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How does COVID 19 affect workers and consumers' risk perception in the Italian MEEC Industry?

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Abstract

The Italian economy has recently suffered the consequences of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has seen a peak impact in March 2020. The tourism and hospitality sectors were the most affected economic trades, and the Meetings, Expositions, Events, and Conventions (MEEC) industry, which annually has a significant value on the national gross domestic product and economic growth, has undergone many changes. For this reason, the following study sought to investigate how digitalization affected conferences, exhibitions, and fair-trade events in Italy during the pandemic and changed the attendance of workers and customers. A qualitative and quantitative methodology was adopted by collecting 250 questionnaires to investigate workers' and customers' sociodemographic and economic status, degree of risk perception and method, frequency, and influence of digital transformation. The meaningful results show that the effect of mandatory lockdown in Italy has brought several changes in the events' participation and arrangement. First, the sociodemographic condition and economic status, influenced by the pandemic, affected the decision of workers and customers to organize and attend events. Despite it, transitioning from in-presence participation to online events was positively accepted and encouraging due to the perception of risk, the socioeconomic status of attendants, and their predisposition to use technologies. These adaptions highlighted the usage of digital devices during crises, reconsidering their role in the fruition of events and the participants' sensitiveness due to dangerous situations. Therefore, in the conclusion, recommendations are proposed to improve crisis management adaptability, adjust the future management of in-presence and online events, and improve technology diffusion in the MEEC sectors.

Keywords: Italian MEEC Industry, Workers, and Customers' Risk Perception, Presence Vs. Remote Events

1. Introduction

The current global pandemic of COVID-19, which has been hitting European Countries since the first months of 2020, is causing severe economic and social consequences, especially in the Italian MEEC industry. The Italian MEEC industry represents an essential segment of the national tertiary sector, arose in the 1980s and has a long tradition. This sector is related to services, transport, hospitality, and wages; it generates allied business in local areas, helps overcome seasonality, and attracts tourists. In Italy, the MEEC industry amounted to around 22.5 billion euros per year in production, for an added value estimated at 10.6 billion euros, equal to 0.7% of GDP.

The Italian trade fair industry ranks fourth in the world and second in Europe, after Germany; it achieves a value of 1.4 billion euros, with 3,700 direct employees, two hundred international and 220 national events organized annually, attracting 12.6 million visitors (AEFI, 2022) [3]. Compared to the regular tertiary daily work, the MEEC industry considers a particular type of travelers: the business tourists. They are a smaller section of the population with different motivations and additional freedom-of-choice-limiting constraints imposed through the business aspects. Hence, the event's participation, obtained from the market demand, consists of exhibitors or visitors for business reasons. Since meetings and events are both animators of destination attractiveness but, more fundamentally, are vital marketing tools in promoting places and increasing global competitiveness, over the years, destinations worldwide have recognized their numerous benefits. However, as the outbreak of COVID-19 began, the profit of the MEEC (meetings, events, exhibitions, and convention) industry decreased. Social distancing measures and other safety protocols required by the Government impacted most events' operations.

The Italian Presidential Decrees considered fairs and the MEEC industry as part of the category of non-essential activities, limiting the same. However, with the end of the National lockdown, hospitality tourism businesses and customer service, the last to re-open due to their non-essential categorization (Hai, 2020) [32], had a boom of clients.

The indicators for conferences and events held in Italy in 2021 showed a positive attitude of 23.7% respect 2020; the regulations in force during the year permitted to hold of in-person events from 1 July and with reduced capacity until 2 December 2021, and a total of 86438 events were maintained, in person or hybrid format. Person delegates were 4585433 (+14.7% versus 2020), with an overall attendance figure of 6798425 (+16.3% versus 2020) (AEFI, 2022) [3].

Thus far, events are a significant motivator of tourism, and the COVID-19 disease and the high-risk perception degree affected population thinking, both travelers and residents. To deal with this inconvenience, various organizers new innovative virtual methods for conducting extensive and lengthy meetings, also post lockdown.

Thanks to the online or hybrid formulas, the fair-trade companies adopted a strategy that allowed them to overcome the pandemic emergency and guarantee a return to budgetary growth. Different fairs and events were organized with the support of diffusion innovation techniques (DOI) which allowed the realization of remote events. Moreover, DOI's technological tools as temperature detection and automatic sanitation of work environments, have guaranteed extra attention for the protection of customers and workers and the continuity and prosperity of the industry itself (B. Chander, 2021) [4].

The Italian MEEC industry and its economic dimension have recently gained importance, and continued consolidation, growth, innovation and updating of this industry is necessary.

For this reason, the present subject's present work strives to understand which guidelines for future operations should be adopted by starting to understand the changes intercurred in its participants.

By asking ourselves, "*How does COVID-19 affect Italian workers and customers' risk perception*?" the present work aims to reconnect communities (workers and customers) and markets in the industrial supply chains to rebuild and make stronger the value interrupted by the pandemic. The present work, therefore, intends to investigate: "*How did the MEEC industry and its participants change?*" and "*What factors have most influenced the change in participants*?".

Hence, the Italian MEEC industry seems ready to implement digital transformation strategies and revamp its facilities in terms of sustainability to offer flexible, high-quality experiences and expertly combine the physical environment, virtual reality, and culture. For this reason, the present investigation is: "*Does the changes given by COVID-19 favor a potential opportunity for the growth of the sector?*"

The empirical work results could be, therefore, helpful in understanding the modern Italian MEEC industry and developing provincial marketing plans.

