COVID-19 AND THE MICE INDUSTRY: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND POTENTIAL STRATEGIES

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic can be seen as an innovation and digitalization accelerator towards a more sustainable and digital future, especially in the MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions) industry. Most of the literature on the MICE industry or hybrid meetings looks at the development of the industry itself, this study goes beyond this framework and theoretically fills the gaps in MICE industry research, especially in its roles in sustainable destination development and sustainable tourism. Taking Gotland as a case study area, this research explores the role of digitalization in MICE businesses for sustainable destination development. Based on participant observation in a workshop series focusing on digitalization and hybrid solutions with tourism, event, and regional development actors on the Baltic island of Gotland, Sweden, a mix of qualitative and quantitative data is collected. Various challenges stemming from the implementation of digital technologies for the purpose of bringing people together are demonstrated. These are complemented by identifying possible strategies for companies to adapt to the new normal. The desire for collaboration to strengthen business offers and resiliency for future crises is a dominant motivator by participants to join forces even with competing companies. This research provides instructive and empirical suggestions for DMOs (destination marketing organizations), entrepreneurs, and organizational managers on how to develop their business resilience and sustainability. This research also offers guidance for local governments on how to support the development of the local MICE industry in order to contribute to the broader sustainable development of the destination.

Keywords: **MICE Industry; Sustainable Destination Development; Post-Covid-19; Collaboration; New Normal**

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic brought the global tourism industry to a standstill overnight, with a precipitous drop in global tourist arrivals in 2020 leading to an economic loss of $2.4 trillion (UNCTAD, 2021). This crisis brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, together with other crises, i.e. climate change can be seen as an innovation and digitalization accelerator for stakeholders to collaborate and work towards a sustainable and digital future. People have to stay at home and work, blurring the lines between work and life. This ongoing disaster is forcing multiple industries to rethink their roots, and their progress towards sustainability and digitization. Among them, MICE (in tourism context, stands for meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions), as an essential aspect of conducting contemporary business nowadays (Inevent 2019), its changes in industry structure have been noticed.

The Meeting strategies 2021 report highlights the importance of digitization for businesses in the MICE industry and an effective pivot to virtual and now hybrid setups: "The pandemic showed associations that they have to be innovative and adaptable to survive challenging times. For meetings, this meant a quick initial transition to virtual events." After surviving the most difficult times of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, Meeting Strategies Worldwide2022 reflected and calls for a successful and sustainable transformation of MICE industry in tourism, stressing the importance of flexibility, resilience, and collaborative learning.

Pushed forward by the pandemic, destination stakeholders (i.e., DMOs (destination marketing organizations), local government, and tourism enterprises), began showing a keen interest in digital development of the MICE industry in combination with existing long term strategies in regards to sustainable development (Disimulacion, 2020*)*. A series of workshops in the "Digital hybrid solutions for Gotland", funded by the European regional development fund and led by the Gotland Convention Bureau in collaboration with Region Gotland, Gotlands Besöknäring AB, explored the current development and the future of the MICE industry in tourism on the Swedish island Gotland in-depth.

Digitalization has the power to introduce great changes in the way we do business and can create new possibilities for the tourism sector and the MICE industry. Thereby all stakeholders, including visitors and entrepreneurs of a destination are impacted (Filipiak et al. 2020). By applying digital technologies and innovations; communication, services, and travel offers are becoming increasingly efficient and even personalized to specific customer needs beyond mass tourism (Zsarnoczky 2018). Digital marketing is one example that aims at promoting sustainable practices in the sector by communicating and thereby encouraging responsible travel behaviors among tourists. Further, business management tools can lead to innovative and greener business models while new technologies such as augmented reality broaden the range of inventive services and experiences (Saseanu et al. 2020). Forms of virtual travel are discussed as "alternative" or even "ecotourism" that allow visitors to experience a destination without physically traveling to a certain place (Talwar et al. 2022). Similar to leisure travel, Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions caused by the MICE industry are dominantly caused by the modes of transport to and from a destination. Studies indicated that more than 50% of the total GHG emissions associated with an event can be traced back to transportation (Edwards et al., 2016; Scrucca et al., 2016). Consequently, being able to meet in a digital setting that excludes all kinds of travel can reduce the regarded GHG emissions caused by transportation to zero. As a result, digital formats as alternatives to in-person interactions in the MICE sector can contribute to environmental sustainability.

批注 [1]: Hi Leonie, Thank you for the hard work. Good job! I have revised it accordingly and add more contents.

