

Impact of COVID-19 on the Exhibition Industry: A Comparative Study of Pre-COVID, During-COVID and Post-COVID Exhibition Participation

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented disruption in the global exhibition and business-events industry. Trade exhibitions, which traditionally depend on face-to-face interaction, product demonstrations, networking, business negotiations and lead generation, were severely affected by lockdowns, travel restrictions, social distancing requirements and cancellation of physical events. This study examines the changing pattern of exhibition participation before, during and after COVID-19, with particular reference to SMEs and business participants in Gujarat, India.

The study is based on the primary research contained in the thesis, covering 500 respondents from SMEs and business organizations in Vadodara, Surat and Ahmedabad, Gujarat. A structured questionnaire was used to collect information regarding exhibition participation, business inquiries, lead generation, online and offline exhibitions, and post-pandemic exhibition preferences. Descriptive statistics and inferential techniques, including Chi-square, t-test, ANOVA and McNemar's test, were used in the broader study.

The findings demonstrate a sharp decline in physical exhibition participation during COVID-19, accompanied by a substantial shift toward online/virtual exhibitions. Before COVID-19, 76% of respondents participated in offline/physical exhibitions, whereas during COVID-19 this declined to 10%. Online/virtual participation increased from 6% before COVID-19 to 56% during COVID-19. After COVID-19, physical exhibitions recovered to 44%, while hybrid exhibitions increased to 30%. Business lead generation followed a similar pattern: high and very-high lead generation declined substantially during the pandemic but recovered considerably after COVID-19.

The study concludes that COVID-19 permanently accelerated digital transformation in the exhibition industry, but did not eliminate the importance of physical exhibitions. Instead, the post-pandemic exhibition environment is increasingly characterized by hybrid models combining physical interaction with digital technologies.

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KEYWORDS: COVID-19, Exhibition Industry, Trade Exhibitions, SMEs, Virtual Exhibitions, Hybrid Exhibitions, Business Networking, Lead Generation, Gujarat, Digital Transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Trade exhibitions and business fares have traditionally served as important platforms for organizations to display products, establish business relationships, acquire customers, generate leads, enter new markets and strengthen brand visibility. Face-to-face communication is particularly important in industrial and B2B markets because buyers and sellers often

require product demonstrations, technical discussions, negotiations and personal interaction.

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted this traditional model. Government restrictions, lockdowns, international travel limitations and social-distancing requirements resulted in the

cancellation, postponement or transformation of physical exhibitions. The research thesis underlying this paper identifies COVID-19 as a major disruption to exhibition participation and investigates changes before, during and after the pandemic.

The research was conducted among **500 respondents** from SMEs in Vadodara, Surat and Ahmedabad. The questionnaire specifically examined the status of the exhibition industry before COVID-19, the influence of the pandemic, post-COVID exhibition development, technology adoption and future exhibition strategies.

The pandemic also accelerated internet usage and digital business activities. In the underlying study, respondents spending more than seven hours per day on the internet increased from **6% before COVID-19 to 16% after COVID-19**, while those spending 3–5 hours increased from 26% to 34%. This indicates a substantial increase in digital dependence following the pandemic.

2. Background of the Study

The exhibition industry is closely connected with manufacturing, trade, tourism, hospitality, transportation, advertising, logistics and professional services. Consequently, disruption in exhibitions can have effects beyond event organizers themselves.

Before COVID-19, physical exhibitions were widely used for:

- Product launches
- Brand promotion
- Customer acquisition
- Distributor appointments
- International trade
- Technology transfer
- Business networking
- Market intelligence
- Competitor analysis
- Lead generation

The research findings indicate that face-to-face interaction helped organizations establish stronger business relationships and customer confidence.

COVID-19 changed this environment almost immediately. Physical events were restricted, organizations faced uncertainty, and exhibition participants were compelled to explore digital alternatives. Virtual exhibitions became an important substitute, although their effectiveness was perceived differently from physical exhibitions.

3. Review of Literature

Existing research on exhibitions and COVID-19 broadly indicates three major stages of transformation.

3.1. Pre-COVID Exhibition Environment

Before the pandemic, exhibitions were predominantly physical. Their value was associated with personal interaction, product demonstrations, networking and direct business negotiations. The underlying thesis similarly identifies physical exhibitions as a major business-promotion mechanism.

COVID-19 resulted in cancellation and postponement of physical events. Restrictions on travel and gatherings reduced visitor attendance and business interaction. Organizations consequently shifted toward online platforms.

The thesis specifically reports that during COVID-19, visitor numbers declined, networking opportunities decreased, product demonstrations were constrained and customer engagement shifted toward digital channels.

3.2. Post-COVID Transformation

The post-pandemic period has not represented a complete return to the pre-COVID model. Instead, digital technologies have become integrated into exhibition management. Hybrid exhibitions provide the possibility of combining physical interaction with online participation.

