

Online Pre-Events During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, mega-events such as the Olympics and expo were postponed, prolonging the build-up phase of the events and providing the opportunity to organize pre-events. COVID restrictions and limitations on movement forced these pre-events to be held online. Examining the case of pre-events leading up to Expo 2020 Dubai, we argue that, as an emerging and growing phenomenon, digital pre-events create spaces for experimenting and reengineering new communication approaches. The case study shows how pre-events provide opportunities to event-planners and organizations for communicating in diverse, rich ways with primary stakeholders before a physical event. Because of their small size, pre-events do not attract large publics and, therefore, are also key opportunities for dialogue and interactivity with primary stakeholders. This article not only contributes to our knowledge about this promotional phenomenon but also highlights the importance of pre-events for practitioners in providing spaces for experimentation and small-scale forms of dialogic engagement and cocreation with stakeholders without the pressure that comes from publics' increasing expectations around large-scale events.

Keywords: pre-event, mega-event, expo, COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic—an ongoing global health emergency that has revealed “fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built” (Guterres, as cited in Katongole, 2020, para. 1)—continues to force individuals and groups to change their sociocultural practices, among them the organization of events. Organizers have to reengineer practices, policies, and modalities. All kinds of events have been impacted, including sporting mega-events such as the Euro Cup 2020 and the Olympics 2020, as well as international exhibitions such as Expo 2020. To tackle the challenges brought about by the pandemic, organizers have created “bubbles” for athletes, new protocols (including social distancing, mask-wearing, limits of crowds, etc.), and banned spectators from events.

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The pandemic has also affected pre-events, which were becoming increasingly valuable promotional tools, but have become even more important because of the impact of lockdowns and border closures that have kept individuals and groups sequestered within their home communities. In straightforward terms, pre-events can be understood—drawing on Chalip (2004)—simply as “opportunities that event planners can create for people to share time together before ... the [main] event” (Mhanna, Blake, & Jones, 2017, p. 155). In more complex terms, drawing on the event studies definition of planned events developed by Getz and Page (2020), a pre-event can be defined as a live social event, held before a more significant corresponding event, that is purposefully created, designed, and implemented to achieve specific outcomes (p. 58). Examples of pre-events include mixed gender team events held before the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 2021 or pre-tournament friendlies in preparation for the European and Soccer World Cup.

Practitioner commentary about the pre-event continues to grow as event organizers around the world increasingly use this promotional tool. Most of that commentary offers advice for other practitioners wishing to undertake pre-events. For instance, Sheth (2018), providing “takeaways” from the MOVE Global Mobility Summit 2018, writes:

With planners who opt for pre-events within their event promotion strategy, it is a must to categorize and leverage all these events accordingly. Taking the example of the MOVE Summit, all the pre-events had a separate space on the main event’s website. (para. 45)

On the whole, Sheth (2018) adds: “Each event can add on to the promotion and participation for the main event and can increase the footfall for the main event when leveraged properly” (para. 47). Similarly, Lucas (2021) provides advice for considering the pre-event’s purpose, approaches to linking with the main event, use of venue, and team engagement, as well as promotion and communication tactics. Practitioner advice like this abounds.

This article examines pre-events in a COVID-19 era, focusing on digital pre-events. It argues that these events have become increasingly important as promotional tools because of border restrictions and lockdowns, offering spaces for experimenting and reengineering new communication approaches, although digital pre-events are often poorly executed and attended. Despite their value as strategic promotional occasions in enabling organizations to communicate in rich ways with primary stakeholders, the events will continue to be a marginalized form of social gathering because of access issues connected with social media and their secondary importance in comparison with the more significant (main) events that they precede. To illustrate this argument, the study uses a case study of the Expo 2020 Dubai digital pre-events, organized by multiple countries ahead of the main event (the expo itself, running from October 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022). This case provides a wealth of insights because it sheds light on the dynamics of many pre-events being organized by different nations. In other words, this single instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) provides a robust way of understanding the principles that apply from it to multiple other settings (Yin, 1981). Qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) has been used to analyze the different digital pre-events held before the expo.

The study provides several contributions to knowledge, as well as a set of contributions to practice. It builds on the current scholarly knowledge about pre-events, and particularly digital pre-events. This

knowledge is growing but limited (Robertson, 2018), and will continue to be important during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as after it, in light of the recognition that digital will be the new normal for societies after the pandemic ends (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2020). Pre-events have continued to grow both in size and importance over the years; they have become increasingly significant social occasions in their own right, giving like-minded individuals and groups the chance to convene for shared purposes, in addition to being significant instrumental promotional opportunities. The study helps to build our knowledge in both respects. More specifically, it expands our understanding of the configurations and purposes of pre-events and adds insights about best practices in digital pre-event organization and execution. Against the backdrop of these primary contributions to knowledge, the article also provides a secondary contribution in building our understanding of the role and value of traditional physical events (such as expo).