While at a first glance, virtual meeting opportunities sound like a sustainable alternative to physical events, this form of personal encounter also bears limitations. People have to stay at home, blurring the lines between work and life and forcing multiple industries to rethink their roots and how they are sustainable and digital. Among them, the industry structure of MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions), an essential aspect of conducting contemporary business nowadays (Inevent 2019), has been greatly changed. Some meetings have gone from traditional face-to-face to virtual, through video communication platforms, with success and increased productivity. But the surge in volume has made some virtual meetings increasingly fatigued. Virtual meetings make workers have to sit in front of electronic devices for long periods of time and hinder some necessary social interactions. Video conferencing relies heavily on technology, leaving people helpless when technology goes wrong. Although the digitization of MICE has reduced the environmental burden of in-person travel to a certain extent, it may not necessarily be equated with sustainability, considering negative factors (i.e., Zoom fatigue, Social interaction, dependency on technology, and accessibility) . Therefore, with the rapid recovery of global tourism, we urgently need a series of empirical studies to explore the issues, challenges, opportunities and potential development measures of the MICE industry.

However, compared to its importance in practice, there is indeed relatively little research on the MICE industry and its related issues. Even with a large number of recent studies dedicated to the Covid-19 pandemic and its influences on sectors, companies, and people worldwide, only a few researchers have studied the disease's effects on the MICE industry, not to mention the development of suitable adaptation strategies for the affected companies.

To this end, this research takes Gotland as a case study area to explore challenges, opportunities and potential strategies of the MICE industry under the Covid-19 pandemic. Gotland's MICE industry has been selected as a case study due to its leading role in extending the high season of the predominant summer destination before the pandemic-related crisis occurred. In this paper, the aim is to investigate the local impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the MICE industry and identify survival strategies for MICE companies taking the Gotlandic tourism sector as an example.

This study contributes to the MICE industry research, especially its role to support sustainable destination development and sustainable tourism. In practice, this research provides instructive and empirical suggestions for DMOs (destination marketing organizations), entrepreneurs and organizational managers on how to develop their business resilience and sustainability. This research also provides guidance for local governments on how to support the development of the local MICE industry in order to contribute to the broader sustainable development of the destination.

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2. Literature review

2.1 MICE industry and its digitalization

In a tourism context, MICE stands for Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions. The MICE market basically refers to the specialized segment of group travel, dedicated to booking, planning and promoting seminars, conferences and events in the travel industry. Although there is no broad definition, MICE tourism has some distinctive features that set it apart and deserve special attention. Among these we can highlight: high average consumption, small seasonal variation, demanding and experienced travelers, excellent

service quality, personalization and financial aspects of participating in travel purchases (Buhalis & Laws, 2001). Businesses and personnel involved in the MICE market include meeting planners, convention and meetings departments of hotels, cruise ships or conference centers, food and beverage managers, and so on. Typically, destinations market themselves as MICE locations and bid events through their visitor and convention bureaus. They can offer subsidies to attract large events, as tourists increase revenue through the economic impact on the host location. The MICE industry has also seen tremendous growth before the Covid-19 pandemic, while generating foreign exchange and jobs. In addition, rapid innovation in advanced technologies such as social media platforms, artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and ad hoc applications have generated significant interest in the events and conference industry, thus complementing the market growth.

However, in recent years, one of the challenges the MICE industry is facing is its digital and sustainable transformation. This challenge is mainly due to the greatdemand for adopting to the latest communication and meeting methods (i.e. zoom, google teams) and the increasing wishes among MICE customers for more sustainable travel, including interaction with local culture, and lower carbon emissions.

Covid-19 brought a turning point for the MICE industry. With the pressure of the Covid-19 pandemic in combination with already existing virtual opportunities, new alternatives are available to meeting and event planners as well as the participants. Hybrid meetings are one example of restructuring the status quo in the MICE industry, which businesses have implemented in various ways (Sox et al. 2017 p. 134). In the travel sector, hotels and conference facilities have for example invested in video-conferencing equipment mainly for business-related meetings and hybrid offers (Standaert et al. 2022).

In the case of a hybrid event, the physical event is complemented by elements from virtual events which introduce technologies such as webcasting and virtual environments to the meeting. Elements from both the digital as well as physical space are overlapping and interactive, allowing a scenario in which attendees meet in person as well as remotely (VEI, 20211, p. 1). Remote participants interact via audio or video systems. This kind of co-location can create new types of challenges, mainly regarding the hybrid meeting dynamics which is particularly difficult in terms of the inclusion of both types of participants (Saatci et al. p. 769). Even more demanding is the fact that commonly available video-communication technologies might not be fully equipped for the facilitation of hybrid meetings. The meeting of participants is taking place through the connection of two remote locations but not necessarily through the engagement of people which refers back to the interaction between distant participants and on-site meeting members (Saartci p. 784). While the significance of hybrid setups has been discussed in various contexts, especially in the corporate world, it is certainly lessunexplored in hospitality literature (Sox et al. 2017 p. 975).