2. Literature review

The first subchapter (2.1) of this literature exploration analyses the MEEC industry impact in Italy and the sector's evolution since COVID-19. In chapter 2.2, an exploration of sociodemographic variables in MEEC industry participants demonstrates how the degree of interest in the remote or online event is interconnected with their own historical background. Then finally, chapter 2.3 is reported the risk perception variable and how it affects workers' and customers' attendance during crisis management and pandemics outbreaks.

2.1 Overview of Italian's MEEC industry: the challenges in realizing technological innovation in the exhibition sector

What has granted the Italian industry stability in recent years is the evolution of the MEEC industry sector with the adoption of a new management method and the increase in technological innovations. The MEEC business, by its nature, is a resource-intensive sector; it can have negative environmental consequences for the host city and population but a positive economic impact on Italian gross domestic product. In particular, large-scale events, such as conferences and conventions, can be significant sources of carbon dioxide emissions, pollution, and waste. Aspects of the environmental impact of the MEEC sector include energy and water consumption, waste and transport of food and beverage, etc. In order to implementing the sustainability of the Italian MEEC industry, technological innovations were sponsored by governance.

Different statistic data show that before COVID-19, the Italian MEEC sector generated 1.1 billion euros, second in Europe and fourth in the world, and from which small and medium enterprises (SMEs) derive 50% of their exports. Nevertheless, in 2020, the Italian trade fair system recorded losses of 80 million euros and, in 2021, of 60 million (Paravati, 2022) [70]. However, the sector, which is ready to restart, is now testing different strategies created during the period of inactivity. Then, with the 4 February 2021 decree, the government finally reopened the borders to buyers from non-EU countries who administer vaccines not recognized by the European Medicines Agency. The green corridors, requested by Italian international fairs' organizers, have reopened due to the necessity of bringing foreign buyers back to Italy.

However, the exigency of a new management method and advancing technological innovations are now necessary for the exhibition sector, which still benefits from the digital equipment developed during the pandemic.

The technological devices guaranteed the industry stability during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak; otherwise, there would be no possibility of holding events. According to Danese M., president of AEFI (Association of Italian Trade Fair Bodies), the digital fairs further supported this economic category, proving essential to maintain brand positioning and contacts with companies in a historical and social period in which the entire tourism sector has suffered a setback.

The phenomenon of technology transformation has inevitably crossed the events industry transversely by implementing it into live events or alternative methods for providing event experiences, like virtual reality or metaverse technology (O. Wreford, 2019) [68]. According to Yung (Yung, R., 2022) [89], an event can be considered as hold online when two or more attendees are geographically distanced and lean on technology to communicate and collaborate synchronously, sharing a digital environment.

Moreover, Google Trends search data shows that organizers and consumer behaviors have become increasingly digital due to COVID-19 social distancing measures. The rapid digital approach led attendances, workers and customers, to develop new digital habits and the diversity of online services offered developed workers' and consumers' greater adaptability and informatic skills. Hence, the speed at which the adoption took place favored more frequent event participation.

Currently, a new report from McKinsey shows that nearly all organizations, from traditional companies to start-ups, are rebuilding their business models to become more social and technological. For this reason, any organization moving into the virtual arena is advised to develop and implement a marketing plan to generate a higher traffic volume, creating enthusiasm and business opportunities. Then, the MEEC industry should continue developing an appropriate strategy that broadly increases participation and technological innovation (Edgar, 2008) [18]. These considerations lead to a first hypothesis:

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

2.2 Social economic status and relational variables impact

To a greater extent, the digitization process has been influenced by a substantial shift from presence attendance to online participation at events due to COVID-19, which has led to changes in consumers' and workers' socioeconomic status and relational variables within the MEEC industry.

Since March 2020, the aid of twenty-five billion has been allocated in the "*Cura Italia*" Decree (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica, 2020) [24] to cope with the Coronavirus emergency. Furthermore, measures have been established to strengthen the National Health Service and provide economic support for families, workers, and businesses.

The Decree acted in going to guarantee the extension of layoffs and the emergency layoffs for the exhibition sector. Fortunately, the dismissal of employees and managers committed to carrying out many projects closed in the drawers was thus fortunately avoided, expanding the physical and virtual boundaries of the exhibition pavilions with new fairs, acquisitions, international partnerships, and new spaces both real and digital.

However, for MEEC industry the need for relatedness is essential both for the community and for the fair-trade fame. It is, therefore, essential to investigate the literature on this topic and consider the dominant element of intrinsic motivation of workers and customers: the desire to traveling, the necessity of doing business, the ambition of advancing one's career, and the job mandatory.

In (Sheldon, 2001) [78] list of universal psychological needs *"money"* can be expected to be a need motivating the producers in developing and developed countries to participate, and to create *"luxury"*. For European consumers, the need for stay connected might be an essential motivator and seems to be part of the need for structure the fair-trade consumption.

In line with the shift to a higher self-orientation in the concept of user and workers experience, in the area of MEEC industry, the "*doing good for others*" moral behavior plays a role. For the consumer of fair trade, the need to generate meaning in the sense of creating a deeper purpose also implies the need to improve the living conditions of "*the other*", i.e., producers, of the fair-trade goods.

At this point, Getz theory is crucial because underlines the motivational aspect of participating in events, both from the point of view of workers and customers, and he divides them into physical, social, personal, and organizational (Getz & Page, 2016).