The remainder of this article is divided into five sections. The background and literature review provide details about digital pre-events in relation to planned events more broadly. The methods section then outlines the research design—including the case study of the Expo 2020 digital pre-events—in answer to the research question: what is the form and function of the digital pre-event? Next, the results section outlines the findings of the original research. After that, the discussion section interrogates the findings critically, and provides recommendations for practitioners (such as event managers and other professional communicators). The conclusion notes the limitations of the research and outlines avenues for further investigation.

Background and Literature Review

Digital pre-events are, collectively, one of the latest outcomes in a long evolution of planned events. Drawing on Getz (2020), these types of events:

are created to achieve specific outcomes, including those related to the economy, culture, society and environment. Event planning involves the design and implementation of themes, settings, consumables, services and programmes that suggest, facilitate or constrain experiences for participants, guests, spectators and other stakeholders. Every event-goers experience is personal and unique, arising from the interactions of setting, program, and people, but event experiences also have broader social and cultural meanings. (p. 32)

Unplanned events, by contrast, can be understood as “unpredictable happenings” that range from the unpleasant, such as forces of nature and wars, to the more pleasant, such as large spontaneous celebrations (Getz & Page, 2020, p. 68). Both planned and unplanned events have occurred throughout recorded history, even though most events have been informal and organic until (comparatively) recently (Getz, 2020, p. 31). Nevertheless, planned events “have been an essential part of human civilization,” helping to bind communities together, define cultures, and shape the identities of people, places and social activities (Getz, 2020, p. 31).

Pre-events, too, have far-reaching antecedents. Examples range from the oath-taking at Olympia that preceded the ancient Olympic games (Potter, 2011) to the more recent annual "Nobel Week Dialogue" meeting that precedes the Nobel Prize awarding ceremony (Nobel Outreach, 2021). History is littered with such precursors to today's pre-events, even though main events have traditionally been the focus of publics' (and scholars') attention. Indeed, in this respect, Robertson (2018) notes that: "The focus of the media event literature has been the live phase—the peak intensity of media 'thickenings' as the scripted event is covered live" (p. 3209); however, the contestation around the main, planned events' narratives actually begins earlier, in what has been termed the "build-up phase" (Robertson, 2018, p. 3207). This concept aligns with the "pre-events period" identified in Kuusik, Nilbe, Mehine, and Ahas's (2014) study (p. 266). In this period, social media marketing can be used to promote ticket sales to the main event (Tolvanen, 2016). Although the "build-up phase," the "pre-events period," and the pre-event itself are three dissimilar phenomena, they all highlight the (often-overlooked) importance of events that precede a main event.

The outcomes that pre-events aim to achieve differ from pre-event to pre-event. Some outcomes are limited. For instance, Hutton and Jaensch (2015) have noted that the participants of outdoor music festivals use pre-events as opportunities to catch up with their friends. Other outcomes are larger and cross multiple pre-events. For example, Knight (2014) notes that the events preceding the annual Academy Awards or Oscars telecast serve multiple functions, explaining that: "Pre-events include interviews, talk about possible nominations, prediction of winners, past Academy Awards happenings, and speculations about who will host the show. In the hours before the main event, the paparazzi cover the red carpet" (p. 3).

Analysts have increasingly been recommending that pre-events be used strategically, especially in ways that fulfill organizations and groups' social responsibility requirements. For instance, Hahm, Ro, and Olson (2018), in their analysis of an LGBTQI+ event, have suggested that the event organizers deliberately "create pre-events, or for national/international events, create geographically specific pre-events, to facilitate bond-building" (p. 253). This aligns with Chalip's (2004) observation that an event can be deliberately elongated by adding pre- and post-events that enable participants to share time together. In line with advice to "green" events or make them sustainable (see, for example, Jones, 2018, p. 19), Moise and Macovei (2014) have argued that the organizers of pre-events (as well as events and post-events) must take into account those events' impacts on participants, and the environment; they have also commented that the responsibility to make events environmentally friendly should not rest with organizations alone, but with both organizers and participants.

The existing scholarship has also increasingly been emphasizing the need to understand the impacts of pre-events. Some proposed impact analyses are straightforward; Ma, Ma, Wu, and Rotherham (2013), for example, used questionnaires in their analysis, which sought to understand how residents living in close proximity to a survey site were affected by various occurrences (including pre-events) before a main event. Other impact analyses are more complex. Zuev (2016) has argued that it is important to examine the visual production stages of a pre-event (as well as the main event and post-event), while Guo, Huang, and Jia (2020) have suggested using the real options valuation method in evaluating risk in connection with pre-events. One of the most comprehensive impact evaluation approaches, though, has been offered by Ma, Egan, Rotherham, and Ma (2011), who have drawn on the triple bottom line (social,

environmental, and financial) approach to understanding pre-event impacts. In their study, the authors identified both the pre-event impacts and the criteria to assess those impacts.

