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Utilisation of Virtual Tradeshows in the Malaysian MICE Industry: Post-Pandemic Impact

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ABSTRACT

The use of web-based apps has increased in the Malaysian meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) industry during tradeshows. This results from the advancement of ICT businesses and the pressures stemming from the post COVID-19 conditions from 2020 to 2024. It has transitioned from conventional physical tradeshows to virtual expo platforms. The virtual tradeshow has been operational since 2020, with its standard features. However, certain aspects are deficient in the virtual exhibition, which affects the low adoption among both visitors and exhibitors. This study examines the critical roles of virtual tradeshow features that must be included in the virtual platform. There is a deficiency of peer-reviewed works on significant tradeshows concerning Malaysian case study marketing and the virtual industry scope that can be recorded for future connected research. This study focuses on the identification of the virtual tradeshow in Malaysia during the epidemic years of 2020 and 2021. Ten virtual tradeshows in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand are under consideration, with the International Greentech and Eco Products Display & Conference Malaysia (IGEM) chosen as the primary virtual tradeshow display. The platform's summarised elements and user expectation outcomes are evaluated and discussed in relation to user experience. At this stage, the user expectation model for the virtual tradeshow platform evolves to investigate the fundamental components based on user objectives, expectations, and anticipated outcomes from the virtual tradeshow. Consequently, this strategy may enhance the fundamental aspects of user experience and elevate the virtual tradeshow sector in Malaysia. The findings of this study will aid Malaysia's MICE industry in developing a virtual tradeshow platform.

Keywords: MICE, Post COVID-19, Virtual Tradeshow, Virtual Exhibition, Website Utilisation

1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of the post COVID-19 pandemic has affected various industry sectors, including a decline in the number of physical exhibitions (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022) or tradeshows that were previously organised in the Malaysian industry. Nevertheless, MICE, as one of a tourism product in both developed and developing countries, has been a fast-growing economic sector (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2023). Even though physical outdoor advertising is one of the popular advertising methods used throughout Malaysia to this day (Esam et al., 2022), virtual advertising is expected to grow in the advertising industry.

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The pandemic has dragged the economies of individual countries into a phase of stagnation and recession (Sułkowski, 2020). Additionally, meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) industries and business events faced strict restrictions, and the Malaysian industry was shocked by initial massive impacts (Changsong et al., 2024). The capability of the ICT sector has created a virtual tradeshow organisation that can provide new space for industry players to become active again in business marketing. Statistics for 2019 by the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) show that Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia is ranked 22nd out of 475 major cities in the world, with 91 organised industry programmes including tradeshows. This shows that Malaysia has experienced fast growth in organising international tradeshow and business events (Bouchon et al., 2017). The tradeshow has become a marketing platform for the private and government sectors to introduce products and services and to expand new industry networks and potential business opportunities. Tradeshows in Malaysia are periodically organised at major investor hotspots around the Klang Valley area, which includes Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, such as the Kuala Lumpur Convention Center (KLCC), Malaysia International Trade and Exhibition Center (MITEC), World Trade Center KL (formerly PWTC), MINES International Exhibition and Convention Centre (MIECC), Malaysia Agro Exposition Park Serdang (MAEPS), Setia City Convention Centre and others that cater to various industry sectors, including tourism.

From its inception in 2010 to 2015, the Malaysia Convention & Exhibition Bureau (MyCEB) and its strategic partners successfully secured 654 international business events, including international conferences, corporate meetings, incentive trips, and trade exhibitions, bringing in an estimated RM4.1 billion to Malaysia's coffers. Between 2010 and 2020, these events took place (MyCEB, 2020). By 2020, business events were expected to contribute RM3.9 billion in incremental gross national income. This highlights the impact of tradeshow in maintaining their consistency within these industries. This platform had an enormous economic impact, as well as bringing in new investment opportunities worth billions of ringgit every year. KLCC, for example, contributed more than RM9 billion to the national economy by organising the programmes from 2005 to 2019.