Speaking of it, Shone and Parry estimate four kinds of potential demands for events: "*current demand*", that demand which our event satisfies at the moment; "*future demand*", that demand which our event could satisfy in the future, over an average growth period; "latent demand", that demand which is sleeping until you provide an event for it, and "*suppressed demand*", that demand which exists for our event, but cannot get to it due to being suppressed by price, time, availability, lack of disposable income or other reasons (Shone & Parry, 2004) [80].

The spread of the COVID-19 epidemic and the resulting financial and social crisis gave rise to severe challenges regarding socioeconomic determinants and behavioral variables. Economic uncertainty is the high-risk period for the overall mental well-being of individuals, their partners, and family members (Holland, 2016; Dohrenwend, 2000) [37, 15]. For this reason, studies concerning how social distancing, panic buying, and other preventive measures have altered individuals' behavioral patterns in their interactions with other economic agents, are considered this research subject (Lahiri, 2021) [52].

The prolonged period of health emergency and economic crisis experienced since 2020 brought cognitive and affective disorders due to the combination of many devastating factors, such as unemployment, downsizing of medical and social services, and cuts in public spending (Meltzer H., 2010) [65]. At the same time, restrictions that have limited infections and social interaction affect psychological well-being and resilient identity (Godinic D., 2020) [29]. Therefore, the present study understood that socioeconomic status (SES) might influence risk perception (J. E. C. Lee, 2008) [41].

Moreover, the current literature supports this hypothesis and indicates that individuals with lower SES are exposed to a more considerable number of environmental and social health risks (Baum, 1999; Evans G. W., 2002; Orpana, 2004) [6, 21, 69]. These environmental and social health risk perceptions could lead to a sense of helplessness and a subsequent decrease in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. As an indicator of SES, there is the income level and, therefore, the maintenance of a job position. Hence, income is closely related to having access to material resources and can act as a proxy for other essential aspects of SES, including power, status, and way of life (Lynch, 2000) [58].

Therefore, in the present work, assessing the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on Italian MEEC industry workers and customers is fundamental to report and manage the organizations in the events industry like fairs companies, SMEs, governments, and partners.

For this reason, the second hypothesis is following assumed:
H2. COVID-19 has affected the socioeconomic status and relational variables of workers and customers in the MEEC industry.

2.3 Intrinsic workers' and customers' risk perception

Accordingly, the use of technologies has not changed the motivation or the intrinsic workers' or consumers' needs, but the variables that have most influenced their participation are linked to the concept of risk perception. Nevertheless, there is no commonly accepted definition for the term risk, either in the sciences or in public understanding; however, by considering the concept of risk in general, which was introduced in the 1920s, consumer behavior research usually defines risk perception in terms of uncertainty and consequences (M. C. Campbell, 2001; Hasan, Ismail, & Islam, 2017) [12, 34]. Risks refer to possible effects of actions or events assessed as unwelcome by most human beings. On

the other hand, risk management refers to ensuring the risks to a level acceptable by society and providing control, monitoring, and public communication (Kolluru, 1995; Zimmerman, 1986) [45, 90].

The risk perception is used in this study as an external variable element that impacted the mental habit of the respondent. Indeed, risk perception is a crucial prerogative of many behavioral theories; in the field of health psychology, among the most important theoretical models from a socio-cognitive perspective, it is possible to find the "*Protection Motivation Theory*" (J. E. Maddux, 1983) [62]. According to this theory, the motivation to protect oneself from the disease is the product of the threat's knowledge, the perception of personal vulnerability, and the coping response's effectiveness in reducing the danger. Therefore, threat assessment consists of estimates of the probability of contracting the disease and the severity of infection (J. Brug 2009) [11].

Risk perception is subjective and depends on values, concerns, or knowledge. When workers perceive risk, they likely adopt unusual ways to judge it (Xia, Wang, Griffin, Wu, Liu, 2017). All these variables mentioned have a considerable influence on the progress of the works and the related problems; in these terms, an important variable is certainly the perception of danger in the workplace (Leoni, 2010) [57]. The health emergency conditioned the human lifestyle and its worry perception everywhere but more in Italy, where the high number of COVID-19 cases and the various lockdowns hit the subject's psyche. Therefore, considering an event as a potential virus vector was one of the main reasons that led to the decision of the Italian Government to suspend all events and all fairs in any sector. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider that risk perception is heterogeneous and, therefore, involves economic research and practical relevance for individual labor market behavior (Leoni, 2010) [57].

In the literature, risk perception studies have surveyed a wide range of risky events that mainly consist of technical (e.g., nuclear power plants), environmental (e.g., air pollution), daily (e.g., vehicle driving), and natural (e.g., floods, landslides, earthquake) hazards. The emergence of risk perception studies is mainly motivated by the observation that there are significant differences between experts' "*objective*" assessments of risk and lay persons' intuitive judgments of risk (i.e., risk perception). Thus, understanding people's risk perception and determining factors are essential for improving danger communications and designing effective mitigation policies (Ming-Chou Ho, 2008). Hence, the risk perception of construction workers is an essential factor influencing their unsafe behaviors at work (Man, 2017) [63].

Risk perception is the intuitive risk judgment made by most people to evaluate hazards (Slovic P., 1987) and this judgment consists of two components, namely, cognitive, and affective (Sjöberg, 1998; Slovic P. &., 2006) [83, 85]. The cognitive component relates to the two aspects of judgment: the "*probability*" of experiencing an accident or an injury and its "*severity*" resulting from exposure to a risk source (Kouabenan, 2015) [48]. For the affective component, emotions have been recognized as necessary in RP (Sjberg, 2007) [84]. Following the Rundmo's study (2000) [77] the two aspects of the affective component of risk perception were measured by asking respondents whether they "*worry*" and whether they feel "*unsafe*" regarding the outcomes of risky

scenarios (Siu Shing, 2019) [82].

