

MICE Segment: Challenges and Opportunities to the Tourism Sector

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Abstract

Objetives | Business and professional travel is one of the oldest forms of travel. Business tourism has grown exponentially in recent years and is seen as a huge opportunity for the sector. Specifically, MICE refer to Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions that can be held to perform business tourism (Smagina, 2017). The Meetings refers to a number of events such as: daily meetings, annual meetings, or weekly meetings, which intended to add value through communication, celebrations or training activities, among others. Meetings can also vary in size. Meeting venues differ depending on participation and meeting style, ranging from formative meetings, lectures, seminars, workshops or panel discussions, presentations, or product launches (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2012). Meetings allow the ideals of organizations to be put into practice as well as communication processes between employees, customers, and other stakeholders (Davidson & Cope, 2003). Incentive trips are considered an important tool by organizations and have served as an introduction to human resource management theories, recognizing the work of employees, not in a monetary way, but in a tangible way (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2012). These trips have been used to motivate, recognize employees for their work and/or increase commitment between the organization and the employee (Pizam, 2005). Incentive trips, or corporate hospitality, have a more direct link with leisure tourism due to the strong recreational nature associated with them, in the sense of rewarding employees (Everard, 2010). The incentive market is made up of two sub-sectors: individual or group incentives. Group trips encourage team spirit and a sense of belonging with a large number of people, while individual trips focus essentially on the same objectives, but with a smaller number of people, usually up to 20 (Witt et al., 1992). These trips usually consist of an itinerary of accommodation, transportation, special events or other options that offer the participant a highly rewarding experience (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2012).

As far as conferences are concerned, they comprise a wide range of professional events on a particular theme and organized with a formal structure. Conferences can be academic, commercial, or business or for another purpose, and can vary in terms of size and duration. The purpose of a conference is to address themes or issues which are then discussed, solutions identified, or advice given. A conference is an assembly that may involve discussion to establish facts and/or solve problems. Conferences have no connotation in terms of their periodicity and are usually held on a smaller scale than congresses (Sylla et al., 2015). This study aims to understand the future of **MICE segment** in Hospitality and to comprehend what are the main challenges and opportunities to the sector with these events.

Methodology | To conduct this study a qualitative methodology was performed using a semi-structured interview to answer our research objectives. Our participants were 10 hotel directors in Portugal. The interviews were conducted online, taped, and verbatim transcript. Data were analyzed with thematic analysis procedures.

Main Results and Contributions | Our results suggested that, as expected, during the COVID-19 period, the drop in the number of events held in the **MICE segment** is, on average, 69%. **MICE segment** are an extremely important segment for Portuguese hotels since, as well as mitigating seasonality, they create dynamism and promote cross-selling, contributing to their economic security. The data also highlights several strategies for adapting the operation to this kind of event, based on making event conditions more flexible, following up on customers' needs, and campaigns on digital platforms and social networks. For the future, our participants consider that there are several opportunities for the development of the segment, based on exploring potential markets such as the United States, or Brazil, and in business areas that will recover more quickly, such as health, banking, publishing and sport. Moreover, the participants consider that the pandemic has accelerated the use of technology due to the need for online and hybrid events and this will be a trend for the future of the sector. Other trends point to significant changes in how far in advance events are booked, fewer participants and shorter durations.

Limitations | Our main limitations are related to the use of a qualitative study with a few numbers of participants making difficult the results' generalization. Additionally, our participants were the hotel directors who could be more influenced by social desirability. In future studies, it would be interesting to have other participants such as intermediate leaders and the customers.

Conclusions | In conclusion, **MICE segment** seem to be an important strategy for business tourism contributing to the decrease in seasonality. Although it is important to develop the specific skills required in this sector.

Keywords | Events, Business Tourism, Hospitality trends, MICE, Portugal

1. Introduction

Business and professional travel is one of the oldest forms of travel. Business tourism has grown exponentially in recent years and is seen as a huge opportunity for the sector.

The phenomenon has grown nationally and internationally, with the aim of these meetings being to disseminate the latest knowledge on the topic being explored, to look for new developments, or to exchange ideas that inspire innovation in the organisations where they work (Gomes et al., 2023). There has also been a proliferation of organisations managing these events, which are more professionally responsible for designing, planning, and implementing these MICE (Gomes et al., 2023). Specifically, MICE refers to Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions that can be held to perform business tourism (Smagina, 2017, Rojas-Bueno, Alarcón-Urbistondo & González-Robles, 2023).