Digitalization has the power to prompt new business concepts or even drive disruptive changes in the core blueprint of a company. Becoming digital presents "the opportunity to redefine a business - and possibly even an industry." (Ross 2017). To do so, businesses need to have a profound understanding of required digital innovations which allow them to accommodate business development needed in a decade that is strongly influenced by technological progress (Gobble 2018, p. 56). In the MICE industry, the advantages of online meetings are straightforward and comprise the reduction of travel time, a high focus on core matters in a meeting as well as scheduling flexibility and inclusion of participants (Allison et al 2015). However, the intensified occurrence of virtual gatherings has demonstrated undeniable limitations to the digitalization of the MICE industry. Debates are focusing on

security and privacy issues, lacking encounters with new people, reduced creativity momentum, and the often perceived as demanding flow of online encounters (Standaert et al. 2022, p. 6,). Furthermore, research indicates that the highlighted efficiency in virtual sessions might be negatively affected by a growing meeting size (Standaert et al.. 2016). Participants of working groups who may have never met in person might also experience a lack of trust in combination with a missing common culture of cooperation (Saatci et al. 2020 p. 771). This highlights the need for assistance, guidance, and appropriate training for attendees in order to conduct a successful digital meeting (Vadenberg & Reese 2011). Despite a long list of limitations, the transformation towards online setups offers companies the possibility to rethink and reshape business structures, marketing strategies, and whole products (Gobble 2018, p. 57). At the center of attention should be the meeting objectives that are intended by the customer. These will determine the usage of appropriate technology and the meeting mode to succeed in the maximal target attainment (Standaert et al. 2022, p. 10). During the Covid-19 pandemic, many people have become familiar with some kind of virtual meeting set up leading to a widespread acceptance of the digitalization of physical events. The forced transition also introduced a variety of relevant platforms to the mainstream namely Zoom, Teams, and Webex, allowing people to meet "face-to-face" from a distance (Standaert et al. 2022, p. 3).

The planning of virtual solutions and their implementation should include but not be limited to factors such as costs and availability (Standaert et al. 2022, p. 5). As with all socio-technical phenomena, the experience of digital event participants is highly dependent on the scope of opportunities and restraints connected to the meeting soft- and hardware (Saatci et al. p. 772). With over two years into the Covid-19 pandemic and its accompanying measures towards online meetings, it is very likely that even post-pandemic "people will be less forgiving for the ineffective use of communication capabilities in virtual meetings" (Standaert et al. 2022, p. 4). Deriving therefrom are most certainly increasing expectations towards event and meeting organizers addressing the utilized technologies and distinctive communication abilities. Therefore, multiple factors are influencing and guiding the digitization process in the MICE industry.

2.2 MICE hybrid innovations and sustainability

The role of digital transformation in regards to sustainable development of the MICE industry within the tourism ecosystem is relatively unexplored. Currently, with a few exceptions, there is little literature discussing the digital transformation of the MICE industry in tourism, nor its impact on destination and industry sustainability. This study draws the following inferences from the literature on digital transformation in tourism or other industries to theoretically infer the link between MICE digital transformation in tourism and sustainability.

The concept of sustainable business models has become an essential driver for a competitive advantage. Sustainability can have many different meanings to various stakeholders. One definition of a sustainable business model includes the incorporation of " pro-active multi-stakeholder management, the creation of monetary and non-monetary value for a broad range of stakeholders, and which holds a long-term perspective" (Geissdoerfer et al., 2018). Innovation, rethinking the way we do business, co-design, and agile ways of integrating stakeholders are important factors in achieving industry and business sustainability, and in dealing with the highly complex and fragile global tourism industry (Disimulacion, 2020). In

this dynamic context, digital transformation might offer an efficient and timely way to achieve them.