In conclusion, by investigating both the situations where the participants, workers, or customers, have attended the meeting online or in presence, it was assumed that when individuals are exposed to or involved in an event, those with higher fear and anxiety are more likely to have a higher risk perception. Thus, this research pretended:

H3. The changes given by COVID-19 have increased the perception of risk in attending events.

In order to respond to a crisis context characterized by complexity and deregulation, practitioners in all kinds of organizations were expected to use health and hygiene guidelines that were given to prevent dispersion of the virus, to support the organization's sustainability and adaptability via their work experience, knowledge, and innovative skills, and finally to withstand the crisis (Maritsa, 2020) [64]. Indeed, health and safety innovation strategies must navigate a delicate balance between government-mandated policies and client risk perceptions.

3. Materials and methods

The research object of the following paper derives from the narrow locus of crisis management adaptation of workers and customers and their cognitive dimensions of risk perception due to the changes given by the COVID-19 pandemic and technological innovation. Criticism of disconfirmation approaches has been based on the measurement and conceptual considerations regarding the use of technology in the crisis management situation and led this research to analyze respondents' thinking regarding national Italian MEEC industry emergency management.

The method used to investigate the objectives and research hypothesis mentioned in the literature was via a questionnaire designed to measure workers' and customers' participation in the MEEC industry's events during 2020. The survey included questions about general socio-demographic information and units for the primary variable of interest in the study, that is, the degree of risk perception. No incentives were offered to induce users to participate in the questionnaire.

The survey was elaborated by respecting the structure of proof presented in the literature.

Firstly, socio-demographic questions have been added to collect personal information, useful to understand our participants' specific aspects, such as age, gender, marital status, education level, monthly income, etc. (see DaMatta, 1984; Falassi, 1987; Hall, 1992; Earls, 1993; Hinch and Delamere, 1993; Soutar and McLeod, 1993) [14, 22, 33, 16, 36, 87]. For the proposed questions, multiple choice answer was suggested.

Secondly, the following section was presented to collect respondents' views on the factors that influence their participation in events, classified into five risk perception dimensions proposed by Broker (1984): financial, performance, physical, psychological, social, and time risks. Therefore, the linker scale value, with an assignment of an increasing score from never (0) to very always (5), consistently helped to discover the degree of risk perception ranked by both customers and worker participants in the presence and online events (Jarvis, 1999).

The standard Google Form questionnaires were shared online and administered by publishing a Google Form URL code via Facebook. 58 Italian and English questionnaires were collected in the pilot survey, conducted from February

3rd, 2021, to March 21st, 2021. Later, the online pilot survey helped obtain research availability and elaborating information and opinion of 259 respondents in the official collection: 128 respondents for the English version and 131 for the Italian one.

Afterwards, data were entered into Excel (Microsoft Office, Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, USA) and analyzed using it.

Then, qualitative, and quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and regressive methods, both valuable tools for exploring and modelling the relationship between a variable and predicting quantitative response variables. Qualitative variables were summarized with absolute and relative percentage frequencies. Moreover, descriptive analyses were conducted to analyze demographic information (gender, age, education level, salary, type of the conference) of the samples and describe the relationships among perceived conference quality dimensions (e.g., professional & social networking, site attractiveness, travel ability, and site environment) and the attendee behaviors (risk perception). Finally, a multiple linear regression model was built with the variables found to be statistically significant (p value> 0.05) and the ANOVA analysis of variance was used to avoid hypothesis testing errors.

4. Results and discussions
This Chapter presents and discusses the data analysis of both descriptive and quantitative research methodologies. Thus, results are shown according to the structure of the questionnaire and the relationships between the "*Skimming and scanning*" approach, "*Socio-demographic*" questions for both customers and workers in the MEEC industry, and "*Perception towards Crisis Management*" answers and "*Risk Perception*" evidence obtained. The characteristics and influence of these variables on the workers' and customers' 2020 participation are then registered and analyzed by the hypotheses assumed previously. Thanks to the theory identified and the hypothesis written, investigation results evidence the changes in the MEEC industry and are reported below in chronological and discursive order.

4.1 Skimming and Scanning evidence
In the first part of the questionnaire, a skimming action was taken to select the interviewers based on their participation

in 2020's MEEC events held in presence, online or both. Of the 258 questionnaires obtained in English and Italian, 26% of the interviewers (66 answers "*No*") were discarded, while 74% (192 interviewees) continued to answer about how they participated in these events. In order to precisely understand the specific work unit, respondents were asked to identify themselves as workers, customers, or both. The workers' perceptions of health and safety risks, in fact, can influence occupational choices, and the impact of COVID-19 crises could influence the numbers of employees in this sector. Indeed, customer information can influence participation in business activity (Leoni, 2010) [57]. In the results, a fewer percentage of the respondents (22%) replied that they participated in events as workers, the minority answered they attended the events as both workers and customers (17%), while the majority participated in events only as customers (61%).

In conclusion, the target sensitivity in the present work is considered different for customers and workers rather than another; therefore, in the following order, workers were asked in which market area they worked. The results showed that a majority of interviewers (59%) worked in the private sector and the public sector (32%), only a minority in the public sector with European Institutions (3%) and both the public and private sectors (5%). A small percentage of 1% stated instead of having worked with "*No-profit associations*".