The scholarship about pre-events has also drawn on work about media events. These types of events—which can be understood as “situated, thickened, centring performances of mediated communication that are focused on a specific thematic core” (Couldry & Hepp, 2018, p. 3)—help to understand not only pre-events but also media events themselves. However, pre-events have not been studied in depth from a media events perspective. For instance, Lin, Keegan, Margolin, and Lazer (2014) have examined audience dynamics on Twitter to understand user behavior during media events as opposed to other events (such as pre-events and news events). In a similar vein, Robertson (2018) has examined the highly contested nature of the build-up phase of planned media events; her study countered the suggestion of Katz and Liebes (2007) that the preplanning of a media event allows for the “comfort of orderliness” (p. 160). This countering is also evident in the work of Rivenburgh (2009), who noted that hosts of global media events must be prepared to respond to pre-event developments, such as surprise news events and unsurprising reporting topics. The need to understand pre-events in relation to media events more effectively is just one of the areas in which further knowledge about pre-events is needed.

Digital Events and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Digital events have been growing for years but have proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic as individuals, groups, and organizations found themselves switching to digital forms of engagement to avoid face-to-face interaction. According to one Australian industry study, undertaken by a firm specializing in event management, almost two in three Australian respondents reported attending six or more digital events a month just one year into the start of the pandemic. Live engagement was also increasing during this time, with four in five respondents attending at least half of all digital events live (rather than on demand; Page, 2020). A different (global) study found that the virtual event platform market was expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 12.7%, reaching USD 18.9 billion in 2026, up from USD 10.4 billion in 2021. The factors driving this growth include the rise in the popularity of online meetings, replacing physical get-togethers, and the continuing transition of businesses to remote working approaches (ReportLinker, 2021). These findings, about distinct time-periods, highlight the ongoing desire and need—at both the individual country and international levels—to continue using digital events.

The scholarly research that has been undertaken (so far) about these events in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic also highlights an ongoing appetite for the use of the events in various settings, although researchers have also pointed out the limitations of hosting various occasions online. One of the most significant benefits of digital events is their removal of geographical boundaries to engagement by individuals of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Westgarth (2021) pointedly asks: “Is it absolutely necessary to travel across the country to ... an event or seminar?” (p. 18). Werner, Junek, and Wang (2022) have pointed out that, in terms of the event management skills that will be needed in the post-COVID-19 world, different skill sets will be required for planning and managing digital events, given the distinct requirements of staging online (as opposed to physical, face-to-face) events. In their analysis of digital and nondigital interaction formats, Schwarz and colleagues (2020) note that digital events of different kinds require less preparation time, have lower costs, and minimize the wastage of typical physical event

components (such as food, plastic, and paper). However, they also find that digital events inadequately replicate the multiple informal discussions held during physical events, have the potential to affect personal well-being (because of the lack of in-person interactions), raise issues relating to data security, and may lead only to limited carbon emission savings.

The communication impacts of digital events are varied, and many individuals' desires to return to face-to-face events, or to engage in hybrid events, also speaks to the limitations of planning and running online-only occasions. The idea of "information richness" (Daft & Lengel, 1984, p. 191) reminds us that face-to-face (verbal) communication is, and will remain (for a very long time, at least), the most effective way to communicate. The use of communication technology also often fails because of issues with hardware or software, as well as—Koch, Fischer, Tipold, and Ehlers (2012) point out—participants' lack of knowledge about the technology and the processes that it involves. Consequently, it is little wonder that an appetite has been growing for hybrid events that "make the best of both worlds"—that is, of digital and physical interactions—with event organizers likely to be mindful of organizing digital twin events in future (Feeley, 2021, para. 3). Nevertheless, digital events in various forms are more than likely to continue being held given the concerns (for the time being, at least) of populations around the world over face-to-face interactions, and given the world's continuing, careful watchfulness for outbreaks of new strains of the COVID-19 virus. Additionally, given the existing benefits that digital events have provided to organizations—and especially the enhancements in efficiency and effectiveness that they have provided—these events are likely to continue being used by organizations in particular.

Methodology

As the literature review has demonstrated, there is currently a lack of knowledge about digital pre-events. To fill this lacuna, the present study sought to understand the formats that pre-events take, as well as the uses to which they are put; as such, its research question was: What is the form and function of the digital pre-event? This single research question was sufficient to understand both the components of pre-events and the purposes that they serve. Hence, the study required a qualitative methodology: an approach to research that, broadly put, yields descriptive (rather than numerical) data about phenomena and people's behavior (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015, p. 7). The online pre-events connected to the Dubai 2020 Expo, held in 2021–2022, were chosen, collectively, as the case study for the analysis. This choice was made given the varying nature of the online pre-events: specifically, their varying cultural backgrounds, and multiple organizing teams, which all had different approaches to organizing and running their pre-events. These events, preceding the Dubai Expo, would enable rich insights to be formed about other pre-events; in other words, this single instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) was deemed to provide a robust way of enabling other settings to be understood (Yin, 1981).