Various industries involved are also adversely affected every time a tradeshow is cancelled. An excellent example of this is event management companies, booth contractors, venues, logistics, and food services, which also involve Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). Universities and research agencies that use tradeshows as one of the marketing mediums are also affected in introducing new technologies, besides establishing industry networks to ensure that innovations can be commercialised within the industry. This study focuses on exploring the essential functions of virtual tradeshow elements that should be embedded into the virtual platform. There is a lack of peer-reviewed articles on prominent tradeshows based on Malaysian case study marketing and the virtual industry scope, that can be documented for future related studies and serve as historical evidence on the prominent tradeshow sector in Malaysia's MICE industry.

1.1 Malaysia Tradeshow Industry During the Pandemic

Concerns of the still high spread of COVID-19 infections and the Movement Control Order (MCO) implemented by the government forced most tradeshows to postpone their events during this grim year. However, the advantages of digital technology have created a virtual tradeshow transition space, which became active in Malaysian industries, as early as October 2020. This enabled new potential opportunities for the industry to increase the marketing momentum of their respective businesses. Shalihah (2024) emphasises the significance of digital platforms in shaping various facets of communication and promotion strategies in the MICE industry. Numerous annual tradeshows in Malaysia continued in 2020 and 2021, such as the International Greentech & Eco Products Exhibition Malaysia (IGEM), AsiaWater, ASEAN Super8, Metaltech & Automex, as well as EMAX Asia, have started shifting to virtual platforms while most other prominent tradeshows such as Malaysia International Halal Showcase (MIHAS), Malaysia Agriculture, Horticulture & Agrotourism Show (MAHA), and HalFest were still pending. These

tradeshows were the only events that could be accessed through website, social media and emails as the online marketing became the primary promotional platform for reaching the audiences and visitors. Based on this list of tradeshows, it is evident that sustainability, survivability and adaptability play a crucial role of the event organiser in Malaysian MICE industry.

The emergence of initiatives to bring booths to the virtual world interactively, such as the Virtual-IGEM 2020 exhibition organised by the Ministry of Environment and Water, was still able to attract 161 exhibitors compared to 230 exhibitors in 2019, indicating that new platforms can be adopted. Nevertheless, the implementation of virtual tradeshows remains inadequate and differs according to the organisers, who are demanding to turn the exhibition booth into a virtual world. Several tradeshows have received low exhibitor participation (Tafesse, 2014), and some virtual tradeshow displays function merely as simple websites pages, lacking interactivity to attract visitors. According of IGEM 2022 post report, they recorded 23,500 visitors to their virtual platform and website. However, the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA) reported in 2021 that Malaysia was named as the 4th Most Expected MICE Destination in 2020. Malaysia's status as Asia's preferred destination for business events was further recognised at the 13th China MICE Industry Golden Chair Awards, where the country was named the 4th Most Expected MICE Destination for 2020.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on Geigenmüller (2010), exhibitors are generally interested in expanding their business and making new contacts, whilst participants are looking for a one-of-a-kind experience and are largely motivated by educational goals. Prior research suggests further study on generating effectiveness measurements for virtual trade fairs and developing their integration and interdependencies with other communication instruments to gain a deeper understanding of the content and effectiveness of virtual trade fairs (Gottlieb & Bianchi, 2017). On the other hand, the primary motives for attending a virtual tradeshow include increasing sales income, minimising costs, gaining access to new or different markets, and establishing brand recognition (Han & Verma, 2014), and organisational legitimacy among visitors. According to the findings, the future of virtual tradeshows will most likely be determined by technical advancements in the tradeshow system and how they are integrated into existing technological and strategic business processes for exhibitors and visitors. This study aligns with Kamariotou et al. (2021), who argue that several strategies for planning virtual exhibitions today fail to take this effect into account and require proper investigation.