Then, workers' respondents were asked what their occupation was, and different answers were obtained, of which a minority (18%) declared they worked in the direct circuit of the exhibition sector. Questionnaire provided five answer options (see Table 1).

Table 1: Workers' occupation

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

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

Table 2: Other workers' occupation

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

Finally, the following question asked whether they changed businesses in 2020 or not, and a net majority (80%) of workers declared they did not change their business in 2020, while the remaining 20% stated they did.

On the other hand, it was presented about customers just a question concerning the purpose of attending MEEC events in 2020 and considerable majority (86%) attended meetings, exhibitions, events, and conferences for academic or educational reasons, while a minority (49%) attended events for entertainment purposes. An insignificant percentage of 8% claimed to have participated for business and public relations reasons.

Therefore, the answer obtained can be summarized in the following statement: the majority of private workers interviewers collected are in a stable job position and are protected thanks to the "*Cura Italia*" Decree. The decisions taken by governance and managerial organizations department of the different work area of respondents could in the next future positively affect the organizational growth cause is well known that laying off employees can have a significant negative effect on customer retention. Despite different working area, every customer is an asset to any company, and the employer must find ways to retain each of them and when a company lays off its employees it sends out a message to customers that it is undergoing some sort of crisis (Mujtaba, 2020; Tu, 2021; Bohle, 2017) [67, 88, 10].

Then, on the costumers' side, can be summarized that the majority of them attended MEEC events due to the engaging and adaptable scientific congress experience, the long-term benefits and the time availability of merging technology and sociality during a period of lockdown, with more flexible and dynamic use of content modulated to the needs of each

participant and the possibility of constructing their own identities as academics (Porpiglia, 2020; Edelhelm, 2017 [17]).

4.2 Sociodemographic findings

It is crucial to outline a profile for event organizers (workers) and attendees (customers) involved in the event process. According to Shone & Parry, studying the target audience's needs and considering the relevance of risk perception on them is necessary for arranging an analysis of the MEEC industry condition during crisis management. Hence, human risk perception strongly correlates with occupation, gender, age, and other demographic information (Leoni, 2010) [57].

The descriptive results presented in Table 3 between workers and customers display an expected percentage of European respondents (83% of the total). The 68% were from North Italy, for customers, the majority aged between 18 and 25 (53%) for workers 26–40-year-old (69%). Most respondents were females (workers 69% and customers 72%) and single (54%). In the educational background, the majority (53%) got a bachelor's degree and have an income of 800-1600 dollars per month (30%). Despite it, 21% of our respondents earn less than $800 per month, and 11% have more than $1600 or are without any salary (see Table 3).

In detail, workers with a salary from 800 to more than 1,600$ per month were the 67% of our respondents, while 28% of customers are the majority who "*don't receive income*".

The consumers' and workers' socio-demographic outcomes are essential due to their monetary availability to attend events and purchase products online and in presence.

Table 3: Summary of Socio-demographic

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

Furthermore, this interview is oriented to investigate the participation on events held in 2020 and due to it was asked the following question: "*In 2020 you participated in meetings / exhibitions / events / conferences...*". Most of the interviewers (72%) attends events online and this is a clear demonstration of how the pandemic have influence their lifestyle.

Table 4: Percentages of workers and costumers 2020 participation

In 2020 you participated in meetings / exhibitions / events / conferences...	
Online as a worker or customer	72%
Both	17%
In presence as worker or customer	11%

Making the Italian MEEC industry virtual means refining the plan and strategy of SMEs and B2-B companies. COVID-19 have led the MEEC industry workers and customers to guarantee, plan and manage the conduction of the online event. Since the pandemic hit Italy, there has been extensive expansion and growth within the world of virtual events. Online events have saved grace in pandemic times due to the limitations imposed on in-presence events like the physical capacities, the reluctance of attendants towards mixing, travelling and the rapidly changing restrictions for both categories. Further results in favor of online events will be reported below in the paragraphs below.

4.3 MEEC industry opportunity for growth outcomes

Since the previous chapter highlighted the role of the online events during the COVID-19 outbreak is now necessary to

proceed by turning the attention to the possible digitalization growth in industry management.

H1. The changes given by COVID-19 have favored technological supports, increasing their diffusion.

This hypothesis was defined with the idea of finding out which transformation COVID-19 gave to the Italian exhibition sector, and to verify its reliability of it, in the first question, related to the *"Frequency of participation in 2020 in the presence ..."* it was received that the 65% did not participate in Italy, 73% did not participate in Europe, and 82% did not participate abroad.

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

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

$H_{1} + \beta_{F} = \beta_{L}$

Table 5: Summary of Regression Statistics for "Frequency of participation in presence"

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

Table 6: Summary of ANOVA

ANOVA					
	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	3	1,281166242	0,427055414	1,680872402	0,172864316
Residual	175	44,46185052	0,254067717		
Total	178	45,74301676			

In the analysis of variance (Table 6), the significance F (0.1) is calculated, which gives an idea of how statistically significant or reliable the results are. Furthermore, if the significance value F is lower than the p-value (5%), the model used is good. But if the P-value is within the real range between 0 (no probability that the observed difference can be ascribed to chance) and 1 (certainty that the observed difference is random) it means that there is a probability that the difference observed can be ascribed to chance. P-value is, in fact, the lowest value at which the 0 hypothesis can be rejected.