Digitalization of the MICE industry has the potential to deepen the resilience of the industry, especially in crisis recovery. This may be mainly reflected in more efficient cooperation and knowledge exchange, absorption and management. First, organizational resilience refers to an organization's "capacity to resist major business disruptions due to unforeseeable, unexpected, or catastrophic events, leading organizational systems beyond the planned service limits without serious losses" (Antunes, 2011, p. 383). Research on organizational resilience aims to understand how organizations respond differently to external risks, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, economic depression, political unrest, etc. Companies in the MICE industry have used traditional methods to develop themselves rather than a knowledge-integrated ecosystem or network in the past. Such industries are often fragile, coupled with the vulnerability of tourism itself. The digitized MICE industry facilitates an environment in which stakeholders in the industry collaborate and share information related to materials, products, manufacturing processes, market data, information, knowledge and resources for cost-effective co-creation supporting openness to the value of innovative innovation (Nellippallil et al., 2019). This will likely benefit MICE industry stakeholders in the tourism industry to respond more quickly to technological changes, intense competition and short product life cycles. This is because it helps reduce costs, risk and uncertainty, and enables companies to access knowledge, assets and resources or complementary resources that would otherwise be unavailable (Ndubisi et al., 2019). Socially responsible companies or authorities (eg NGOs, DMOs, local governments, etc.) align their behavior with the norms and needs of their key stakeholders (Gonzalez-Padron and Nason, 2009). In addition, it is also conducive to the co-creation of collaborative innovation and value within and outside tourism companies and related organizations, and the digital network platform is conducive to the sharing of resources and information to maximize the efficiency of resource deployment and utilization. The digitized MICE industry also gives the bottom-level micro-tourism enterprises the opportunity to communicate with experts and managers of tourism management and authoritative institutions, breaking down the stereotype of hierarchy and building a certain level of trust. Business success depends more on how the people involved develop and use (disruptive) technologies to add value to the business, rather than simply adopting new technologies themselves. This is especially important for stakeholders in the vulnerable tourism industry to achieve higher adaptability and diversification of risks.

However, digital transformation does not apply to all industries. The negative impact of digitalisation in the MICE industry in tourism has not yet been intensively studied. Among other non-tourism studies, Bargués-Pedreny (2019) discusses the response of conflict-affected societies to the liberal state-building crisis since the late 2000s. In order to alleviate the crisis in the industry, the government has introduced new technologies, like crisis mapping initiatives to reach the local level and attempt inclusive responses. Information is collected and shared at an unprecedented speed to help practitioners better communicate, material machine and How to deal with the original intention of the crisis. Unexpectedly, Bargués-Pedreny (2019) concludes that the information provided by these new technology platform-based crisis response programs is often incomplete, distorted, power-biased, and misrepresented in space. Therefore, this study does not assume that digital transformation is equivalent to sustainability, but rather deeply reflects and explores the specific situation of reality through empirical data.

3. Methods

3.1 Case area introduction

Gotland is the largest island in the Balitic Sea and a prominent tourism destination especially during the summer time. The capital city Visby is the home for 23.000 inhabitants and caters a large number of visitors with a great density of restaurants, bars and hotels. In recent years, even during the Covid pandemic, annual visitor numbers have risen to over 1 million of which the majority arrives between June and August. The island also hosts important and popular yearly events, such as the political week "Almedalsveckan" and a medieval festival in August.

To prolong the high season and attract visitors all year around, the importance of the MICE industry on Gotland has come to the fore. Conferences and events are seens as opportunities to fill the underutilized facilities such as hotels outside peak season. Hereby Gotland is competing with larger cities in Sweden as alternative destinations for meetings and similar events. In Stockholm, Gothenburg and Uppsala the number of international conferences is about 20 times higher compared to Gotland. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought the vulnerability of this sector also on Gotland to the forefront. With regulations enacted by the Swedish Government that limit the number of attendees for events, alternatives for physical meetings had to be established. As an attempt to develop strategies that allow both on- as well as offline concepts for the MICE industry, the project "Digital Hybrid Solutions for Gotland", funded by the European Regional Development Fund and Region Gotland was started in winter 2020.

The project is carried out by Gotland Convention Bureau with the goal of knowledge creation and providing inspiration on how the new needs of customers in regard to digital meetings can be met. In various workshops and inspirational sessions with experts from the digitalization field of meetings, companies from Gotland were invited to the following three areas: 1) The business value of digital hybrid experiences or meetings; 2)Implementing hybrid meetings: technology solutions, project management, platforms, facilitation, legal, seamless between digital and physical, interaction; and 3)Global analysis and benchmarking.

Targeted stakeholders are either businesses that have a small meeting space or want to develop additional digital hybrid experiences for their guests but also those stakeholders that have meetings as one of their main business offerings. In a second step, Gotlandic players in the MICE industry could join in-depth business development programme with individual coaching sessions. All offers are free of charge for the participating companies.