Han and Verma (2014), in their study stated that exhibitors are generally interested in expanding their business and making new contacts, whilst participants seek a unique experience and are largely motivated by educational goals. They believed that tradeshows are evolving, and hosting tradeshows through the virtual platform has become one of the best options during the pandemic impact. Furthermore, Sedon et al. (2021) found that the cancellation of exhibitions had a significant impact on artists, as well as the sale of artwork and other kinds of art appreciation. The pandemic has led to the growth of a new type of virtual exhibition sector, with people seeking innovative ways to ensure the continuation of the arts through virtual or online methods.

One of the most important criteria that determine a website's success is its usability (Abdullah & Wei, 2008), which relates to human behaviour when facing new tradeshow facilities in a Malaysian context. On the other hand, Blythe (1999) provides evidence that exhibitors and visitors not only have different expectations of exhibits and tradeshow but that these divergent expectations are often irreconcilable, as shown in studies based on both UK and US shows. Their studies reveal that visitors do not attend shows to be sold products, though rather to gain information, whereas exhibitors consider exhibition as a means of reaching a large number of prospects in a short period. This finding suggests that these two entities have a different purpose in attending tradeshows, which should be considered in further studies, especially in Malaysia's

tradeshow industry. These scenarios have negatively impacted the exhibition and tradeshow industries. Studies by Rosli and Kamaruddin (2020) discovered that exhibition attendees were not well-versed in the true digital experience because the present exhibitions do not offer entirely digital media technologies. Moreover, Gottlieb et al. (2011) suggest that boosting the perceived service quality of trade show visitors has a beneficial impact on visitor perceptions of tradeshow efficacy. In addition, the success of tradeshows and the level of service provided directly impact future purchase intent.

Consequently, statistics from www.eventseye.com, as shown in Figure 1, one of the events and tradeshow web information providers, show that there are increasing numbers of tradeshows and exhibitions organised in June 2021. However, most of the events were postponed to the end of the year, and some had yet to finalise their decisions. The drastic increase of COVID-19 cases in 2021 forced the government to enforce a lockdown. This scenario affected all industries including tradeshows, impacting both investors and visitors who planned to attend. Even though most tradeshows were delayed until the end of the year, there was no guarantee that the pandemic's chaotic spread in Malaysia would subside. This is where a virtual tradeshow serves as a solid solution for industry players, providing an alternative for conducting business online.

