

What is a Phygital Sporting Event?

Evidence from the World Alpine Ski Championships Cortina 2021 Opening Ceremony

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate phygital sporting events focusing on the Opening Ceremony of the World Alpine Ski Championships Cortina 2021. The research adopts qualitative, single-case study-based techniques and involves various levels of analysis. The findings uncover the characteristics of phygital sporting events and how phygital can enhance customer experience and engagement.

Keywords: Phygital, Physical, Digital, Phygital Sporting Events, World Alpine Ski Championships Cortina 2021 Opening Ceremony

Introduction

The term "Phygital" is a neologism coined in 2007 by the Australian experience design agency Momentum (Vergine et al., 2019). The word phygital results from the crasis of the terms "physical" and "digital". It was crafted to acknowledge the convergence between real and virtual dimensions of people's lives and the emergence of hybrid spaces where people and connected interfaces coexist, allowing natural interactions between humans and machines (Gaggioli, 2017). Far from being the mere juxtaposition of two different environments, phygital represents an augmented solution that brings together the best of the physical and digital domains, which reinforce each other (Ballina et al., 2019; Nofal et al., 2017; Zurlo et al., 2018). Technologies are integral elements of phygital, and they act as enhancers of people capacities, building fluid and customized experiences based on the exchange of human data with technological objects (Zurlo et al., 2018).

Phygital in the event industry

Events can be considered drivers for promoting and communicating the activities of companies (Cherubini et al., 2009) and economics (Dolasinski et al., 2020). Technological development is constantly renewing the event system (Ryan et al., 2020), enabling innovative opportunities for organizers and attendees (i.e. virtual events and digital events). Moreover, the extraordinary changes that the COVID-19

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pandemic brought to consumers' lives forced event organizers to rethink their business models (Dillette & Pointing, 2021). With new engaging technologies that have been applied in fashion (e.g., Milan Fashion Week and Altaroma), sport (e.g., NBA with Zoom) and trade fairs (e.g., Messe Frankfurt), the event industry has faced the pandemic situation (and its consequences) creating an innovative experiential event that has been labelled "phygital events".

Despite the growing managerial interest in phygital events, there is a lack of theoretical contributions which study the phygital phenomenon in the event sector. By acknowledging that gap, this work aims to increase knowledge about phygital events, focusing on phygital sporting events (PSE), by identifying its constituent elements, u paying attention to the role of technology, the actors involved, and the customer experience.

Methodology

The research adopts qualitative, case study-based techniques and involves various levels of analysis (Yin, 1984). A single case has been chosen to fill the theoretical category of a phygital event (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The event chosen was the Opening Ceremony of the World Alpine Ski Championships Cortina 2021, which took place on February 7, 2021. This event proved to be an extreme exemplar case to explore a significant but rare phenomenon (Eisendhardt and Graebner, 2007; Gaya and Smith, 2016). The case was selected for: (a) its international stance and media coverage; (b) the live experience and the digital experience integration; (c) the different digital technologies used to construct the event experience, and (d) the resonance that the event had on the territory involved. The case analysis has been conducted through a multilayered process that included collecting and analyzing the information about the event (website, App, social media). Two researchers conducted seven in-depth online interviews involving the Chairwoman (MC), the Art Director (RM) and the Head of Operations (GdF) of Triumph Group International, the organizers of the opening ceremony event. Researchers also interviewed the Mayor of Cortina (GG), the CEO (VG) and the Chief of media, broadcast & media, operations (VC) of the Cortina 2021 Foundation and the CEO of the company that measured the Event Social ROI (GL). Each interview lasted around one hour. Questions dealt with the role played by technology, the event experience design, the event evaluation, and the phygital legacies. The interviews were registered and transcribed and afterwards content-analyzed by the researchers separately. Possible inconsistencies in the verbatim interpretation were agreed upon by the two researchers in a subsequent meeting. The researchers watched the event from multiple platforms (streaming, YouTube, and App).

Findings

From the documentation and the informants' narratives about the event, it emerges that PSEs could be defined as innovative live events "contaminated" by a mix of technologies. The PSE can be interactively experienced either physically or virtually from different platforms. It employs digital technology to build an interactive, immersive, and engaging experience that starts before and continues after the event.

The PSE is constructed around five dimensions: autonomy, dedicated experience, human-centred technology, event measurement and evaluation and legacies.

Autonomy – The organizers perceive phygital as a new format that is different from live and in-person events. PSE has two audiences, one physical and one digital. These audiences have different experiential needs that derive from the type of fruition – either physical or digital - that must be considered in the events planning and implementation. The event must provide moments of entertainment and engagement for the two audiences with diversified direction, content management, narrative construction, and duration (not exceeding 45 minutes) in order to maintain a high level of attention. According to the informants, this requires increased knowledge about the event's target audience before planning. PSEs "have a much longer tail of resonance and return" (GdF) because they break the unity of space and place; hence they start before the physical event and create "the expectation of the Place to Be" (MC). They also continue after the event through the public's engagement, which is built up through digital content (social media, Apps, Web) that creates expectations about future events. PSEs have a much broader amplification because a greater number of people can enjoy them without any geographical or infrastructural limits. Also, PSE events increase the level of involvement, which can be both physical and digital. It broadens the brand's ability to "get its message across to a much wider audience" (GdF).