The Dubai Expo is the most recent of the global expos that have been taking place since 1985. According to the organization in charge of regulating the events, the Bureau International des Expositions (Bureau International des Expositions, n.d.-b), each expo "aims at educating the public, sharing innovation, promoting progress and fostering cooperation" (para. 1). The event usually lasts six months, involves multiple publics and various institutional actors—such as governments, companies, and intergovernmental organizations—and is hosted (and organized) by a different country every three to five years, approximately.

Each expo also has its own theme, which aims to “raise awareness of and find responses to universal challenges of our time” (Bureau International des Expositions, n.d.-a, para. 2). Because of COVID-19-related delays, the Dubai Expo began on October 1, 2021.

First, we identified the pre-events taking place before the expo, and then we analyzed them. The identification stage required first finding the webpage of each individual country pavilion on the official expo website (Expo 2020 Dubai, 2021). Second, the social media channels of the pavilions were searched to find online pre-events (organized by those pavilions); this second step (and the use of the social media channels) was needed, as the pavilions’ webpages on the official Dubai Expo website did not list individual online pre-events. Most pavilions had dedicated social media channels for the Dubai Expo, but some did not. At the time of data-gathering (following the steps outlined here), of the 58 countries listed on the Dubai Expo website, 23 countries’ expo-focused social media channels were searched, and pre-events were identified on 10 channels. Appendix Item One provides a list of the countries that had expo-focused social media channels at the time of data-gathering, and Appendix Item Two provides a list of the 17 online pre-events that were identified on some countries’ social media channels. The data-gathering took place from March to September 2021.

Second, we analyzed the pre-events through a qualitative content analysis. This method was chosen as it was deemed to be the most suitable for answering the research question, given that it enabled emerging themes and patterns to be identified in the data. Also, the method achieved the research question’s requirement of identifying the broad forms and functions of digital pre-events (rather than analyzing or interpreting detailed meanings in the events’ specific components). Mayring’s (2000) widely cited approach to (inductive) qualitative content analysis was employed in the study. This approach enabled the events’ forms and functions to be identified successfully; as Mayring (2000) reminds us: “The analysis of formal aspects of the material belongs to its [qualitative content analysis] aims as well” (p. 2). Initial criteria of definition connected to the research question (analyzing both forms and functions of online pre-events) were determined; preliminary categories were formed by working through the data (that is, the pre-events, including the descriptions and recordings, available online, as identified in Appendix Item Two); the categories were revised and, eventually, reduced to main categories to guide the remainder of the analysis (Mayring, 2000). The first author, who had extensive experience in analyzing digital data of this kind, undertook the initial coding, with the second author reviewing the codes in the lead-up to the development and use of the final codes; this approach (of one specialist author analyzing data, followed by the other author) has been undertaken by other studies (see, for example, Bogenschutz, Inge, Rumrill, Hinterlong, & Seward, 2016; DeMeester, Hendricks, Stephenson, & Welch, 2017; Lederer & Sheena, 2021).

Using this qualitative content analysis approach, both the forms and functions of different types of pre-events were able to be identified (thus answering the research question). The process allowed the creation of a typology—described in the following section—that emerged from the data by using this inductive coding approach. Once all the single events were classified in relation to each category, the frequency of each category was visualized (as shown in the next section, as well) to highlight the patterns. The goal of the analysis was not to provide a fine-grained description or interpretation of every moment of each event; rather, as previously mentioned, it was to understand the events in a more holistic way by categorizing them and noting their salient features to understand their forms and functions. The following sections outlines the results of the analysis.

A Typology of Pre-Events

The codes that have emerged in the content analysis have been organized in Table 1, which represents a typology of pre-events based on their configuration, function, target audience, availability, and interactivity. These codes were used in this final typology because, having emerged from the data, they most effectively captured the forms and functions of digital pre-events (in answering the research question and, thus, broadly capturing the shapes that online pre-events take, as well as the uses to which they are put).

- *Configuration* refers to whether the pre-event is a one-off, individual occurrence, or a series of events that follow the same format and/or similar and connected topics.
- The *primary function* represents the role of the pre-event in relation to the main event. In this sense, pre-events can support the engagement with stakeholders; they can help to create, shape, and experiment with narratives for the main event, or they can constitute an opportunity to re-present and establish narratives for the main event; they can also have a more practical purpose, such as planning the main event or selecting/involving volunteers for the main event.
- The *target audience* can be insiders (people already involved or about to be involved in the organization), stakeholders, and publics. This dimension is directly related to the function of the digital pre-event.
- The *availability* of the pre-event can be live or both live and on demand. Our analysis shows that even the on-demand events have been first broadcast live and then made available as a recording.
- Finally, the *interactivity* of pre-events indicates whether publics or stakeholders are allowed to intervene and actively participate in the event. Three levels of interactivity have been identified: pre-events can facilitate planned interactions; they can also be open to stakeholders or closed.

These dimensions have been applied and used to categorize the Expo 2020 pre-events.