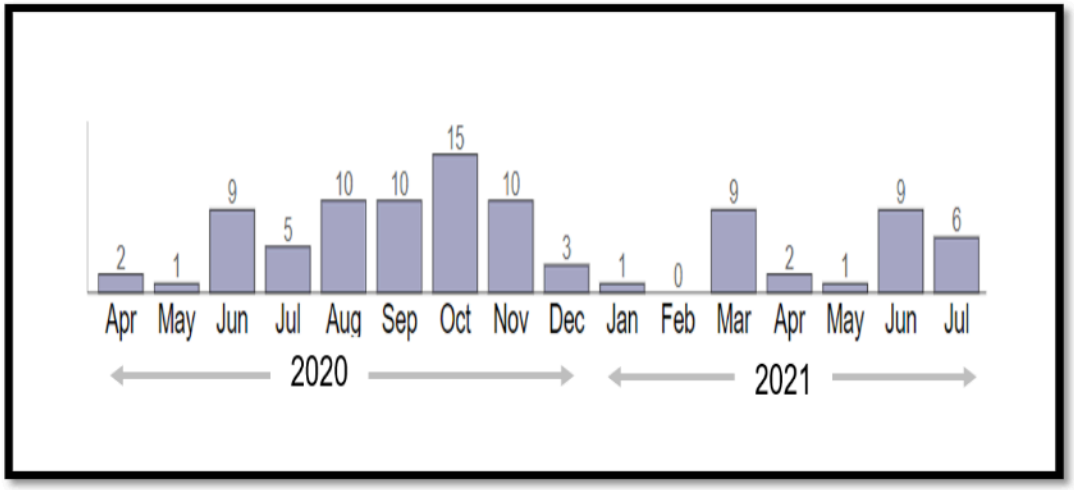

Figure 1. Tradeshows Event in Malaysia from 2020 to 2021

From this perspective, a convenient and easy-to-use the platform will present a challenge to industry investors, as well as web-based platform providers, in meeting the expectation of their client and visitor. The significance of this research is to provide insights for the prospective platform providers, industry players, event organisers, and related parties to better understand perceptions of virtual tradeshows organised in the Malaysian industry. Both the expectations of visitors and platform users should be taken into consideration.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this phase, we selected the comprehensive virtual tradeshow platform based on user experience covering the period from 2020 to 2021. Based on the author's experience in managing marketing and the promotion of innovation since 2004 until 2024, there is several prominent tradeshows and exhibitions have remained active in Malaysia's MICE industry over the years. Numerous tradeshows and exhibitions have continued to exist since 2004, while a few became inoperative, and many new tradeshows have been established within the last five to ten years back. The tradeshows that remain today include the International Invention, Innovation & Technology Exhibition (ITEX), established in 1989; Malaysia Technology Expo (MTE), established in 2001; and IGEM, established in 2010. All the main industry tradeshows and R&D exhibitions have been analysed and categorised based on their features and functionality,

classifying them as comprehensive, adequate, or basic. Indeed, multiple website evaluation methods exist, including user-based, evaluator-based and tool-based approaches (Abdullah, 2008; Chiou et al., 2011; Jati & Dominic, 2008; Zahran et al., 2014). This study explores these platform categories based on user observations and experiencial aspects. The research team for this project, as both users and visitors**,** has 15 years of experience in participating in and organising tradeshows and exhibitions from Universiti Putra Malaysia. Their scope of responsibilities is to promote research and innovation to the industries and public, in various fields. This extensive exposure has provided them with in-depth knowledge of the tradeshow industry in Malaysia and the ASEAN country region, particularly in agriculture, food technology, biotechnology, health, engineering, science, ICT, halal industries, education, social sciences, art, and humanities. Exhibitor expectations also have a significant input (Hansen, 2004). However, in this study, our focus is on user-based experience (Wang & Liu, 2010; Widjono, 2020), as the exhibitors themselves also assume the role of visitors when engaging with other exhibitors.