In this case, however, the p-value corresponding to the F statistic, in the Table 7, is (0.05) concerning Italy, (0.6) regarding Europe and (0.3) with reference to abroad. This indicates that the hypothesis assumed for the independent variable of Italy is statistically significant, which is difficult to explain through the randomness due to sampling. As regards Europe and abroad, the difference between the observed result and the hypothesized one is due to the randomness introduced by the sampling.

Table 7: Summary of ANOVA Outcomes

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	2,076847904	0,260321743	7,978003978	1,87161E-13
In Italy	-0,074938948	0,037986681	-1,972769046	0,050096915
In Europe	-0,018585104	0,043915643	-0,42320008	0,672668908
Abroad	0,043037148	0,0459903	0,935787493	0,35067215

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

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

Then, it was verified how their participation as a customer, seller or both roles were related to the participation in events online for Italy, Europe or abroad. The same regression

model used previously was set up, changing only the dataset, to test the hypothesis:

$H_{1} + \beta_{F} = \beta_{L}$

where β_F was the *"Frequency of participation in 2020 online"* and β_L the events online located or in Italy, or in Europe or abroad.

Table 8: Summary of Regression Statistics

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

Table 9: Summary ANOVA

ANOVA					
	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	3	0,960785199	0,320261733	1,251518768	0,292681401
Residual	175	44,78223156	0,255898466		
Total	178	45,74301676			

In the analysis of variance (see Table 8 and 9), the significance F is (0.2) while the P-value is (0.07) concerning Italy, (0.5) regarding Europe and (0.6) respect abroad. This indicates that the hypothesis assumed for the independent variable of Italy is statistically significant while, about Europe and abroad, the difference between the observed result and the hypothesized one is due to the randomness introduced by the sampling.

Table 10: Summary ANOVA Outcomes

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	2,112400979	0,204499184	10,32963033	7,87017E-20
In Italy	-0,067243692	0,037755512	-1,781029784	0,07664222
In Europe	0,019960583	0,037603908	0,530811406	0,596222465
Abroad	-0,016509676	0,040594112	-0,406701254	0,684724378

Thanks to multiple regression, the data regarding Italy are valid and it is understandable that, for those who participated more than 3 times to online events in 2020 is continuing to have an ever-decreasing desire to attend Italian fair-trade events.

This desire to continue to attend meeting is influenced by distinct factors. As reported in the literature (Chapter 2.2) the need for relatedness is essential for workers and consumers, Hence, the intrinsic motivation of workers and customers as the desire to traveling, the necessity of doing business, the ambition of advancing one's career, and the job mandatory are explained by dissimilar universal psychological needs (Sheldon, 2001) [78]. In researchers' opinions, the need list is composed by physical, social, personal, and organizational (Getz & Page, 2016) exigence and for the fair-trade attendants the majority of them attend meeting for the purpose of make *"money"*, create *"luxury"*, and "*doing good for others*" as moral behavior. This moral behavior is affected by the need of improving the living conditions of "*the other*", i.e., producers or buyers, of the fair-trade goods.

Italy is preferable for attendants due to its MEEC events strategic mercantile area. Italian MEEC events are arranged with the criteria of spreading homemade products, promoting developments, and being international. Given the "*unitary direction*" that 2020's Italian MEEC industry sector and governance adopted, it is possible to outline strategic guidelines. To suggest less organizational and operational fragmentation is recommended to coordinate interventions between institutions, regions, chambers of commerce, etc.

The current results prove that the changes given by COVID-19 were a significant opportunity that offered the possibility for the Italian MEEC industry to grow internationally. Therefore, focusing on international fair-trade events is the primary standing to maximize the expected benefits, resources, investments, and strengths.

With the intention of "*creating a system*" in cooperation between public and private sectors, investments have to devolve into strategic, sustainable recovery plans and technological tools to create hybrid events; hybrid events for managing future disruptive crises or emergencies (Yung, 2022) [89]. Hence, emphasis on business sectors (SMEs) with more significant export potential is necessary for continuity and medium/long-term investment plans. To this end, a clear and coherent communication strategy is required for the success of Made in Italy.

4.4 Socio-economic status and relational variables effects
The knowledge used in the literature of Hughes; Camden, & Yangchen (2016) [38] was adopted to investigate the socioeconomic status (SES) as a control variable. It was proceeded with the study of hypothesis two to verify is there a relationship between how are involved in the MEEC sector the socio-demographic status of workers and customers and how much is strong the relationship between them. Therefore, the following third hypothesis was postulated:

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

To verify the reliability of this hypothesis, it will proceed by comparing the answers obtained from "*How are you involved in the MEEC sector*" with the answers obtained from "*Worker's variables*", "*Customer variables*" and "*Socio-demographic variables*".

Despite the apparent importance of eliciting guests' positive emotional responses, no record can be found that fairs trade has ever measured or used consumer emotions as a management tool.

Although the present investigation has revealed substantial differences in how physical, social, and psychological closeness is perceived among consumers in developed countries as opposed to emerging economies (e.g., Doran 2009). Literature indications demonstrated that consumers from two developed countries might also have different motivations for participating in MEEC's consumption (Gillani, 2021) [25]. In the present study results, forty-two workers were from Europe (79%), similar with the 117 costumers (82%). Most of European States have a GDP per capita higher than the world's average and are very highly developed, hence the majority of the respondents were from the North Italy (67%).