By the year 2028, the value of the worldwide meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions (MICE) industry is expected to reach USD 1337.4 billion, which is nearly a 166% growth from USD 805 billion in 2017, thus further boosting the business travel market (Dinesh et al., 2021; Lee & Park, 2023).

The Meetings refer to a number of events such as daily meetings, annual meetings, or weekly meetings, which are intended to add value through communication, celebrations, or training activities, among others. Meetings can also vary in size. Meeting venues differ depending on participation and meeting style, ranging from formative meetings, lectures, seminars, workshops or panel discussions, presentations, or product launches (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2012). Meetings allow the ideals of organizations to be put into practice as well as communication processes between employees, customers, and other stakeholders (Davidson & Cope, 2003).

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purpose of a conference is to address themes or issues which are then discussed, solutions identified, or advice given. A conference is an assembly that may involve discussion to establish facts and/or solve problems. Conferences have no connotation in terms of their periodicity and are usually held on a smaller scale than congresses (Sylla et al, 2015).

Finally, exhibitions are also known as association events, the purpose of which is to present or promote the products and/or services of one or more companies, for various purposes, such as marketing, selling a product, or even doing business and forming partnerships with other organisations. They usually take place in spaces open to the public and can be addressed only to professionals or directly to potential consumers (Davidson & Cope, 2003; Getz, 2008).

This study aims to understand the future of **MICE segment** in Hospitality and to comprehend what are the main challenges and opportunities to the sector with these events. Furthermore, this research also contributed to the knowledge of **MICE segment** in the Hospitality sector, based on data explored from semi-structured interviews with 10 hotel directors in Portugal.

The following section presents the existing literature on the **MICE segment**, their global importance, and the main challenges due to COVID-19, as well as future tendencies on the **MICE segment**. Section three outlines the methodological approach, followed by the main study's findings, and the final section addresses the discussion and main conclusions.

2. Literature Review (DM)

2.1. The MICE segment

MICE is an acronym formed by combining the initials of the following words: Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (Smagina, 2017; Rojas-Bueno et al., 2023; Lee & Park, 2023). This tourism segment is one of the most dynamic and has undergone constant evolution over time. In addition to offering accommodation and meals, hotels have always offered additional services, particularly **MICE segment** (Everard, 2010; Lee & Park, 2023). These events not only provided new forms of leisure but above all met the needs of commercial and industrial expansion, which indirectly boosted other business areas upstream and downstream of the hospitality sector, such as trips, business meetings, and other corporate events (Marques, 2014; Wan, 2011; Wood & Brotherton, 2008; Rojas-Bueno et al., 2023), to acquire knowledge, exchange ideas or celebrate. In this field, predatory conferences, also on the rise in recent years (McCrostie, 2018), are known for their lower quality, whose objectives are more to generate revenue for those organising them or to promote networking between participants with an interest in the same topics (Gomes et al., 2023), cannot be excluded.

Alongside the term MICE, other terms have become commonly used, namely Meetings Industry (Everard, 2010), and more recently, converted into the terms Business Tourism, or Industrial Tourism Events (Otgaar, 2021). However, they have different characteristics and cannot therefore be considered synonymous. Business tourism is characterised by being a broader term that encompasses all aspects of the business traveler's experience. Swarbrooke and Horner (2012) suggest that in business tourism, the individual demands more quality from the services they

choose and is less sensitive to price, as it tends to be associated with traveling for professional purposes directly related to their work. Industrial tourism, on the other hand, involves tourists visiting companies where their main activity is not tourism, providing educational experiences taking into account the products that are produced, the production process, and their use in everyday life. Industrial tourists can be individuals who are in a place outside their area of residence, according to the definition of a tourist, and who do this activity as a form of leisure. It is also important to emphasise that industrial tourism does not include business or commercial trips because they can be directly linked to the production process of the product/service (Otgaar, 2021). Finally, the term MICE is distinct from the term event tourism, in the sense that event tourism encompasses all types of events, such as cultural, sporting, social, environmental and political events. Its aim is also to mitigate seasonality and promote a particular destination, generating economic impacts (Marujo, 2015).