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3.2 Data collection

Data has been acquired in the context of a project led by the Gotland Convention Bureau in collaboration with Region Gotland, Gotlands Besöknäring AB, as well as the European regional development fund. "Digital hybrid solutions for Gotland" is targeting Gotlandic businesses within the MICE industry including facilities for conferences, events, and meetings, event management services, restaurants, hotels, transportation enterprises, various sorts of activity providers, guided tours along with others. The timeframe of the initiative is set from November 2020 until July 2022 and includes a variety of workshops for participating companies in addition to individual coaching sessions, international benchmarking, and access to marketing material. Workshops are led by professionals covering assorted aspects of digitalization, business development, quality management, business models, packaging, and marketing of digital products. A high emphasis has been set on the active exchange between

participants and their company-based knowledge or experience to the topic in focus. For the present research, such digital workshops have been accompanied and comments from the chat function were saved. Furthermore, poll results and interactive exercises on the platform "Howspace" have been taken to protocol. Data has been collected between January 2021 and May 2021 providing a mid-project status and development analysis. With a majority of the workshops being held in Swedish, answers have been translated into English. Attendance in workshops was not mandatory, consequently, the number as well as the type of businesses joining differed in each session. All of the regarded seven inspiration and knowledge building sessions for this research took place in an online setting using the video platform application Zoom. During and after workshops, we carefully wrote down our reflection and observation fields notes. We transcribed the zoom recordings and stored the surveys and other results concluded in the workshops.

3.3 Data analysis

We used the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo to analyze the field notes from observations, workshop interview transcriptions and other data provided during the workshops (i.e., survey results). The analysis of the field notes and workshop recordings generated new codes, the combination of both theory-generated codes and inductively then generated codes called for a more systematic method to organize the emerging concepts. We examined and compared the concepts between cases to reveal differences and similarities within and across cases, using content analysis (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002) and more interpretive developments of meaning condensation, categories and stories in line with the hermeneutic–phenomenological approach. Although this study combined several methods to explore this emerging phenomena, it is still challenging to understand and identify participants' perceptions and values. Values and perceptions are related to human practices and are socially structured, which are more or less tacit and veiled. To unveil them requires reflection and sensemaking from both informants and researchers. The field notes during and after workshops helped in in-depth reflections and these methods allow us to grasp the metaphorical tip of this emerging phenomena

4. Results

4.1 Challenges and presumptions of digital adjustments

In one of the first observed meetings, representatives from the participating companies have been encouraged to share their fears in relation to the shift towards online meetings and events. Here they mentioned high initial investment costs that might be needed to purchase necessary technology and relevant equipment. Overall, the technological aspects of fully virtual or hybrid meetings are perceived as major obstacles. This is accompanied with the fear of falling behind and not being up-to-date with recent technological trends in addition to a lack of knowledge in the usage of such. Thereby the focus lays on circumstances that are difficult to influence as for instance breakdowns in the communications system or being hacked along with the dependency towards other service suppliers.

"I see an uncertainty in the fact that there are many factors in the digital / hybrid meetings that you can not have 100% control over, when we normally do assignments, you make sure to have control over as many factors as possible, it becomes difficult when customers want delivery guarantees, which you are used to being able to provide and fulfill."

Besides the technological perspective in the transition towards a hybrid approach, companies also bear in mind their customer's experience. They suspect meeting or event participants who are joining for example a conference online will not have the same benefits that in-person visitors will experience. Focusing on the communication aspect, a lack of body language, communication dynamics, and energy in addition to a feeling of disconnection are named as the consequences for digital attendees. Subsequently drawing in both audiences on- and offline, in a hybrid meeting is not considered a simple task.

Both indicated factors of uncertainty, technological and experience wise, are contributing to the assumption that offering a hybrid solution to customers will require more workload which needs to be covered by the company's existing resources. For the Gotlandic MICE industry, the trend to digital meetings will presumably lead to a reduced demand for physical spaces, and general visitor numbers to the island in relation to meetings, events as well as conferences. At the same time, this would negatively affect other side events and revenue through a loss in indirect sales. One substantial question remains, whether the adaptation to digital products and services is legitimately required to address the customer requests post-pandemic.?

"As a small event company, I am afraid of (not) having time to develop both our "regular" offer which is based on a physical meeting that is constantly in need of development and which will be important in the future and at the same time have the resources to develop the digital into a good product."

Apart from the drawbacks and concerns that might accompany the transition towards fully-online or hybrid events, the representatives of various Gotlandic companies are asked to evaluate in which aspects digital events might dominate over physical events. On a scale from 1 (Physical events are better) to 5 (Digital events are better), a poll of 17 workshop participants indicates that digital solutions are seen as superior in regards to information sharing, fast collaboration and a sense of safety compared to physical events. Yet, inter-personal connections such as a sense of belowing, bonds between people and accidental encounters are associated with physical events. In-debth discussions and a sense of accomplishment are considered to be attainable in both forms of events.

Rating their comprehension of what a hybrid meeting is on a scale from 0 (I don't know what that includes") to 5 ("I have a good understanding) 34 participants led to an average of 3.5 creating the assumption that a basic level of understanding about hybrid solutions exists.