Dedicated experience - The phygital format provides the public with a customized experience tailored to people's attitudes and expectations because everyone can "live a dedicated experience, customized on what is your enjoyment" (GdF). PSE experience adapts to the target audience (i.e., Tech media center for journalists, the App for fans) by offering personalized content across multiple channels. It allows for a higher level of interaction between participants, athletes, and the brand. Moreover, PSE lets the public choose the preferred way of experiencing the event freely "where they live and there, they are present, experiencing it at 360°" (GdF), letting the participant be free to share, to comment, and to live the event again through the digital platforms. It aims to increase the audience's involvement "we were meeting the needs of the public who were involved" (GdF).

Human-Centered Technology – Phygital events integrate a mix of digital technologies that must be ubiquitous and not intrusive. Although digital technologies are enablers of phygital events, they are considered by the informants as being human-centered technologies. They are aimed at creating emotion, engagement, and interaction. According to the informants, there is not a single phygital technology but an appropriate mix of technologies that are used to convey the physical experience through the digital layer (social media, App, web streaming) and to integrate the digital into the physical experience (3D technology, wearables, digital instruments). The technology mix increases participation in the PSE because "you are on the screen; you are part of the panel" (MC). Technology helps create an emotional link with the audience, making the narrative of the event "even more magical" (RM), with a higher level of audience identification. Technology also brings people closer and replicates the physical experience of interacting with the athletes (via apps), which is more effective than selfies or autographs, with the possibility of accessing engaging content on the territories that host the sporting event: "We made them experience Cortina of the World

Cup, even though they were not in Cortina" (VC). It helps create an emotional bond with the event hosting site - "It made me remember many special moments I spent in the mountains in the past" (GL).

Event measuring and evaluation – Phygital events facilitate punctual event monitoring and evaluation, offering specific information about the involved spectators and making collecting data more accessible; this is possible because "nowadays, technology is everywhere, and all of us are used to having at least a smartphone" (VC). Moreover, with the implementation of connected tools and devices, PSEs merge "digital and real characteristics, [...], and they are digitally measurables" (RM) instantaneously. Measuring phygital events allows organizers to create specific metrics that could be shared with other stakeholders. In fact, "through the creation of a phygital event, we studied the metrics, and that allowed us also to discover the return on investment generated by the event" (GdF). Phygital events enable organizers to (a) manage, change, and correct the live experience since "we have the opportunity of engaging" (GdF) the actual audience phygitaly; (b) evaluate post-event outcomes and outputs as "we have the traceability of how many people were connected" (GdF). Traceability also allows organizers to identify and implement processes and techniques to correct, rethink, or renew further editions (or other events).

Legacies – Phygital sporting events produce four legacies. Firstly, they generate an intangible legacy. PSEs represent a showcase for the hosting cities and enable local governments to increase visibility and notoriety and, thus, the sharing of information about the territory: "Cortina relied on this event to talk not only about the sporting event but also the territory, hospitality, gastronomy and the beautiful mountains" (VG). The audience can be global: PSEs enable new consumers to be reached, to be located worldwide, and they can digitally discover and explore cities that were not known before, to plan future trips: "The results of some marketing research conducted by us after the event were extraordinary: we had viewers from the Middle East, Japan, Sri Lanka etc.. they saw pictures of these wonderful places with these mountains. I am sure a part of them will surely come to our territory" (GG). Secondly, PSEs generate an economic-infrastructure legacy. Through these events, hosting cities and the neighbouring territories receive extraordinary revenue flows; this increases local investments to bridge infrastructural gaps that can boost long-term innovations such as road reconstruction, etcetera: "events like this are an opportunity to make a series of interventions, especially on infrastructure and services for a total revitalization [..]" (GG). Thirdly, PSEs generate a digital legacy made up of the participants' information collected through digital touchpoints. This database includes data and analytics from digital coverage, apps, websites, wearable devices, etcetera, that can implement stakeholders' marketing strategies to specific and targeted clusters: "a legacy [..] of a packet of users' data (who have authorized the sharing [with other stakeholders]), which are emotionally related to Cortina, the mountains and winter sports [..] This is to activate a series of marketing and promotional activities, and [for hosting cities] to enhance the territory" (VG). PSEs also create an emotional legacy; in fact, phygital environments create a lasting emotional bond between the participants and the event since they can recall experiential memories attached to the event through their devices. Those feelings, based on the participants' personal and shared experiences, can be

digitally stored (i.e. in the form of photos, videos, screenshots) and be viewed at any time after the event: "I have a beautiful memory of the event, and picked up from my home remember some emotions that I will never forget. [...] I also filmed two or three moments, and I still have them on my smartphone" (GL).

Conclusions and Implications

PSEs are characterized by a mix of related technologies naturally integrated into the physical space and interrelated by a narrative fil rouge where online and offline are well balanced. Digital-real relationships create a highly immersive, emotional and interactive experience. PSEs allow the democratization of events, allowing people to choose how and where to experience them. Then, PSEs enhance a punctual event monitoring and evaluating, bringing an intangible legacy for each stakeholder.

The work has important theoretical and managerial implications. From a theoretical point of view, the work contributes to the emerging theory of phygital by providing an overview of the constituent elements of a PSEs. The study also has significant managerial implications: phygital sporting events can represent a valuable tool for brands to increase consumer attention and engagement by creating immersive and emotional customer experiences. Furthermore, the ability of phygital events to overcome the physical barriers allows them to reach large and diverse audiences. In addition, the integration of physical and digital in the phygital event increases data collection and enables the adoption of optimizing marketing strategies during and after the event. The paper also implements the literature on event marketing, highlighting the role of hybrid environments, mixing the real and the virtual domains in creating amplified and engaging experiences, drawing possible future directions in this field.

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