Table 1. A Typology of Pre-Events Based on Their Configuration, Function, Target Audience, Availability, and Interactivity.

Configuration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-off • A series of events
Primary function	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement with stakeholders • Re-presenting narratives • Creating content/narratives • Planning the event
Target audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insiders • Stakeholders • Publics
Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live • Live and on demand
Interactivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planned interactions • Open to stakeholders • Closed

Expo 2020's Pre-Events

Figure 1 categorizes the Expo 2020 digital pre-events in relation to function, interactivity, and target audience. The diagram shows the frequency for each of the categories. From an analytical point of view, it shows the relations between function, target audience, and the interactivity of pre-events.

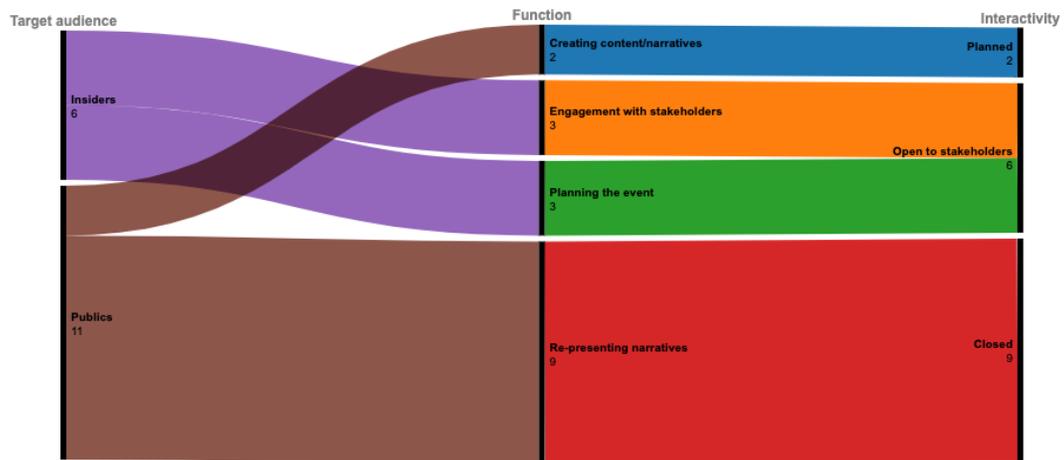


Figure 1. Expo 2020 digital pre-events in relation to primary function, interactivity and target audience.²

The group of nine pre-events in brown and red constitutes the majority. Pre-events are generally used as tools to re-present narratives to publics in closed contexts. An example of a pre-event that falls into this group is the "Architect Talk: Italy x Germany," a webinar organized by the German Pavilion's team, featuring the architects of the Italian and German Pavilions discussing and describing the architectural features of the two pavilions (as shown in Figure 2).

² Created with RAWGraphs (Mauri, Elli, Caviglia, Uboldi, & Azzi, 2017).