The graph below shows an overview of resources needed to provide a digital meeting experience to customers and which of those are already available among companies on Gotland. Multiple answers could be selected by participants. About two thirds of businesses provide internet access to their customers and claim to have good connections to local suppliers. Half of the workshop participants are equipped with a meeting room that inclused a screen, light and camera. Less than one third of attendees has full-package offers for digital meetings ready available with 9 companies indicating already established routines, availbale space and personell for online meetings. While 5 business representatives state that they feel unsure what is needed for a relevant digital offer, 3 other participants present that they have everything needed for a digitalization of their business products or services.

What are your current virtual meeting offers to customers?

- We have everything needed
- We have internet access
- We have a prepared meeting room with screen, light and camera
- We have good connection to local suppliers
- We can offer full packages for digital meetings
- We have routines, space and personell to accomodate online meetings
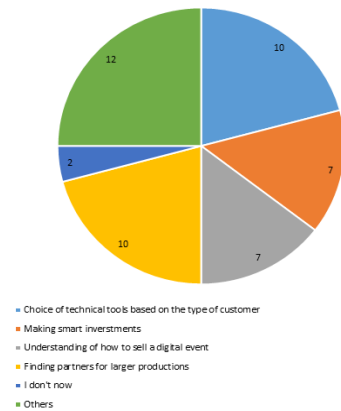- Feeling unsure of what is needed

Workshop participants are also asked about their most urgent needs which they are facing in terms of the transition to digital meeting offers on Gotland. The right choice and handling of technology appear to be one of the main challenges for MICE companies. Another focus is drawn to the right packaging and sale of purely digital or hybrid offers in combination with the optimal sales strategy. In this conversation among the company representatives, it becomes clear that working together is of high aspiration for many and is seen as a potential solution to overcome existing obstacles. Thereby the term "packaging" is often used indicating the wish to create comprehensive offers in collaboration with various actors from the industry for the customers.

"I'm thinking about how we can work better together, - to be able to meet the new needs of the future customers. Will everyone jump on the journey? one does not have to exclude the other - physical - digital = together wow!"

An additional poll reveals described deficiencies in a summarizing overview. Of 34 participating company representatives, around one third is indicating the need for support in finding partners for larger scale digital offers and help in identifing the right technical tools based on their individual customers. Requested by a total of 7 attendees each, the understanding of sales in the context of digital events and making smart investments are considered as gaps for support. While two poll answers show that there are also companies that have not yet identify their needs in support, 12 partipants require help in other areas of digital events and meetings.

Which support for digital evets/meetings is needed in you business?

- Choice of technical tools based on the type of customer
- Making smart inverstments
- Understanding of how to sell a digital event
- Finding partners for larger productions
- I don't now
- Others

4. 2 Gotland as a destination

Workshop participants highlight the uniqueness of Gotland as a destination and the high value of experiences available for individuals traveling here and meeting on site. However, there is also an increased understanding that in order to stay competitive the unique selling point of the island needs to be included into digital offers. This covers the distinct environment and setting of events on Gotland including specific products and services. Participants highlight a valuable chance that the destination becomes available to a larger number of people even if those are virtual visitors.

"we will have a new and significantly larger platform for marketing our destination! The digital meeting participants can have an at least as memorable experience as those on site. Gotland is unique!"

As described in the introduction, global crises as the COVID pandemic can cause a disruption leading to change processes within companies and their core businesses as well as whole industries. An exemplified model of such a transformative journey was presented to the workshop participants offering the opportunity to identify the stage in which they would regard Gotland's meeting industry at the current moment. This exercise was posted at the beginning of March 2021 and showed that certain stages might take place simultaneously. One participant suggested:

"Practice and Integration as well as chaos as well as Transforming idea - it is a lot of different movements at the same time. some things are in the chaos part, some things are in the New status quo"

Observing the comments made during this exercise, a majority of participants agreed that Gotlands MICE industry is developing in the transformation stage with a current transition toward the next step of integration. Consequently they point out that Gotlands meeting and event sector has left the chaos stage that resulted from a foreign element, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the implementation of transformational ideas are not yet in place and a new status quo state has not been reached.
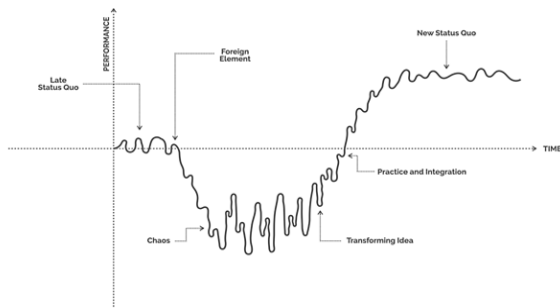
Figure: by Ghost company

One inspirational session by the Convetion Bureau Gotland included a brainstorming exercise, which allowed a concluding outline of the MICE industry on Gotland from a stakeholder perspective. Therefor representatives of businesses operating in the meeting and event sector answered the following three questions: 1) What are we doing well? 2) What needs to be improved? 3)What are the next steps?