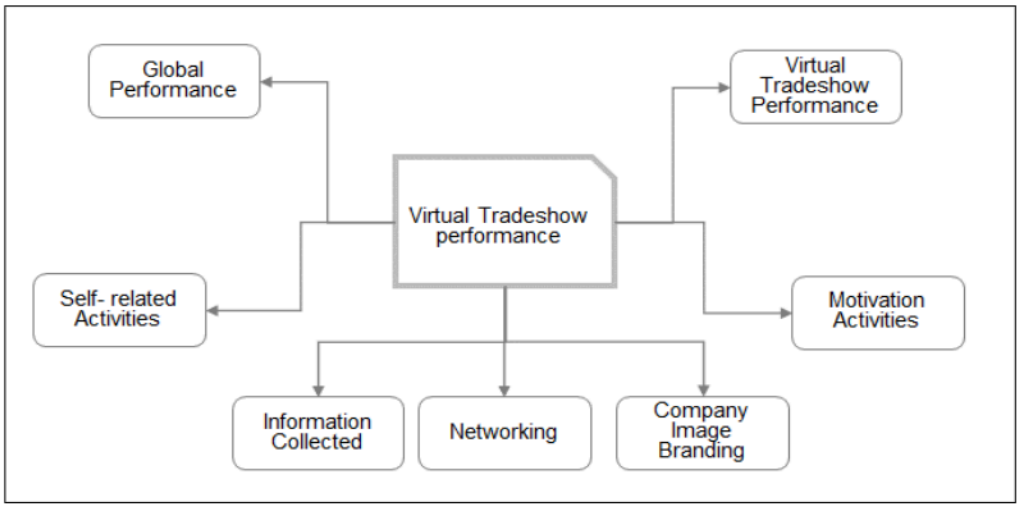

Figure 2. Model for Measuring Virtual Tradeshow Performance

4. RESULTS

The researchers explored virtual tradeshows and exhibitions organised in Malaysia, Indonesia (Widjono, 2020), and Thailand (Han & Verma, 2014) in 2020 and 2021 for comparison, as shown in Table 1. Based on this exploration, this study investigates an in-depth analysis on Virtual IGEM 2021 (www.igem.my), which is the most comprehensive and consistent virtual tradeshow platform, using it as a case study.

Table 1 List of Tradeshows and Exhibitions Organised Through Virtual Platforms (2020-2021)

No	Event	Type	Year	Country	Appearance
1.	International Greentech & Eco Products Exhibition & Conference Malaysia (IGEM)	Tradeshow	2020	Malaysia	Comprehensive
2.	International Invention, Innovation & Technology Exhibition (ITEX)	R&D Exhibition	2020	Malaysia	Adequate
3.	Metaltech & Automex	Tradeshow	2020	Malaysia	Adequate
4.	ASEAN Super 8	Tradeshow	2020	Malaysia	Adequate
5.	Asiawater	Tradeshow	2020	Malaysia	Adequate
6.	Malaysia Technology Expo : COVID-19 (MTE)	R&D Exhibition	2021	Malaysia	Adequate
7.	Virtual Eastfood Expo	Tradeshow	2021	Indonesia	Adequate

No	Event	Type	Year	Country	Appearance
8.	Cyber Defence & Security Exhibition and Conference (CYDES)	Tradeshow	2021	Malaysia	Adequate
9.	ASEAN Science, Technology And Innovation Week (ASTIW)	Tradeshow	2021	Thailand	Basic
10.	International Greentech & Eco Products Exhibition & Conference Malaysia(IGEM)	Tradeshow	2021	Malaysia	Comprehensive

Virtual IGEM, as shown in Figure 3, has been established for 13th year in the tradeshow industry as Southeast Asia's largest trade event for green technologies and eco-solutions. IGEM is an event organised by government agencies and serves as an ideal platform for solution providers and green energy businesses to tap into the fast-expanding ASEAN market by showcasing the latest innovations to policymakers, government organisations, universities, investors, and the mass markets of the IGEM brand. Over the years, IGEM has successfully generated over RM30 billion in business leads since its initiation in 2010 and continues to maintain its track record. To date, IGEM has attracted an attendance of over 490,000 visitors, including delegates, dignitaries, and companies from over 79 countries. The findings on the virtual tradeshow platform are presented in Table 2.

Figure 3. Platform of IGEM Virtual Tradeshow 2021 (A-Entrance, B-Lobby, C- Booth Selection)

Table 2 shows the findings for every page on the virtual tradeshow IGEM platform, based on user or visitor perspectives, using a model for measuring virtual tradeshow performance. The study evaluates seven themes, each corresponding to an element featured on IGEM platform. User perspectives reflect personal or user-oriented experience (Desai, 2021), including both satisfied and unsatisfied user experiences.

Table 2 IGEM 2021 Virtual Tradeshow Platform Findings

No.	Theme	Element	User Perspective
1.	Web Page	Main website; - List of activities - List of a conference talk - Virtual booth tab	- Adequate information provided - Easy access
2.	Interface of Virtual Booth	1. Graphic animation 2. Text animation 3. Sound and music 4. Guideline video for new user	- Interactive animation and music - Show the excitement inside - No loading delay
3.	Virtual Booth Entrance /Lobby	1. Apparent choice of activities a. Exhibition b. Conference c. Business Contact 2. Helpdesk info 3. Real exhibition environment image	- Easy to new user - A lively effect on animation motion - To compact with all the real environment images can confuse the new user