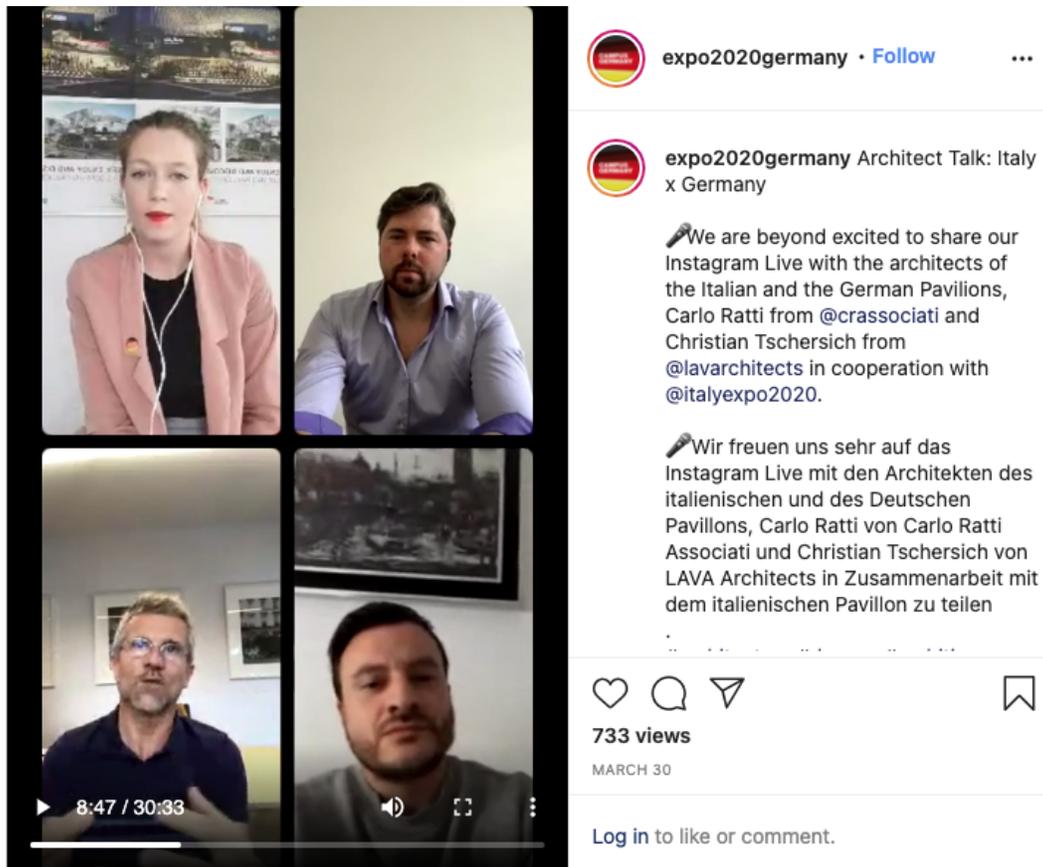


Figure 2. A screenshot of the online pre-event organized by the German Pavilion team titled "Architect Talk: Italy x Germany" (Campus Germany, 2021, 0:08:47).

Interestingly, these events are usually recorded live, with the recording then being made available to publics without any editing. This indicates that, despite the function of these events being to re-present narratives for publics, the actual crafting of the event tends to be rudimentary. There are two main reasons that explain this phenomenon. First, we believe that the lack of editing suggests an underlining lack of resources. Indeed, as the main event is still far off, it seems that countries' communication teams are lacking in human and economic resources that may become available closer to the main event. Second, the practice of making video recordings of live webinars available to publics (so that they can be rewatched after events) has become increasingly more acceptable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Publics are getting increasingly used to "new temporalities" by applying strategies such as fast forwarding, increasing the speed of the video ("speed watching"), or skimming content (Alexander, 2017, p. 103). At the same time, publics tend to welcome unedited video content if it is authentic.

Referring back to Figure 1, the six pre-events in purple are open-to-stakeholders events. This means that they allow the audience to participate in the event by, for example, providing a Q&A session and opening up the floor for questions. The findings clearly indicate that pre-events with a specific target

audience (experts and insiders, for example) are more likely to take advantage of the interactivity offered by video conferencing platforms such as Zoom. One of the events that falls into this category is "Expo 2020 Dubai: A Regional Platform of Opportunity for U.S. States and Businesses" (as shown in Figure 3) organized by the U.S. pavilion. This seminar targeted states and businesses interested in participating in Expo 2020. This one-off event provided key information about the exposition and the American pavilion to potential stakeholders, presenting the different opportunities for states and businesses to get involved. The event had a Q&A session in which potential partners could ask questions and seek clarifications. As part of this event, key contacts were also provided to the participants, indicating a willingness by the organizers to keep the conversation with their stakeholders alive even after the pre-event.



Figure 3. A screenshot of the online pre-event organized by the USA Pavilion Team titled "Expo 2020 Dubai: A Regional Platform of Opportunity for U.S. States and Businesses" (USA Expo 2020, 2021, 0:09:52).

Finally, the remaining small group of two pre-events in Figure 1, marked in brown and blue, allow for planned interactions with partners and stakeholders to create content for the main event. For example, in the case of the Italian Pavilion (in Figure 4), students pitch their ideas and solutions in response to specific challenges such as "education after the pandemic" (Italy Expo 2020, 2020). Then, a panel of experts selects the finalists who showcase their ideas in the Italian Pavilion during the main event. An interesting characteristic of these pre-events is that they are not made available to publics. However, finalist projects and ideas were showcased in the pavilion during the expo. Thus, while these events provide opportunities for participation and dialogue between students and experts, the pre-events take place largely behind closed doors. This seems to suggest that the primary goal of these pre-events is to produce content and ideas that can be showcased in the pavilion during the main event.

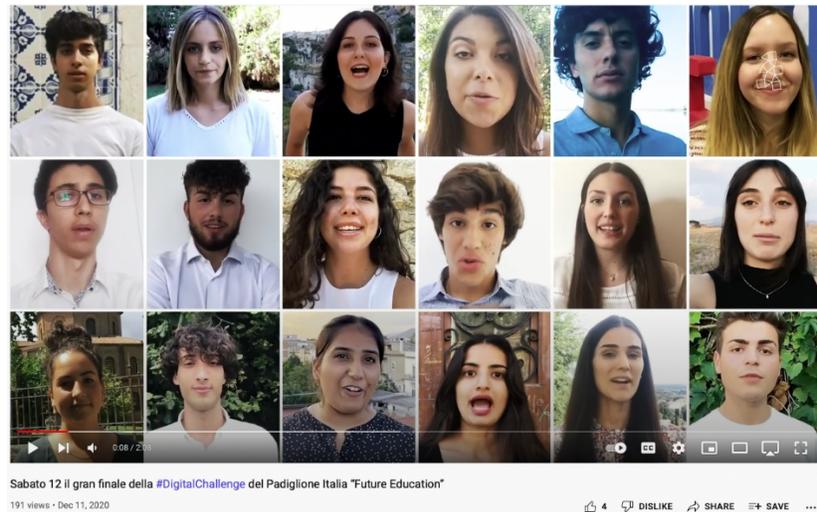


Figure 4. A screenshot of the promotional video for the finals of the "Future Education #DigitalChallenge" by the Italian Pavilion Team (Italy Expo 2020, 2020, 0:00.08).