Table 11: Provenience percentage results

Provenience	Results
Italy - North	35%
Europe	30%
Asia	11%
Italy - South	10%

Italy - Center	6%
North America	3%
Africa or Middle East	2%
Italy - Islands	1%
South America	1%
Canada - East	1%
France	1%

Despite it, the importance of social needs and connecting with other human beings in a global pandemic provides critical pathways in the risk perception management for organizers, workers and consumers (Bavel, 2020) [7]. Hence, in recent months, multidisciplinary scholars have highlighted the social effects of not meeting and seeing others as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Berg-Weger, 2020) [8]. For example, Yu and Dean suggest that neglecting happiness's emotional components may be insufficient to obtain reliable consumer response predictions; the same can happen with workers.

However, in this research was obtained that 22% of workers are females (15%) and they participate in events by working in the private sector. Therefore, a big predominance of them are teachers or organizers and with a range of age comprised between the 26-40 years old.

The nature of teachers' work is done of relationships with their students, colleagues, and families but also with members of their community. Due to the digitalization of the educational system, the higher responsibilities attitude and sense of work toward novelty influenced the women's participation and appreciation in online MEEC events. This pattern seemed to correlate with the desire on the part of younger women to have the opportunity, while working, to engage in social networking. The shift in the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has influenced the female social standing and had bring a usage intention of Social Network Services (SNS) and "*technology acceptance*" significantly high (Hee, 2020) [35].

Then, females' marital status has a predominance of engaged, their educational background arrives until the bachelor's degree and their salaries are lower than 800$. Therefore, female gender seems to be affected by a lower socioeconomic status, and the literature show that this can bring a considerable number of environmental and social health risks (Baum, 1999; Evans G. W., 2002; Orpana, 2004) [6, 21, 69]. Hence, social health risk perceptions could lead to a sense of helplessness and a subsequent decrease in maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

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

Finally, the workers' and costumers' women owned and operated MEEC companies are often smaller in size and have fewer financial resources to counter the crisis. Women hold such frontline positions in the MEEC industry, and in the present research primarily as teachers, which puts them in a particular health risk (Aburumman, 2020) [1]. Hence, digitalization, mainly social media and smartphones, and

their increasing importance in working and business lives offer opportunities for women to manage work fluently, family-related communication and to advance towards equality and prestige at work (Rajahonka, 2019) [74].

The opportunities created by digital technologies are open for women in the Italian MEEC industry, although most do not have science, technology, engineering, and mathematics backgrounds. The varied educational backgrounds of women can even be seen as an advantage: by proceeding with learning by doing and by seeing changing digital technologies, one must have a positive attitude towards continuous lifelong learning.

4.5 Results of in-presence risk perception's events
Lastly, it was investigated whether and how the changes that occurred as a consequence of COVID-19 affected socio-economic status and relational variables affected the risk perception felt online, in presence or both. The following hypothesis was stated:

H3. The changes given by COVID-19 have increased the perception of risk in attending events in presence.

The data obtained show that, about online participation, just over 40% are aged between 18 and 25. Almost 27% between the ages of 26 and 40, and finally 5% are over forty. As regards participation in presence, the participants aged between 26 and 40 seem to be higher than those aged between 18 and 25, albeit slightly. Only 1%, on the other hand, is the percentage of participants over forty. Finally, as regards participation in online and in presence events, almost 9% are aged between 18 and 25, almost 7% have between the ages of 26 and 40, and a less 2% is over forty. In respect of gender, on the other hand, in online, in presence and hybrid participation, women seem to be much higher than men, in all three cases.

However, related to the risk perception the data collected were divided between the three modalities of attendance. Table 12 below represents the risk perception in presence.

Table 12: Summary of in presence risk perception percentages

In presence as worker or customer						
	0	1	2	3	4	5
Financial risk:						
fear of suffering economic damage	19%	9%	11%	27%	36%	16%
Performance risk:						
problems with transport and housing	11%	13%	37%	24%	7%	7%
Physical risk:						
physical repercussions (e.g., migraines, back pain, eye discomfort)	6%	26%	30%	26%	6%	7%
Psychological risk:						
fear / anxiety / nervousness in participating	15%	30%	33%	9%	9%	4%
Time Risk:						
slowdown in organizational and participation activities	15%	20%	30%	17%	20%	9%
Social risk:						
My colleagues, friends or family have negatively judged my participation in remote events m	37%	24%	24%	13%	2%	

It is clearly evident a "*very often*" high percentage of financial risk (36%), and an "*often*" performance risk. Then, an equal "*sometimes*" physical (30%), psychological (33%) and time (30%) risk perception. Finally, a higher social risk perception (37%) related to the self-appearance.

Concerning the online participation (Table 13), on the other hand, the highest degree of perceived risk appears to be the performance (27%) one, similar with a "*sometimes*" perception is the physical and psychological (22%).

To the question related to the social sphere ("*my colleagues, friends or family have negatively judged my participation in remote events*") the 47% percentage of respondent chose the answer "never = 0".

Table 13: Summary of online risk perception percentages

Online as a worker or customer						
	0	1	2	3	4	5
Financial risk:						
fear of suffering economic damage	22%	17%	20%	14%	13%	14%
Performance risk:						
connection problems	5%	14%	27%	22%	23%	9%
Physical risk:						
physical repercussions (e.g., migraines, back pain, eye discomfort)	17%	20%	17%	22%	15%	10%
Psychological risk:						
fear / anxiety / nervousness in participating	16%	22%	20%	22%	12%	9%
Time Risk:						
slowdown in organizational and participation activities	10%	18%	29%	22%	12%	9%
Social risk:						
My colleagues, friends or family have negatively judged my participation in remote events m	47%	24%	12%	5%	7%	5%

In addition, the time (29%) and financial risks (22%) are equally significant. The results indicate that gender differences detected in the sociodemographic section of the questionnaire administrated, in correlation with financial risk tolerance, can be explained by sex individual determinants.