Traditionally, the **MICE segment** is associated with the organisation that hires the event, the event organiser, and the event participant (Rogers, 2013). Whenever the event organiser uses external organisers, it is common for them to be hotels that recognise the need to meet the expectations of the client company and the heterogeneity of its event participants or guests (Getz, 2007; Rogers, 2013; Wood & Brotherton, 2008). This demand for an adequate response from both the company creating the event and its participants has led to the creation of professional associations to guarantee a higher quality of service. One of the most successful examples in this MICE segment is the ICCA (International Congress and Convention Association), created in 1963, which is known as a leading global association for the meetings industry, offering information, training, communication channels and development opportunities. It represents the world's main destinations as well as the most specialised suppliers when it comes to international meetings and events. In 2020, it has the industry's main stakeholders in this sector, thus expanding its offerings for companies to organise more effective meetings (ICCA, 2021), moving a large number of products and services needed to hold a **MICE segment** (Chim-Miki et al., 2016). To summarise, the MICE segment encompasses different types of events, with different motivations (Aguero, 2007), which can be national or international events, promoted by governmental, non-governmental or corporate entities, from different sectors of activity and with a very diverse number of participants, ranging from a mini-event to a mega-event and serving objectives that can vary between promotional, informative, didactic or to strengthen internal or external relations or establish social links.

2.2. Importance, challenges, and tendencies of MICE

The MICE segment has emerged in recent decades as an important vector for national economies, being perceived as a significant and growing contribution from tourism and other directly or indirectly associated industries (World Tourism Organisation, 2006; Soares et al, 2019). The main contributions can be identified as the occupancy of hotel units in low seasons (Marques, 2014; Oliveira, 2014; Sylla et al., 2015; Costa et al., 2023; Borges, 2023) or the increase in business

trips (Akhyadov et al., 2021). Choosing to hold the event in a hotel also has the advantage of being a multi-purpose venue - accommodation, dining services, and car parking. While this option represents greater convenience for the event's organising committee, for hotel units it brings marketing and publicity benefits to the different services provided and guarantees higher consumption, use, and occupancy rates (Gomes et al., 2023). Thus, on the one hand, it is important to recognise the importance of the **MICE segment** as a significant source of revenue for hotel units, namely through the cross-selling of products or services offered by the different departments of that hotel unit (Everard, 2010; Jones & Li, 2015; Akhyadov et al., 2021). On the other hand, these hotel units increase their investment in essential equipment for holding corporate events and in developing a differentiating promotional strategy (Getz, 2007; Akhyadov et al., 2021). In line with these arguments, Gomes et al (2023) emphasise that choosing the venue for a **MICE segment** is an essential decision, as it is often linked to the number of participants and the consequent revenue generated by the event. The choice depends on various factors, such as ease of travel (land and air transport) and the attractiveness of the location.

The reputation that a **MICE segment** brings is not only for the promoters and organisers, but also for the country and city where it takes place, especially because of the revenue for all kinds of services and businesses in the local communities, from restaurants and hotels to transport companies and tourist agents (Gomes et al., 2023). In the case of the Portuguese context, INE data points to a significant increase in professional or business travel, corresponding to 8.2% of all trips made in 2019 (INE, 2020). These figures are consolidated with the growth of events in the **MICE segment** in Portugal, in 2019, according to data shared by "The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry" (UFI, 2020), 27 exhibitions were held, which shows that Portugal has significant room for growth in this business area.

However, the panorama of growth that Portugal had been registering was surprising by the pandemic situation caused by COVID-19 (Jiloha, 2020). The rapid escalation in the number of cases of infection led the World Health Organisation to advise governments to impose measures to control and restrict people. Among the measures taken by countries were travel restrictions, periods of confinement, and measures to socially restrict movement (Kapia, 2021).

National fountains, not only in Europe but also in the rest of the world, were completely closed, preventing international and domestic travel. This measure conditioned hotel and tourism operations, forcing many units to close down indefinitely (Baum & Hai, 2020). Against this backdrop, the tourism industry has been one of the sectors most affected by the arrival of the new SARS-COV-2 virus, better known as COVID-19, mainly due to the dangers and restrictions associated with the spread of the virus (Coelho & Mayer, 2020). In addition, the nature of the products and services used in hospitality prevents the possibility of a recovery effect on lost revenue.