Discussion: The Importance of Pre-Events

Given the ongoing challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic in various parts of the world—challenges that are likely to persist for some time yet, sadly—and the increasing importance of the digital representation of mega-events, creating a space for experimentation and preparation before the main event becomes yet more important. The pandemic has forced event organizers to rethink the "lead-time": the length of time between the initiation of the planning process for an event and the date on which it is actually held (Davidson, 2019).

The typology developed through this article provides a way to understand the forms and functions not only of the Expo 2020 online pre-events but also of other pre-events. The broad nature of the analysis means that the typology—captured in Table 1—is easily generalizable to other online pre-events. That is, most—if not all—of the dimensions readily apply to other events of this type. This broader applicability, in turn, benefits the organizers of online pre-events and the organizations that they serve, or their clients, in more practical ways, in helping the organizers to develop more effective events of this sort. Being aware of the elements of online pre-events can also benefit amateur event organizers in helping them to understand the typical elements of these events or the options available to them in successfully communicating with different individuals and groups (large and small).

A range of insights emerges from the analysis of the digital pre-events held before the 2021–2022 Expo; these insights shed light on digital pre-events more broadly. The analysis shows that these events can become vital spaces for three key reasons: generating small-scale engagement with primary stakeholders through cocreation, testing digital infrastructure, and testing communication approaches in the lead-up to the main event. These elements are captured in Figure 5.

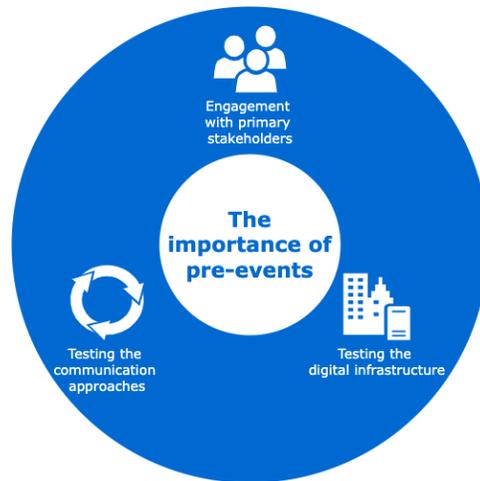


Figure 5. The importance of pre-events.

The case study shows how these sorts of auxiliary events (Goldblatt & Lee, 2020) provide opportunities to event-planners and organizations to communicate in diverse, rich ways with primary stakeholders before the main, physical event takes place. Because of the small size of pre-events, these are also key opportunities for dialogue and interactivity—rather than the unidirectional transmission of content (Kim, 2016)—with stakeholders.

In addition, the digital delivery of these pre-events offers communicators the opportunity to experiment with varied, creative approaches for communicating with stakeholders. Pre-events, for example, provide opportunities for what the literature calls cocreation (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2014), especially when stakeholders are asked to produce content for the main event (as, for example, in the case of the Italian Pavilion). Stakeholders can thus help organizers add creative elements and varied communication approaches (that organizers might not necessarily have considered).

Digital pre-events are also an opportunity to create and test a dedicated digital infrastructure (as in the case of Finland's pre-event, for example, and its page for its forum), with the infrastructure stretching through a range of different media types: webpages, embedded videos, freely available downloadable materials, and the like.

Event attendees and mega-event goers increasingly seek novel experiences and creativity in programming (Getz, 2020). However, this sort of inventive programming exacerbates the fixation on entertainment of today's "entertainment subjects" (Samuels, 2021), who are relentlessly seeking increasingly engaging, novel experiences. In this sense, pre-events can provide a space for experimentation and small-scale forms of dialogic engagement with stakeholders without the pressure that comes from the increasing expectations from publics around large-scale events.

Finally, online pre-events challenge rigid configurations of time and space established by traditional face-to-face pre-events, in which people must be at one place at a certain time. This article's analysis shows that online pre-events encourage practices of asynchronous participation and/or on-demand consumption. For

example, in the case of the Italian Pavilion, students recorded the video content to participate in the contest, representing an example of asynchronous cocreation. The ways in which the content is accessed also changes. Online users can access the content on demand, which also allows practices such as "speed watching" or skimming content that can challenge the organizers' configuration and structure of the event.

As pre-events evolve, the contribution of communication and media studies scholars to the analysis of this phenomenon becomes key. Getz and Page (2020) already note that communication and media scholars can play a key role in contributing to the evaluation and the impact of events (pp. 216–218). This article has emphasized this point further by showing how pre-events are becoming more than a mere organizational effort. Rather, the complexity of online pre-events described in this article signals the need for communication and media studies to pay more attention to the ways in which events are becoming key opportunities to study message design, cocreation dynamics and audiences on digital communication platforms.

