2020). The article discusses the mental implications the lack of engagement can have on an artist, as the connection with an audience is typically an integral part of why musicians perform (Lamont, 2012). The uncomfortable, one-sided nature of online live-streams or events may have a significant impact on the artist's ability to perform effectively and therefore produce an underwhelming experience for the attendees.

The inability to provide a live environment may also deter specific individuals such as the visually impaired or hard of hearing. As these attendees can not view or hear the performances, it is the crowd atmosphere and physical feel of the music in their bodies that creates the motivation to participate (Kalia, 2018). These features are the

fundamental difference between attending a festival and attempting to listen to regular broadcasts on servers such as Youtube and Spotify.

Furthermore, even if a company had access to a substantial amount of funds like Tomorrowland, navigating through a digital environment may not be attainable to the visually impaired (BBC, 2018). It could be argued that the ability to control the digital environment is one of the primary elements that creates an atmosphere and ensures engagement. Even if someone with visual difficulties was to attend the festival online with the support of another controlling navigation, the experience had by that individual could be somewhat underwhelming.

In conclusion, the feasibility of music events transitioning online is dependent on the event type and the extent of its funding.

During the current pandemic, online events have been the only alternative for the continuation of the industry (Schmelzer, 2020). Without digital facilities, every events business would have seen the cancellation of their musical performances and received no economic turnover.

Some digital events, such as Tomorrowland demonstrated a very effective approach to an online substitute by ensuring immersion and full engagement (Wells, 2020). The atmosphere created by a music festival or event may be one of the key driving factors for attendance, so attempting to replicate this is crucial for a successful event (Brown & Sharpley, 2019). However, the financial implications of achieving this effectively may not be viable for every company, especially during the existing economic impacts of the Coronavirus (ONS, 2020).

Assessing the impacts on the sample group of music events can also indicate the industry's feasibility as a whole.

Any other full engagement event that creates an atmosphere may encounter the same strategic impacts. The sporting sector, for example, could experience not only a lack of viewing engagement but the performance of its athletes when having to compete without their usual audience motivation (Maddie, 2020). Additionally, it could be assumed that any event that has to reduce or remove cost drastically will see substantial economic damage.

Alternatively, the fitness and business sectors have remained primarily unhindered by the transition and in some cases, may have received profit from the circumstances of the virus (BBC, 2020).

However, in any event, type, extra considerations may need to be taken to enable those with sight and hearing difficulties to participate, or the company has to acknowledge that these individuals could be excluded from attending their digital events.

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