

## RESEARCH NOTE

### TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS AND COVID-19: EVENT MANAGEMENT AND DIGITALIZATION IN TIMES OF PHYSICAL DISTANCING

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The purpose of this research is to find out how the organization of events adapted to the COVID-19 lockdown and how digital transformation can be a solution for events when physical distancing is required. Using a qualitative approach based on case studies, the article analyzes the changes in the organization of traditional festivals during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, focusing on Spain's five most populated cities. Complementary to the study, in-depth interviews were conducted with the heads of Protocol and Institutional Relations of the city councils in charge of organizing these events. The results show that, although some festivals were postponed, others were redesigned to be held without an audience, enhancing live streaming, strengthening communication through social media, and offering virtual tours. COVID-19 has been a catalyst for event digitalization. The existence as yet of only a small amount of scientific literature on how COVID-19 has impacted event and festival management makes this research a relevant contribution. This work provides insights for events crisis and emergency risk management, as well as for the digital transformation of festivals. The study highlights the need for contingency plans for organizing events in situations that require physical distancing and how online tools and virtual events can be part of this solution.

**Key words:** Festival; Event; Crisis; Virtual; COVID-19

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#### Introduction

When external circumstances make the on-site presence—still an essential part of many events (Nordvall et al., 2014; Simons, 2019)—impossible, event organizers should look for alternatives. In

this context, it is useful to know how digital technologies can be used to design events that are also capable of attracting a relevant audience.

The COVID-19 pandemic was declared a public health emergency of international concern by the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 30,

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2020. Spain, together with Italy, was one of the European countries to be most affected by this pandemic, where the state of emergency, declared on March 14, 2020, was followed by a strict lockdown never experienced before. The lockdown period coincided with the spring months, when the main traditional festivals are held in Spain: the 2nd of May Festivity in Madrid, Saint George's Day in Barcelona, the Fallas Festival in Valencia, the April Fair in Seville, and the Day of Aragon in Zaragoza. These festivals and traditional celebrations have an important impact, as they "are special events with a strong cultural component and play a significant role in community life and economic development" (Palma Martos et al., 2014, p. 289). These events also contribute to reinforcing the identity of the cities and regions in which they take place and foster greater social cohesion while attracting nonlocal visitors and an international audience (Mikkonen & Lahovuuo, 2020; Raj et al., 2017). This study seeks to discover how these celebrations were affected by COVID-19 and how an emergency response was required.

Crisis and risk communication is particularly important in event management although scholars have generally focused on studying the implications of climate change for outdoor event planning (Jones et al., 2006) or terrorism-related safety and security (Taylor & Toohey, 2005). In fact, the research in crisis communications concerning event management is very limited (Pappas, 2019). However, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a considerable threat to many of the events scheduled for 2020 (Miles & Shipway, 2020), causing an unprecedented global crisis in the sector, according to the professional associations such as the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA), Meeting Professionals International (MPI), and the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA). Having contingency plans and fluid communication with health authorities and stakeholders (Coombs et al., 2019) was more necessary than ever.

Given the impossibility of holding on-site events such as those scheduled for the spring of 2020, the present study analyzes the decisions taken by the organizing municipal authorities (to cancel or postpone them) and, if they went ahead and held the celebrations, how they redesigned them, and whether and to what extent they resorted to digital tools.

Although there is increasingly more literature on digital transformation in the event sector (see Van Niekerk, 2017; Van Winkle et al., 2018), the recent work by Sá et al. (2019) and Ryan et al. (2020) revealed that "academia should place even greater emphasis on the need for understanding technology and its different levels at events" (p. 60). Likewise, most of the literature on events digitalization focuses on corporate events, congresses, conferences, or music festivals, while there is still very little research that goes into how digital technology can be adapted for traditional festivals and celebrations.

The present study responds to this need to expand the research on crisis and risk management in these types of events and on how digital technology can be used in contexts where physical distancing between people is required.