Conclusion

Digital pre-events will only continue to grow in number over the coming years as the world recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic and the use of digital communication tools gains even wider, daily acceptance. This article has argued that, as an emerging and growing phenomenon, pre-events create spaces for experimenting and reengineering new communication approaches. It has developed a novel typology of pre-events based on format, function, audiences, availability, and interactivity; this typology, drawing on findings related to the 2020 Expo (held in 2021–2022), would be applicable to many other pre-events. Our analysis has also shown that the main roles of pre-events are to engage with stakeholders, create and re-present event narratives, and plan the main event. Organizers often use pre-events as a preparatory time in the lead-up to the main event. Even if pre-events are connected with the main event in many ways, the two types of events—the pre-event and the main (live) event—are not substitutable as they serve two different purposes for organizers.

The examples explored in this article indicate that online pre-events are still mostly rudimentary and experimental as organizers struggle to define their function and target audience clearly. Nevertheless, the pandemic and the postponement of expo have provided nations' communication teams with an opportunity to experiment with a new canon of online events that may become more systematic and codified in the next edition of expo or other similar mega-events.

Although the article has identified, from its analysis of the expo case, the elements of both the forms and functions of online pre-events that can be applied more widely to other cases, the limitations of the study do need to be acknowledged. The examination of just the one case meant that a smaller set of findings was able to be presented than if a second case had been (comparatively) examined. In this respect, the online pre-events from just the one (though most recent) expo were investigated; data from other expos and the dynamics of their pre-events were not taken into account. Although the set-up of each expo is reasonably similar—with the focus being on diverse countries showcasing their institutions, products, services, and the like—each expo also features different, unique dynamics of its own.

The research opens several avenues for further investigations related to pre-events. As noted previously, this article has used just the one case study to understand the configurations of these events; other analyses could draw on different cases to gain deeper insights into pre-events and their configurations.

The expo, as a case, has its own features; for example, it is a large-scale event with subevents that feature social actors from various countries. The analysis of a smaller, more contained case would likely yield different understandings of pre-events. Also, this article has only required the use of qualitative content analysis as its method; the use of different methods—such as textual analysis focusing on understanding meaning making—would yield richer insights into pre-events, and especially the digital versions of these events. Interviews or focus groups with event organizers could also be undertaken to understand the motivations of these individuals, the tools and techniques that they use, as well as the successes and failures that they have encountered, in planning and running the events.

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Appendix

Item One

The following countries had expo-focused social media channels (as found during the data-gathering stage).

1. Australia
2. Burundi
3. Finland
4. France
5. India (website available, but not working at the time of data-gathering)
6. Indonesia
7. Iran
8. Ireland
9. Italy
10. Luxembourg
11. Peru
12. Portugal
13. Singapore
14. Switzerland
15. United Kingdom
16. United States

Item Two

The following online pre-events were identified and analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

Table 2. Full List of Online Pre-Events.

Country	Name	Date	Form
Australia	AUSTRALIA AT EXPO 2020 DUBAI WEBINAR	April 20, 2021	One-off online live webinar
Belgium	Online meeting with "UAE food buyers"	November 23–25, 2020	One-off online live event
Finland	Smart Cities forum	June 21, 2021	One-off online: live and on demand
Finland	EDUCATION FORUM: ON-DEMAND SESSIONS	April 12, 2021	Online: on demand and live
France	French Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs visits the pavilion	n.d.	Online event—live and recorded (on demand)
Germany	Architect Talk: Italy x Germany	March 29, 2021	Online event—recorded (on demand)
Germany	Exhibition Talk: Facts and fiction	April 6, 2021	Online event—recorded (on demand)
Germany	Architect Talk: Netherlands x Germany	June 24, 2021	Online event—recorded (on demand)
Italy	Pavilion's Volunteers Programme	Launched on March 15, 2021 (and selection April 30, 2021)	A series of online events—live and recorded (on demand)
Italy	Future Education #DigitalChallenge	October 2020 to January 2021	A series of online events—live and recorded (on demand)
Italy	"Videoforum"	August to November, 2021	A series of online events—live and recorded (on demand)
Italy	Pre-Expo Theme Weeks	October 2020 to March 2021	A series of online events—live and recorded (on demand)
Malaysia	Virtual townhall: "Why you should join Malaysia at Expo 2020 Dubai"	June 24, 2021	Online live event
Malaysia	Virtual townhall with partners	June 22, 2021	Online live event

Switzerland	Pitching solutions for waste management	April 8, 2021	Online live event
USA	Expo 2020 Dubai: A Regional Platform of Opportunity for U.S. States and Businesses	n.d.	Online event—live and recorded (on demand)
Expo 2020	Expo talks	December 2020 to March 2021	A series of online events