Answering these questions, a summarizing image of Gotland as a destination for meetings is generated. Overall, the Baltic island is perceived as a unique destination that conveys a "far away" experience to visitors without actually being far away. Hospitality and experiences are seen as strengths specifically on Gotland. To further enhance the advantages more planning and collaboration are determined as important improvement factors. Participants collected a broad range of needs and future initiatives which they see as crucial to move forward and stay competitive within the industry. MICE stakeholders would like to promote the diversity of Gotland and offer competitive service packets. Thereby the need for a common marketing strategy is expressed. Joining forces in testing newly created or previously established digital offers is named as one way of collaborating among the stakeholders.

4.3 Potential measures

An important aspect of the project "Digitala hybrida lösningar för Gotland ("Digital Hybrid Solutions for Gotland") is to create and collect ideas for potential solutions that can be implemented by the various companies. One suggestion of participants is the provide those visitors joining a meeting online with gotlandic products and pictures. Common about the above-mentioned suggestions are their often low usage intensity of technological equipment. Instead, the focus is drawn to the creation of physical experiences for virtual visitors. This could be achieved for example by product samples, such us a postcard or food items from the island that are sent to online participants prior to the event. Company representatives hereby refer to the usage of all human senses that should attract participation and establish engagement among online attendees. A more long-term prospect can be established by creating a desire to travel to Gotland in the future. Thereby events, meetings, conferences, or similar provide the opportunity for marketing and new customer and thereby visitor acquisition.

批注 [4]: Swedish title is: Digitala hybrida lösningar för Gotland

4.4 Workshop synergies and personal exchange

Throughout the seven observed sessions on innovation and knowledge creation, a strong desire for exchange and collaboration among the participating parties was observed. Company representatives repeatedly stated their enthusiasm of coming together and jointly discussing potential solutions and especially common challenges with other players from the industry. Attendees stated a feeling of togetherness and appreciation in facing the only recently arising challenges in a supported setting. The participants have seemingly different points of departures when it comes to their knowledge and existing expertise of providing digital solutions to their customers. However, the majority articulates that the provided workshops are helpful and contribute to their understanding in the digitization process of the MICE industry. Some businesses already have experiences with digital events and are able to share their implemented concepts and ideas with others. Overall, it could be observed that participating actors appreciate the communication with other participants and the development of simple and easy to be realized solutions.

5. Discussion

5.1 COVID-19 as an innovation and digitalization accelerator

The project "Digitala hybrida lösningar för Gotland" has provided a meeting space for actors within the MICE sector on the island. Looking at the diversity of stakeholders such as hotels, technical companies, entertainers and other sorts of businesses that are involved in the organization of events and conferences it is not surprising that communication and exchange of experiences is rather rare between these companies. This project demonstrates a good example of communication, collaboration, innovation and knowledge exchange in the face of complex and unknown challenges. Through the project led by Gotland Convention Bureau company representatives are able to come together in a coordinated workshop format and jointly work on common challenges. While workshops in this regard offer valuable information on digitalization, marketing, tourism as well as business development the participants are drawn to the idea of working together and sharing their individual experiences regarding the adaptation towards the Covid-19 pandemic. Through the collaboration, more ideas and a stronger bond created among the project participants are created. Problems previously regarded as specific to one company prove to be challenges for other businesses too. This can foster a feeling of togetherness.

Yet, this feeling of togetherness cuts both ways.This project on digital transformation brings stakeholders together, makes them feel less alone and provides a platform to talk to each other. However, as the project is largely composed of small entrepreneurs and non-business representatives from the region, they are exchanging their similar experiences and covering some basic business concepts, but there is no surprising or more groundbreaking innovation that can inspire each other. The biggest takeaways after the conference may rest on how to circumvent some moves that might be bad for their business (such as not investing in large equipment), rather than how to use the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity for a sustainable transformation and possible potential approaches. Togetherness sensed by the project participants came from the social embeddedness of Gotland. The importance of social embeddedness can be considered high in the business cooperation of tourism entrepreneurs, a sector dominated by micro and small and medium-sized enterprises from local communities in close proximity to each other (Czernek-Marszałek, 2020). Strong socially embedded relationships depend on a combination of factors such as time, reciprocity, emotional strength,

批注 [5]: I feel SUSTAINABILITY is very indirect in all chapters so far. Maybe we can advance that?