Confinement may have changed the way business is done in hospitality shortly, given the new rules and regulations regarding hygiene and social distancing, coupled with more hesitant and concerned customers (Breier, Kallmuenzer, Clauss, Gast, Kraus, & Tiberius, 2021). According to

the latest data released by the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2020), between January and October 2020, America and Europe saw a drop of 68%, Africa a decrease of 69%, Central Europe a drop of 73% and Asia and the Pacific a drop of 82% in international tourist arrivals (UNWTO, 2020). As for Portugal, data revealed by the National Statistics Institute (INE, 2021) shows that in November 2020 there was a sharp contraction in tourism, with only 123,600 foreign tourist arrivals, which corresponds to a decrease of around 76%, while in October this contraction stood at 60%. This data shows that hotels with a restricted relationship with business travelers could suffer a greater impact. Teleworking entrepreneurs have managed to reduce their traveling to what is strictly necessary with the creation of videoconferences, which have become part of their day-to-day lives and could continue to do so (Moreira et al, 2020).

As far as events are concerned, APECATE - the Portuguese Association of Companies for congresses, tourist entertainment, and events, says that there has been a drop in MICE segment of between 70 and 90%. The same has happened with MICE, because many business trips that used to take place have been cut back, and some even permanently. This is less positive news for hotels, as this segment accounts for an average of 20% of turnover (APECATE, 2021). In congresses and conferences, the pattern is different and there is some consensus that hybrid events will grow. The uncertainty is whether it will only affect the number of people physically attending these events or whether it will be a strategy to increase audiences, break down geographical barriers, and reduce travel costs (APECATE, 2021). Unequivocally, these practices make it possible to reduce the costs of enrolment, time, travel, and accommodation for participants (Gomes et al., 2023).

Forecasts suggest that tourism in the MICE segment will, in 2021, be 15% below 2019 levels (Akhyadov et al., 2021), which highlights tourism's exposure to some risks, showing that this is a vulnerable sector (Kapia, 2021).

Tourism Portugal revealed that 63 corporate events have already been registered in 2021, signaling that there may be some signs of an upturn. In 2020, of the more than 100 congresses scheduled, only 13 were held, of which only 44 were rescheduled for the near future (Turismo de Portugal, 2021). Today's MICE tourists have different requirements, including the convenience of the event and the venue, the cost-effectiveness of attending the event, the speed of the internet, loyalty schemes such as points cards and discounts, and breakfasts included in the price of the stay. Therefore, although the MICE tourist are very connected to technology, they have a more pronounced and demanding tendency when it comes to their experiences (Akhyadov et al., 2021).

With the arrival of the pandemic, events and meetings are now all online, and a new event format has been developed that will become part of the new normal for hotels and MICE segment, known as hybrid events. These events are designed to combat some of the constraints caused by the pandemic, namely the number of participants in the same space (InEvent, 2019). These events have both an online and a face-to-face component and offer major advantages. Firstly, the platform used to hold and/or broadcast the event allows event managers to reach a greater

number of audiences via social networks, bridging geographical barriers that may exist due to travel impediments (Turismo de Portugal, 2020), and then for the organisers, the initiatives of this type of online event reduce the costs of renting space, catering, transport, and accommodation. Hybrid events also allow exhibitors and sponsors to access presentations from the comfort of their own homes and at a time that suits them (Disimulacion, 2020).

The use of technologies for online and hybrid events makes it possible to obtain real-time feedback that can be used for continuous and immediate improvement while companies hold online meetings to showcase their products to partners (Aburumman, 2020). Organisers gain access to post-event statistics such as satisfaction levels, topic preferences, and participant interest, enabling necessary adjustments to be made to further increase participant loyalty. More and more event attendees spend time in front of screens, so it's increasingly common for them to feel comfortable dealing with digital interactions (InEvent, 2019). Even so, this type of event cannot replace the experience gained from face-to-face interactions (Congrex Team, 2020). In this respect, Gomes et al (2023) consider it common to prefer segmented professional events based on the profile of similar participants, but also to be interested in taking part in these events to generate personal and professional visibility within the community. In these cases, the choice of participants may also be conditioned more by the list of speakers and other participants than by the relevance of the topics being debated. It is common in these cases for networking time to be the priority of professional participants, who strategically move around according to their interests and desire to establish contacts and/or partnerships (Gomes et al., 2023).