No.	Theme	Element	User Perspective
		4. Minimum human animation 5. Guideline video tutorial 6. Animation video highlight	
4.	Exhibition Area	1. Tunnel to the location area 2. Four different types of exhibitions a. Main Hall – Platinum sponsor dan international booth b. Malaysia Hall – booth Categories; energy, Greentech and green partner (SME, Start-up, Agencies, Universities) c. Two Organiser Hall – agencies related. 3. Previous page menu 4. Microsite for every virtual booth – information on text, video, brochure download 5. Additional overall programme menu – pocket talk 6. Dropdown menu for the exhibitor list and searching	- Attraction to the visitor - Freshness view to the user perspectives - Easy and simple menu - Emphasize international representative. - Repeated list of exhibitors twice – for start-up companies - Too many pages before user can find the exhibitor booth (microsite) - Image of 2D booth with simple animation - Information easily collected and download. - Easy enquiries to the exhibitor
5.	Conference	1. Schedule of activities 2. Live video – link Youtube video 3. Recorded video– link Youtube video. 4. RSVP menu and evaluation reminder	- Simple and straight forward menu - Convenient video apps to user - Easy to register for the conference
6.	Business Contact	1. No further option (depend on the client registration)	- Not enough information
7.	Additional	1. Token to the visitor on every booth visit - Diamond award 2. Visitor survey question 18 question	- Attract and motivate visitor to explore all the booth and came again. - Feedback for improvement

Based on the studies, we propose a model for user expectation on virtual tradeshow platform, as illustrated in Figure 4. The objectives for user to visit a virtual tradeshow are based on three main focuses, namely, to build networking (Geigenmüller, 2010), build a new business (Jotikasthira, 2015) and build their own branding (Jeong & Arcilla, 2017) in their respective industries. Moreover, user are attracted to the convenient facilities provided by the platform (Gottlieb et al., 2011; Ling & Dai, 2010), such as easy access (Widjono, 2020), flexibility to use their own time (24 hours a day), and freedom from logistical issues associated with traditional tradeshow (Jurakanit & Taweepornpatomkul, 2018). Additionally, virtual tradeshows offer unlimited access without geographical boundaries (Margolis, 2005), allowing user to receive real-time responses from the exhibitors (Norshaharizan et al., 2021; Pike, 2020). Furthermore, virtual platforms can provide longer exhibition durations of up to 6 months, compared to traditional tradeshows, which typically last between three and seven days. Therefore, user expectations can be structured based on this model to simplify accessibility (Jati & Dominic, 2008) and help the platform developers in incorporating essential elements into future virtual platforms. These elements include enhancing local and global networking, facilitating purchases (Nayak & Bhalla, 2016) or acquiring services (Jeong & Arcilla, 2017), obtaining the latest industry information (Sarmento & Simões, 2018) and strengthening personal or company branding.