批注 [6]: I feel like this is my main point in the research. In a sense I felt that the workshops were (yes nice) but also not crazy innovative or on an expert level but rather a communication starter which then led as a summary to "well, why don't we work together"
The idea of offering packages of different services for events was popular and instead of every company buying expensive equipment one could share these for example

批注 [7]: Good idea!

and trust (Granovetter, 1973), which mediate partners' mutual expectations and behaviors. This is especially evident in small island destinations like Gotland. However, social embeddedness can also lead to negative consequences, which are often overlooked in research on cooperation. In this study, out-of-network digital transformation experts or technology sector experts were not included to a certain extent, as the conference consisted of entrepreneurs or non-business people with close ties to regional representatives. The dark side of social embedding is reflected in overly dense relational structures and information that is only transmitted between entities bound by strong ties (Uzzi, 1997). This reduces innovation and development opportunities for a given entity, resulting in its passivity. Such a network would seal itself off and cut off information sources from outside. Therefore, it is important to cover different fields of expertise and listen to their opinions in conferences on digital transformation when regulating social networks, especially in the MICE industry.

In addition, s pointed out earlier, hybrid meetings can challenge organizers especially in terms of the place variable. People attending the meeting are located in different spaces and still need to be connected. This has been highlighted throughout the workshop sessions reminding the participants to use the strengths of understanding the value of a "place", specifically Gotland for their sales offers. While online participation in an event located on the island might not lead to a direct increase in sales, indirect or future economic benefits can be targeted. By establishing a positive image of the destination through the usage of imagery, local products, films, audio, etc. even remote event participants might be inclined to visit Gotland at a later stage. Consequently online and hybrid setups can be utilized as potential marketing platforms to attract in-person visitors.

Digitalization, in the context of the MICE industry and sustainable development must be regarded from a critical point of view. While proponents advocate for the flexibility and reduced GHG impacts that are often caused by usage of transport, fully digital or hybrid events also have their downsides. Regarding the experiences by meeting and event participants, there appears to be a large gap between on- and offline visitors. The lesson taken from this study from the stakeholders of Gotland's MICE industry is that it is vital to the need to engage online participants in a way that fosters a desire to visit the island physically at another occasion. Thereby an online event becomes an opportunity to attract future tourists.

5.2 Flexibility, collaboration, and digitalization: is there any sustainable digitalization?

The MICE industry itself is an interdisciplinary, successful collection of events and conferences including public transport, communications, catering, cultural heritage, tourism and other sectors. Therefore, collaboration and flexibility of the various stakeholders are unquestionably required.One challenge, however, is that the goals of these stakeholders when working together may be quite different, especially with regard to reciprocity and regional sustainability goals. According to Wood and Gray (1991), given that collaboration focuses on goals, those involved in collaboration should make decisions or "actions.". In Gotland's case for this study, rather than discussing how to individually mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, it may be more important to discuss how to create a range of new products and services together. When cooperating across industries, it is important to clarify the intrinsic value of competing and cooperative interests in order to achieve synergies among stakeholders (Hede, 2007). Integrating resources and thinking about products and services with regional characteristics may help stakeholders integrate local cuisine, art, architecture and traditions to provide a wide range of experiences for customers in the MICE industry.

Last but not least, when we reflect on the series of digital transformation projects in the Gotland case, we find that its ultimate goal is to attract potential customers of the MICE industry to Gotland offline. That is to say, when these stakeholders discuss the digital transformation of the MICE industry, they are ultimately looking forward to non-digitalization. Therefore, when we are promoting digital transformation in the tourism industry to reduce the guilt of people traveling, we need to reflect on whether the ultimate purpose of these digitalization transformation promotions is still to travel non-digital? The hybrid (online and offline) approach in the MICE industry seems to be a better alternative as we can't ultimately stop people's desire to travel and experience things in person.

6. Conclusion

Tourism is globally growing, with the MICE industry as an important growing sub-sector. Whole destinations are specifically targeting this part of the tourism market, which likewise many other visitor activities to a hold caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The MICE sector on Gotland is represented by a diverse range of stakeholders, often acting on a rather small scale with limited financial but also human resources. This article explores the role of digitalization for these actors and how the transition to online and hybrid settings contributes to destination development. It can be argued that sustainable development and opportunities for the MICE industry on Gotland can be solely understood when taking the interdependency of involved stakeholders into account and acknowledge the great dependency on collaboration between the MICE actors. The regarded target group of event organizers and similar businesses demonstrate a notable connection to the island as a place and engagement in collaboration efforts for local development. This paper fills the gap in MICE industry research to a certain extent from an empirical point of view, and finally discusses whether there is sustainable digitalization. This raises a series of future research questions, namely what should and should not be digitized? Future research can start from this question and use empirical research methods to gain more experience. This will be beneficial to the sustainable development of the MICE industry, and even other industries.

批注 [8]: I'm wondering if we're actually talking about SUSTAINABLE destination development

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