To respond to the crisis that has affected the hospitality sector (Ranasinghe et al., 2020), several studies point to the creation of development models for the **MICE segment** after the restrictions caused by the pandemic have been lifted and suggestions for an immediate response to recovery (Akhyadov et al., 2021; Ranasinghe et al., 2020). These models involve planning an increase in the number of services with an individual approach and meeting the needs of each client, making them feel valued (Akhyadov et al., 2021). In addition, organising **MICE segment** brings benefits to companies, especially in terms of employer branding, taking advantage of the opportunity for company advertising and marketing sessions, and leveraging the visibility of the company and its business in a strategically selected niche (Gomes et al., 2023).

The specific context of Portugal shows a large accommodation capacity in terms of the number of existing beds (INE, 2022), with a total of 1,407 hotels, most of which are concentrated in the north of the country with a total of 400 hotels. If we consider data from Turismo de Portugal (2022), the country recorded an average annual growth rate of 7.2% in overnight stays, which translates into an increase from 37 million overnight stays (recorded in 2019) to 70 million overnight stays recorded in 2022 (Borges, 2023). However, recent data from Portuguese Statistics about tourist activity (INE, 2023) shows that the tourist accommodation sector recorded 1.9 million guests and 4.6 million overnight stays in November 2023, corresponding to growth of 9.2% and 7.5% respectively (+8.9% and +8.6% in October 2023, in the same order). This growth trend is still far from achieving the growth dynamics of foreign markets such as the British

market (+15.6%). Next in terms of representativeness are the German (12.8% of overnight stays from non-residents) and North American (9.3%) markets, which grew by 10.1% and 14.4% respectively.

However, the Portuguese hospitality sector faces some challenges, such as seasonality, competition from other tourist destinations, changing visitor expectations, and people management (Turismo de Portugal, 2022). According to the literature (e.g. Bello et al., 2021; Costa et al., 2023; Garcia, 2022), the hotel industry's major challenges are of great relevance to the organisation in that it is equally important to take into account value growth, accessibility, innovation, sustainability, and investment. In line with these concerns, the **MICE segment** seems to have a major impact on the hospitality sector, especially due to its ability to minimise the effects of seasonality, i.e. fluctuations in demand for hotel accommodation and other hospitality services that occur at different times of the year (Costa et al., 2023; Borges, 2023). In this way, the **MICE segment** could be an important factor in the hotel industry by boosting revenue in what is considered low seasons, benefiting from the attractiveness of the cities, climate, and local cuisine chosen for organising MICE (Costa et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

This exploratory qualitative study aimed to understand the future of **MICE segment** in Hospitality comprehending their main challenges and opportunities.

For data collection, it was developed a semi-structured interview with 18 questions: five related to the sociodemographic characterization of the participants, five related to the number of events, and eight related to the characterization of the events. There were questions such as "What is the importance of MICE to the hotel?", "What kind of strategies do you use to attract new events to the hotel?", or "Which new markets can be exploited to attract events MICE?".

Regarding our research objectives, the inclusion criteria for the participants were having direct contact with the organization of events, getting to know the dynamics of this segment. Our theoretical sample was 10 Portuguese hotel managers (seven men and three women) working in the **MICE segment**. Their ages were between 36 and 55 years old (mean=42,5 years old). All the participants had higher education qualifications. The number of participants was defined according to the data theoretical saturation.

Concerning the procedure, an e-mail was sent to all the hotels in the Oporto region that had the **MICE segment on their website explaining the study objectives and asking for their availability to participate in the research. We received answers from 15 hotels, and 10 accepted to participate in the study.** All the interviews were conducted during 2023. They were made online, taped, and verbatim transcripts. The average length of the interviews was 25 minutes. The interviews were classified with letters to maintain data anonymous. Data were analyzed with thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clark, 2006) **identifying themes and categories. The software used was QSR NVIVO. All the themes presented were theoretically saturated.** All ethical procedures were considered during the research.