The study therefore considers COVID-19 not simply as a temporary disruption but as a **catalyst for structural transformation** in exhibition practices.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design

The study adopts a **descriptive and analytical research design** to compare exhibition participation across three periods:

1. Before COVID-19
2. During COVID-19
3. After COVID-19

The underlying thesis collected primary data through a structured questionnaire from 500 respondents representing SMEs and business participants in Vadodara, Surat and Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

4.2. Sample Size

Sample size: 500 respondents

4.3. Sampling Unit

The respondents included SME owners/managers and participants connected with exhibition and business activities.

4.4. Data Collection

Primary data were collected through a personally administered structured questionnaire. The questionnaire included demographic information, pre-COVID exhibition status, COVID-19 disruption, post-

COVID exhibition status, technology adoption and future prospects.

4.5. Statistical Techniques

The broader thesis used:

- Frequency and percentage analysis
- Descriptive statistics
- Cross-tabulation

- Pearson Chi-square
- Independent Samples t-test
- One-Way ANOVA
- McNemar's test

McNemar's test was particularly relevant because it examined changes in exhibition participation across different pandemic periods using paired responses.

5. Data Analysis and Results

5.1. Exhibition Participation Before, During and After COVID-19

The most important finding of the study is the dramatic change in exhibition-platform preferences.

Table 1. Exhibition Participation Across Three COVID-19 Periods

Exhibition Platform	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	After COVID-19
Offline/Physical	380 (76%)	50 (10%)	220 (44%)
Online/Virtual	30 (6%)	280 (56%)	80 (16%)
Hybrid	20 (4%)	70 (14%)	150 (30%)
Did Not Participate	70 (14%)	100 (20%)	50 (10%)
Total	500 (100%)	500 (100%)	500 (100%)

Source: Underlying thesis, Table 5.16.

Interpretation

Before COVID-19, offline exhibitions dominated the market, with **76%** of respondents participating in physical exhibitions. During the pandemic, this fell dramatically to **10%**.

At the same time, online/virtual participation increased from **6% to 56%**, demonstrating the rapid adoption of digital exhibition platforms.

After COVID-19, physical exhibitions recovered to **44%**, while hybrid participation increased to **30%**. Therefore, the post-pandemic environment is not simply a return to the old physical model. Instead, it represents a combination of physical and digital exhibition practices.

6. Impact on Business Inquiry and Lead Generation

Business inquiry and lead generation are important indicators of exhibition effectiveness.

Table 2. Business Inquiry / Lead Generation

Level	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19	After COVID-19
Very High	28%	12%	26%
High	36%	20%	34%
Moderate	22%	32%	28%
Low	10%	24%	9%
Very Low	4%	12%	3%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Underlying thesis, Table 5.17.

Interpretation

Before COVID-19, **64%** of respondents reported high or very-high levels of business inquiry/lead generation.

During COVID-19, this combined proportion fell to **32%**.

After COVID-19, it recovered to **60%**, approaching the pre-pandemic level.

The results demonstrate the strong relationship between physical business interaction and lead generation. During the pandemic, virtual exhibitions provided an alternative, but they did not fully reproduce the networking and engagement advantages of physical events.

7. Online, Offline and Hybrid Exhibition Participation

The study further examined respondents' overall participation preferences.

Table 3. Current Exhibition Participation Preference

Type	Frequency	Percentage
Regular/Offline Exhibitions Only	220	44%
Online Exhibitions Only	80	16%
Both Online and Regular Exhibitions	150	30%
Did Not Participate	50	10%
Total	500	100%

The findings indicate that physical exhibitions remain the most preferred single format, while **30%** of respondents use both online and offline exhibitions. This supports the growing significance of hybrid exhibition models.

8. Impact on Visitor and Exhibitor Participation

The study found that among exhibitors, 28% participated only in offline exhibitions, 12% only in online exhibitions, and 20% participated in both online and offline exhibitions. Forty percent reported no participation as exhibitors.

Among visitors, 36% attended only offline exhibitions, 18% participated exclusively online, and 34% participated in both formats. Only 12% reported no participation.

These results suggest that visitors may have adapted to digital exhibition opportunities while continuing to value physical events.

9. Statistical Findings

The underlying research used McNemar's test to evaluate changes in exhibition participation across the three periods.

The results showed a statistically significant decline in exhibition participation from before COVID-19 to during COVID-19. The primary causes identified included lockdowns, travel restrictions, health concerns and cancellation of physical exhibitions.

The comparison between the COVID-19 period and the post-COVID period showed a statistically significant increase in participation after restrictions were lifted.

The comparison between pre-COVID and post-COVID participation indicated that participation recovered to levels comparable to, or in some cases exceeding, pre-pandemic levels.

10. Discussion

The findings reveal three distinct phases of exhibition-industry development.