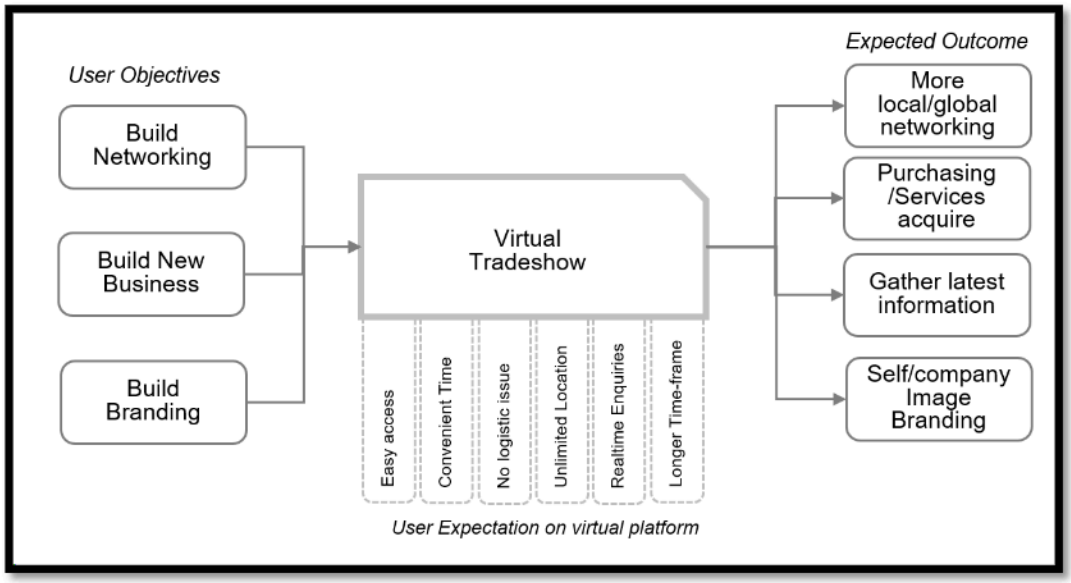

Figure 4. User Expectation Model on Virtual Tradeshow Platform

5. DISCUSSIONS

The findings show that tradeshows should incorporate additional elements of interactive information and entertainment scenarios to maintain and transform the visitors from passive viewers and readers into active actors and players (Walczak et al., 2006), to achieve their objectives. A dynamic effect, achieved through motion-based animation, greatly influences the user's perspective by simulating a real-world environment, even in the absence of a 3D model (Chow & Chan, 2009). This approach enhances interactivity and enriches the overall user experience. Offering 3D virtual displays could give visitors with a sense of being inside the exhibition space while also allowing them to navigate freely (Gomes et al., 2011), as demonstrated by Indonesian tradeshows' efforts to implement this feature.

Nevertheless, virtual tradeshows provide a more convenient alternative for visitors. However, the numbers of exhibitors and visitors has remained low. Several factors can be inferred from the lack of participation from industry exhibitors and visitors, including insufficient tradeshow promotions, a short-planned implementation period, and the exhibitors' lack of preparedness in facing the uncertainty of the pandemic. The absence of additional promotions from exhibition venue providers such as KLCC, MITEC, and WTC has also impacted the visibility of tradeshows, preventing them from reaching visitor awareness. To overcome this issue, the strengthening of social media promotion is undeniably. Indeed, the role of agencies such as the MyCEB is crucial in supporting the industry and further promoting the organisation of this virtual tradeshows, alongside websites that list tradeshows both locally and internationally.

Correspondingly, organising a virtual tradeshow still provides some advantages to exhibitors and visitors with a longer exhibition period of up to 6 months, more products display, unloadable exhibit materials, and cheaper tradeshow participation costs (Gottlieb & Bianchi, 2017) offered by the organisers. It is easier for both industry and public visitors to participate in such tradeshows which able to be reached for 24 hours a day, apart from various webinar sessions, most of which are offered for free. The additional features proposed for Malaysian tradeshows should consider the implementation of mobile applications (Ciurea et al., 2014), multi-user 3D environments (Vosinakis & Xenakis, 2011), virtual reality and artificial intelligence-driven technologies to create a 'real experience' for visitors (Sedon et al., 2021).

The implementation of the virtual exhibition also opens new spaces for industry visitors to expand the industry network across regional countries. With virtual platforms being organised in Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand, the potential for new business opportunities continues to grow across Southeast Asia. It is hoped that companies, especially SMEs, as well as university technology transfer centres and research agencies, can take advantage of this marketing method. Therefore, one of the benefits of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it has opened new opportunities for these industries to develop further.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the utilisation of the virtual tradeshows will continue to grow as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on Malaysia's MICE industry. Platform developers and event organisers need to emphasise critical elements based on user objectives, expectations, and anticipated outcomes from the virtual tradeshows. Therefore, this model could help interested parties to focus on the basic needs of the user experience and uplift the virtual tradeshow industry in Malaysia.

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