

## Post-COVID Thunderstorm in Online Conferences

Dear Editor,

*If we are asked “Who is responsible for digital revolution in conferences?” Answer will invariably be our common acquaint today: **Coronavirus**.*

As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in widespread lockdown, work-from-home and limited travel, online or virtual communication has emerged as a viable option. This pandemic has resulted dramatically in cancellation of majority of earlier planned academic conferences and emergence of a new conference culture in form of virtual conferences (VCs).<sup>[1]</sup> Being a new experience for organizers and participants, this mushrooming has occurred in an unorganized and haphazard way.

As most of us are not trained and familiar to the digital platform and there are no set rules or conventions governing them, there is a chaos in the utilization of VC.<sup>[2]</sup> It must be appreciated that VC like its physical counterpart also needs planning and execution though at a different level. A high-quality and well-executed VC will be a new norm in the coming days.<sup>[3]</sup>

### TRADITIONAL CONFERENCES

In the pre-COVID period, physical conferences were the backbone of the academic community. All major conferences across the globe used to coincide with tourist season. Visit to exhibition booths, special offers on purchases, and introduction of new products were added complementary.<sup>[1]</sup> Delegates from non-metro cities had the opportunity to personally interact with experts, learn soft skills, and have hands-on experience in small-group workshops. In addition, physical environment of traditional conferences offers a stimulating experience for learning human resource management and organizing such events to uplift the academic culture at smaller places. In addition to academic enrichment, networking with colleagues and to visit different destinations are the additional benefits.<sup>[4]</sup> During this period, one will be away from monotonous and stressful situation of the workplace. Socially it used to be a rich experience and for many colleagues family also used to join them. Many of us in the academic community were almost addicted to these conferences. COVID 19, apart from the medical and psychological blow, has put a break to our addiction to conference culture. The economic impact of the cancellation of traditional conferences is immense. Although society and organizers are deprived of registration and sponsorship amount, ancillary services, particularly with the bigger conferences, such as hotel and catering industries, transport services, and entertainment industries also have a negative impact.

However, everything is not rosy with the conventional conferences. The common limitations are hefty registration

fees and expenses related to travel, accommodation, and logistics.<sup>[1,4]</sup> In addition, delegates have to take few days off of work and in some cases face visa and jetlag-related issues.

### VIRTUAL CONFERENCES

VCs have acquired acceptance across the globe as they are economical and logistically less demanding both for the participants and for the organizers. Delegates can participate in national as well as international conferences from their home in an informal way.<sup>[1]</sup> VCs can have all the major features of a face-to-face conference such as plenary sessions, satellite symposia, panel discussion, clinic-pathological sessions, multiple concurrent sessions, trade exhibitions, and poster sessions.<sup>[4,5]</sup> The mushrooming of VCs has benefitted maximally to younger delegates. For organizers, VCs have saved them from arrangements for travel, lodging, and physical management of the venue.<sup>[3,4]</sup>

### Shortcomings of VC

As most VCs are either free or with minimal financial obligations, there is a marked rise in the number of such webinars, most of which are unorganized and are on overlapping topics.<sup>[1]</sup> This overexposure may have a harmful impact on conference culture. Small group discussion and hands-on workshops are the biggest causalities with the VCs particularly for younger colleagues. Absence of face-to-face communication, social networking, and formal interactions with the doyen of the speciality are some of the major causalities with VC. The participants in VCs are deprived of their individuality. Questions and responses often lose their spontaneity and body language communication. Audiovisual communication and internet connectivity are other major sources of discontentment.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

VCs is not a case of simply putting together a few prerecorded sessions. It requires considerable effort to put together.<sup>[4]</sup> They require a lot of planning and real-time logistics at the backend.<sup>[1]</sup> They also need to be managed by multidisciplinary organizational committees to take care of the academics, logistics, and finances. Some suggestions are given in Table 1.

**Preplanning considerations** are quite important and to some extent different from that of the physical event. Format of the meeting (virtual or hybrid), registration process, types of sessions within the conference (pre-recorded or live), and time schedule considering global participation should be considered.<sup>[3]</sup>

COVID-19 has reshaped our thoughts as well as work pattern. VCs offer endless opportunities and they are going

**Table 1: Suggestions for improvement in virtual conferences**

1. To prepare guidelines and support documents for speakers, technical team, participants and moderator/chairpersons.
2. To ensure that the speaker (s) adhere to time slot during live sessions and to develop a “warning” system in case time is going to exceed.
3. Moderators/Chairpersons: Clear guidelines to be provided to deal with disruption during the sessions.
4. Speakers: (i) As cost of inviting speaker at VC is significantly less, an all-out effort must be made to attract best speakers. (ii) Stress on speakers for partial or full practice runs before the conference. (iii) To obtain consent from speakers for recording the session and to make them available after the event.
5. Attendee: Issue guidelines to attendee with details of digital platform used, and hardware, software and connectivity recommendations at the time of registration itself.
6. Speaker’s recommendations for VC: (i) Have an appropriate lighting at the place of recording. (ii) Have a quality microphone or headset with elimination of background noise. (iii) Camera should be at eye level and to look at the camera. (iv) To do trial presentation frequently to avoid technical difficulties. (v) To have a professional background and avoid a messy desktop.
7. Platform for VC: Choose a platform which is best suited for the particular VC. Zoom webinars and Google meet are quite popular. For large VCs, professional private organizers have custom built platform with inclusion of Welcome Lounge, Conference Hall (s), Exhibition Zone, Information Desk and Networking Zone<sup>[1]</sup>

to stay. Although most of the online contents are available on YouTube, podcasts, and other digital platforms, VCs offer us a unique advantage of interaction with speakers during live sessions. It is predicted that hybrid conferences will soon replace traditional in-person conferences. With further advancement in technology, we can overcome many obstacles to VCs.

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There are no conflicts of interest.

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