The majority of female respondents are due to the survey administrators' gender but an analysis of social theories of gender points out some gender differences in the perception of risk. Results were inconsistent for the association between physical risk perception and healthcare professionals but strongly linked to individuals' gender and socioeconomic status is the perception of financial risk, depending on a direct or indirect exposure.

Women with higher socio-economic status were more likely to be concerned about risk, although lower socio-economic status is associated with increased risk (Gustafsod, 2006) [31]. This review indicates that women at considerable risk during attended in presence events do not perceive this risk to be extreme.

Hence, there is an evident time risk perception as well similar to the one detected in past studies in the event and hospitality industry (Rather, 2020) [75]. Mostly believed that teenagers and old people may more care about physical risk and equipment risk, while youth focus on financial risk and middle-aged people mind time risk (Cui, 2016) [13].

Concerning the online participation, on the other hand, the highest degree of perceived risk appears to be the performance one, like the physical one. Performance risk incurred due to the online repurchasing behaviour and intention on social commerce platforms (Lazaroiu, 2020) [53]. In addition, the time and financial risks are equally significant due to the previous mentioned information.

5. Conclusion

In the introduction and in the first literature chapters, important testimonies stated that in 2020, the exhibition sector was affected by a severe crisis due to the cancellation of numerous events. The crisis has negatively affected Italian companies' financial statements in the MEEC sector due to travel restrictions, COVID-19 regulations as well as the decline in the willingness of participants to have face-to-face meetings. With the "Cura Italia," Decree Italian government avoided MEEC industry workers layoff, and customers and workers were encouraged to use technological innovations. The decisions taken by governance and managerial organizations department positively affect the organizational growth because the approach to finance technological tools and supports, according to O. Wreford, promotes and increases the frequency of virtual events with success and, therefore, the adaption of the MEEC industry and its future growth. Then, to verify all the previous literature investigation, in the descriptive outcomes, attendants' demographic information detected significant participation of European, and more specifically north Italian, female workers and, then, costumers, with ages between 18-30 years old, a salary between 800-1600 dollars and a bachelor's degree educational background. Subsequent, the multiple regression and ANOVA's quantitative model were adopted to verify if the frequency of participation in events online will lead to an increase in attendance and, therefore, future growth of the industry. It was discovered that those who participate in online events more than three times in 2020 continue to have an ever-decreasing desire to attend Italian fair-trade events due to the need for relatedness, the desire to travel, the necessity of doing business, the ambition of advancing one's career, and the job mandatory as dissimilar universal psychological needs (Sheldon, 2001) [78]. Hence, the location of Italy is preferable for attendants due to its strategic mercantile area. Italian MEEC events are arranged with the criteria of spreading homemade products, promoting developments, and being international, and the changes given by COVID-19 were a significant opportunity that offered the possibility for the Italian MEEC industry to grow internationally.

Regarding the socioeconomic status, workers' and customers' women-owned and operated MEEC companies are often fewer and have lesser financial resources to counter the crisis. Women hold such frontline positions in the MEEC industry and in the present research, primarily as teachers, which puts them at a health risk. Despite it, the 2020 technological innovations offer opportunities for women to manage work fluently, family-related communication and to advance towards equality and prestige at work. Thanks to the educational preparation of women workers and customers, they can proceed with having long-term benefits and the time availability of merging technology and sociality during meetings. Thanks to their learning by doing and their multitasking attitude, women workers are guaranteed a lifelong digital position in the MEEC industry. On the other hand, women customers with more flexible and dynamic use of digital content could modulate their needs, construct their own identities and attend more events.

Lastly, the varying degree of perception of the risk felt

online in the presence, or both were analyzed in correspondence which the socioeconomic status and the frequency of attending events. The results regarding both in presence and online events indicate that gender differences detected in the sociodemographic section of the questionnaire, in correlation with financial risk tolerance, can be explained by sex individual determinants and gender differences in the perception of risk. Depending on direct or indirect exposure, the perception of financial risk did not affect women with higher socioeconomic status, although the lower socioeconomic status is associated with increased risk. Moreover, there is also an evident time risk perception due to our respondents' age (18-30 years, youth attendants) and frequency of following events (more than three times). Then, just concerning online participation, the highest degree of perceived risk appears to be the performance and the physical. Performance risk incurred due to workers' and customers' satisfaction, customers' repurchasing behavior and workers' presence on social commerce platforms and events return on investment (ROI).

In conclusion, the relationship between the methods of participation and the degree of risk perception of workers and customers in the MEEC industry, based on their gender, education, and socioeconomic status, helped in observing that concerning both the presence and online types of participation in financial risk resulted in being the one with the highest degree, demonstrating the uncertainty of economic stability generated by COVID-19, in line with Lynch's statement literature. Secondly, the results of this investigation help to evidence the necessity of organizing, managing, and adapting the business through the internet. Thus, digital technologies are not simply functional to the work experience but profoundly shape the essence of such experience, as Korlat (2021) [46] affirmed. The significance of the study helps in understanding that studies on the MEEC industry are limited, and this research attempts to fill a gap by suggesting two academic models that provide theoretical and practical implications for understanding components that describe workers' and customers' risk perceptions in the online or in presence Italian conference experience.

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