4. Results

Data analysis allowed us to identify five main themes: "Events breaking", "Strategies"; "Expectations", "Opportunities" and "Trends".

Events breaking refers to the significant decrease in the number of events held during the pandemic period due to national restrictions. Our participants referred to a drop, on average, of 69% as illustrated by Participant 4 "In hospitality we have a huge drop in the events". Until then, the MICE events were a significant segment for hotels allowing some seasonability mitigation.

To face this decrease, participants had to use several "Strategies". This theme refers to the referred to the approaches used by participants to deal with the situation. The most frequent categories were related to the need to adapt their events to digital platforms requiring new infrastructures as we can observe in "digitally is the new normal, we had to prepare our infrastructures and the wi-fi for this..." (I2) or "we have to have a new approach, everything has to be digital, you have to have infrastructures for that" (I1). Additionally, they considered the importance of being flexible to maintain their customers and services as you can observe in the citation " Above all, we have flexibility in everything regarding cancellation policies, we are giving all the possibilities to clients to be able to postpone events or even if they need to cancel, because there are partners who are intermediaries and have already had to pay a deposit for the groups and we are making it flexible..." (I7) or "you have to be more comprehensive and adapt to the customers needs, it is changing every day and we should be flexible according to the customers and partners needs" (I8).

The "Expectations" refer to the perceptions of the participants in the medium and long term. The participants considered that 2023 is the changing point and the years after it will expect to the affirmation of this activity, as we can observe in "it was difficult, but I believe next years will be very promising for the segment" (I3).

"Opportunities" theme is concerned, and based on the expectation of an upswing, which could still take two to three years, the hotel units have started to look at new business opportunities and emerging markets that shortly could become promoters of potential MICE to be held in Portugal.

Concerning emerging sectors with the potential for holding MICE, the analysis of the interviews revealed a growing interest in sectors linked to health, publishing, real estate, sports, banking, among others, as can be seen in the quote "We have noticed that there is some recovery, especially in the health segment, so anything pharmaceutical, medical events, we have noticed that there is some recovery, but perhaps even because they have better knowledge about the pandemic and where they can or cannot go." (I9) or "Yes, we are recovering, we have some interesting namely in the banking sector" (I5). These sectors of activity have been showing signs of recovery more quickly than those linked to other areas of industry/services and have been arousing the interest of hotel units. The diversification of customers from the MICE segment is one of the objectives of hotel units, to increase the number of events in this segment. Additionally,

the exploration of new international markets is a huge opportunity namely, the United States or Brazil. Still on the theme of opportunities, based on the available data, our country's favorable position to other, more media-friendly destinations stands out. There is a tendency for companies to look for safe destinations.

The "Trends" theme refers to what participants consider the future of **MICE segment** in the hospitality industry. Although the general expectation of managers is face-to-face events, they consider the use of digital technologies to develop events as a reality that will continue. As can be seen in the quote, "But I believe above all that we are starting to have smaller, hybrid events. We are seeing more and more hybrid events between face-to-face and online, and I think that's going to be the case over the next few years" (I10) and "I believe the future is hybrid events, we have to be prepared for this reality" (I6).

Investment in digital infrastructures, with the creation of conditions for holding hybrid events, streaming, or using technologies that allow remote communication or that improve the animation of the events held, should therefore be one of the areas of focus in management budgets.

Regarding the events booking, there is a trend towards reducing the time between booking and holding the event, which should continue. Managers note that companies do not want to take risks, as we can see in the quote "We live in very uncertain times, but more and more events will be short and booked at short notice" (I9).

Other trends referred by our participants are the duration of the event and the number of participants/size, which tend to decrease compared to the events held in the past. This can be seen in the quote "The events tend to be during fewer days and also with a reduced number of participants" (I5) or "I think that smaller events will be a trend in the future" (I10).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The main objective of this exploratory study was to understand the future of the **MICE segment** in the hospitality industry.