Phase I: Pre-COVID—Physical Dominance

The pre-COVID exhibition model was primarily based on physical interaction. Organizations used exhibitions as strategic marketing and business-development tools. The strength of this model came from direct communication, product demonstration, negotiation and relationship building.

Phase II: COVID-19—Digital Substitution

COVID-19 disrupted the physical exhibition ecosystem. Online exhibitions became an emergency alternative. Digital participation increased substantially, but business lead generation declined.

The findings show that virtual participation increased from **6% to 56%**, demonstrating the speed of digital transformation. However, high/very-high lead generation fell from **64% to 32%**, suggesting that digital substitution could not fully reproduce the effectiveness of physical interaction.

Phase III: Post-COVID—Hybrid Transformation

The post-COVID period represents a more balanced model. Physical exhibitions recovered strongly, but digital participation remained above the pre-pandemic level and hybrid participation expanded.

This indicates that COVID-19 changed the exhibition industry permanently rather than simply interrupting it temporarily.

11. Major Findings

The study produces the following major findings:

1. COVID-19 caused a major decline in physical exhibition participation.
2. Offline exhibition participation declined from **76% before COVID-19 to 10% during COVID-19**.
3. Online/virtual exhibition participation increased from **6% to 56% during COVID-19**.
4. After COVID-19, physical participation recovered to **44%**.
5. Hybrid participation increased to **30% after COVID-19**.
6. High and very-high business lead generation declined substantially during the pandemic.
7. Lead generation recovered significantly after the pandemic.
8. Physical exhibitions remain highly valued for networking and relationship building.

9. Virtual exhibitions served as an important substitute during the crisis.
10. Digital transformation has become an integral component of modern exhibition management.
11. The post-pandemic exhibition industry is moving toward hybrid models.
12. Face-to-face interaction remains an important determinant of exhibition effectiveness.

These findings are consistent with the thesis's overall conclusion that physical exhibitions regained importance while organizations increasingly adopted hybrid models.

12. Implications for Exhibition Organizers

Exhibition organizers should move beyond the traditional physical-only model and develop integrated physical- digital experiences.

12.1. Hybrid Exhibition Models

Organizers should provide both physical and virtual participation options.

12.2. Digital Networking

Digital networking platforms should allow participants to schedule meetings, exchange information and maintain relationships before and after physical events.

12.3. Data Analytics

Visitor and exhibitor data should be used to measure engagement, lead generation and return on investment.

12.4. Artificial Intelligence

AI can be incorporated into visitor management, matchmaking, recommendation systems and post-event lead management.

12.5. Safety and Risk Management

Exhibition organizers should maintain emergency preparedness and health and safety protocols.

The underlying thesis recommends hybrid models, digital technologies, AI, data analytics, stronger health and safety systems and support for SMEs.

13. Implications for SMEs

SMEs were particularly dependent on exhibitions for market access, customer acquisition and networking. The pandemic demonstrated the importance of having both physical and digital marketing capabilities.

SMEs should therefore:

- Participate in relevant physical exhibitions.
- Develop digital product presentations.
- Maintain online business networking channels.
- Use hybrid exhibition opportunities.

- Track leads generated through exhibitions.
- Integrate exhibition participation with digital marketing.
- Develop contingency plans for future disruptions.

14. Policy Implications

Government agencies and industry associations can contribute to exhibition-industry resilience by:

1. Providing financial assistance during major disruptions.
2. Supporting exhibition infrastructure.
3. Encouraging digital transformation.
4. Promoting hybrid exhibitions.
5. Supporting MSME participation.
6. Developing contingency plans for future pandemics.
7. Encouraging international business participation.
8. Supporting digital exhibition infrastructure.

These measures are also reflected in the thesis's policy recommendations.

15. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the exhibition industry. Before the pandemic, physical exhibitions dominated participation and were important instruments for product promotion, networking, customer acquisition and lead generation. The pandemic caused an unprecedented decline in physical participation and forced organizations to rapidly adopt online and virtual alternatives.

The empirical evidence from 500 respondents demonstrates this transformation clearly. Physical participation declined from 76% before COVID-19 to 10% during COVID-19, while virtual participation increased from 6% to 56%. After COVID-19, physical participation recovered to 44%, while hybrid participation reached 30%.

The same pattern is visible in business lead generation. High and very-high lead generation declined from 64% before COVID-19 to 32% during the pandemic, before recovering to 60% after COVID-19.

Therefore, COVID-19 did not eliminate physical exhibitions. Rather, it accelerated the digital transformation of the exhibition industry. The future is likely to be characterized by integrated exhibition models in which physical interaction provides relationship-building and experiential value while digital platforms provide accessibility, wider reach, data collection and continuous engagement.

The study ultimately supports the conclusion that hybrid exhibitions represent an important post-pandemic strategic direction, while face-to-face interaction remains a critical element of successful B2B exhibitions.

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