Our results suggest that, during the pandemic period there was a significant decrease in the number of events held in Portuguese hotels. **On the one hand, these results are similar to other geographical realities (e.g. Singapore), which saw a decrease of up to 92% in regional and international conferences in 2020 (Seow et al., 2022). On the other hand, these results run counter to the global trend in the tourism sector's MICE market, which is expanding exponentially (Karnchanapayap, 2023; Thommandru et al., 2023), thus further boosting the business travel market (Lee & Park, 2023).**

To cope with the decrease, our results show that hotels used several strategies to adapt them to the new reality. These strategies were related to being able to develop online events requiring new digital platforms and infrastructure but also their ability to be more flexible and adapt to this new normal (Tsai et al., 2024). **As referred by Karnchanapayap (2023), the MICE segment in hospitality can benefit from the usage of virtual reality and careful activity design. This author (Karnchanapayap, 2023) feels that this experiment with a virtual reality experience can serve as**

a starting point and set of guidelines for anyone who wants to develop an engaging attractive experience for an exhibition setting. Our results are in line with previous literature (Akhyadov et al., 2021) that highlights the importance of developing strategies focused on the characteristics of the problem. This disruptive moment has shown that strategies for organising MICE must be reviewed, because a lack of flexibility can compromise their success, and solutions must be considered to deal with the needs of both organisers and participants (Bello et al., 2021; Costa et al., 2023; Garcia, 2022). In addition, equipment and technological infrastructures must be properly adapted to provide adequate support for the performance of MICE when held in a hybrid or remote format, which can entail additional costs (equipment, qualified personnel, software fees, etc.) and require digital skills to use correctly (InEvent, 2019; Rojas-Bueno et al., 2023; Seow et al., 2022; Tsai et al., 2024). On the other hand, our results suggest that there could be important opportunities for the MICE segment in hospitality. According to our participants, these opportunities are related to the exploration of new international markets, and new activity sector events, increasing all the MICE potential for Portuguese hotels, but also to the kind of events. These opportunities contribute to maintaining and retaining clients as well as to analysing new marketing campaigns rapidly (Chumpoonta, 2024). Our participants argued that hybrid events would be an advantage but also a requirement in the future of MICE. Aburumman (2020) and Disimulacion (2020) also stated the importance of other forms of events, namely hybrid, in the future of MICE. Overall, this research highlights digitalisation and new forms of events were not new thinking for modern hotels, but in the past, they played minor roles in the organisation of MICE (Aburumman, 2020; Akhyadov et al., 2021, Tsai et al., 2024). This all changed radically in 2020, as people and organisations were forced to adopt digitalisation, remote contacts, and flexible participation systems on account of the COVID-19 pandemic (Chumpoonta, 2024; Karnchanapayap, 2023; Seow et al., 2022; Tsai et al., 2024).

Regarding the trends for the MICE segment, our results suggest that the events will occur in a few days, and with fewer participants, also the event booking will decrease. These results are in line with previous studies suggesting that uncertainty is related to changes in behaviours (Graffam & James, 2021; Tsai et al., 2024).

Our study had some limitations that should be considered. Being a qualitative study, we can not generalise our data to the MICE segment in Portugal. Indeed, we have a reduced number of participants and our results are very contextualised. On the other hand, we had the managers' perspective that can be influenced by social desirability and manage syndrome. Future studies should have more participants and consider quantitative methodologies allowing data generalisation. Moreover, future research should also consider the customer perspective; this is the MICE client's perspective, in order to better understand their needs.

Therefore, we can conclude that uncertainty and unpredictability times could be an opportunity for the MICE segment. The pandemic period required changes and investments by Portuguese hotels creating and allowing them to be prepared to face new challenges. This study is also one of the first ones to examine the MICE segment in Portugal, although some of these hotels are

multinational corporations with activities in the country. Lastly, the research also provides guidelines for the literature on new MICE segment organisation models (e.g., remote MICE) as well as the study reinforces the argument that it is important to encourage hotel leaders to develop and to adopt the use of technological and material resources to promote innovative behaviour, by organising regular meetings and to guarantee the success of MICE in the new times. Thus, the results help to enrich the body of theoretical literature on MICE tourism. In addition, the main practical contribution of the study is that it allows subsequent studies to develop a research framework utilising the findings of the present study primarily to explore innovative strategies around the MICE segment by integrating new knowledge and resources into future service offerings in the tourism sector. In addition, this research can help maintain competitive advantage and promote business tourism by providing clues as to how customers in the sector can be educated to consume new services. It also allows the tourism sector to evaluate its practices in order to develop value propositions for service innovation as well as respond effectively to customer needs.

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