#### Literature Review

Although several authors from the academic field have reviewed the existing literature on event organization, highlighting its increase in the last decade (see Getz & Page, 2016; Mair & Weber, 2019; Michopoulou et al., 2019; Park & Park, 2017), there are still few studies that focus on emergency risk management and the digital transformation of events.

The strength of live communication and the socializing component of events have always been in the focus of both specialized studies (Nordvall et al., 2014; Sá et al., 2019; Simons, 2019) and event practitioners. To use the words of James Rees, ICCA President, "the physical presence, the sense of belonging, and the building of trusted relationships by meeting in person is irreplaceable" (ICCA, 2020b).

However, at the beginning of 2020, the risk of a massive spread of COVID-19 led to the cancellation or postponement of many events, following the World Health Organization's recommendations (WHO, 2021). Italy canceled the Venice Carnival. Internationally, the Olympic Games—to be held in Tokyo in the summer of 2020—were postponed until the following year. Professional associations for event planners stated that they were "all feeling the effects of this unprecedented situation" (ICCA, 2020a), calculating that 87% of events had been canceled (Russell, 2020), and not foreseeing their recovery until next year (Pinchera, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic falls within what in the event management is considered an *emergency or disaster risk*, defined as “the potential loss of life, injury and destroyed or damaged assets which could occur to a system, society or a community in a specific period of time, determined probabilistically as a function hazard, exposure, vulnerability and capacity” (WHO, 2019, p. 3). Pappas (2019) highlighted “the importance of appropriate crisis marketing and communications strategies in popular culture events for the minimization of the negative impacts of both, events and destinations” (p. 663). Specifically focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic, Miles and Shipway (2020) pointed out the importance of exploring this crisis as a catalyst for stimulating future research agendas for managing crisis and disaster at international sport events. In the field of Public Relations, research has been conducted and in-depth theories have been elaborated on how to manage crisis and risk communication (see such authors as Coombs, 2015; Coombs et al., 2019; Frandsen & Johansen, 2016; Heath, 2018; Leopkey & Parent, 2009; Moyle et al., 2014). For Coombs (2015), crisis management needed to take into account four interrelated factors to reduce damage: prevention, preparation, response, and revision. As Palenchar (2010) noted, traditional concepts of risk communication and crisis communication have been combined under the concept of crisis and emergency risk communication (CERC), which “differs from traditional risk communication because oftentimes a decision must be made within a narrow window of time and without all the necessary information” (p. 451).

This is precisely what happened with the COVID-19 crisis when event organizers had to communicate decisions about the future of events scheduled for 2020 within a very short period of time, and with uncertainty as to how the pandemic would evolve and whether it would allow events to take place as initially intended.

The digitalization transformation of events in times of lockdown is framed within the digital transformation of society. The information and knowledge society (IKS) (Castells, 2010) has transformed our way of life, our society, our way of working, the economy as a whole, and also event management. Although the situation generated by COVID-19 has made the potential of the digital

transformation of events clearer, other factors have also had an influence: (1) the increase in digital literacy among the population and the ease with which new generations—like Generation Z—interact and socialize in virtual environments (Dimock, 2019); (2) the demands made by society for greater sustainability in event organization from the society, primarily because of the environmental impact caused by travel on the part of international attendees (Sá et al., 2019); and (3) technological advances in mobile devices, the 5G network, and the increase in the number of people who have these devices and a home Internet connection (Llanasas, 2019).

In fact, before the COVID-19 situation, the event industry had already been incorporating digital technology innovations. The use of social media to promote events and establish more two-way communication with attendees, live streaming, the creation of event-specific apps, the use of big data, the Internet of Things, and artificial intelligence are some of the technological innovations that were already being incorporated, although in many cases these were very incipient (Olya et al., 2018; Simons, 2019; Tussyadiah, 2017 cited in Bustard et al., 2019; Van Winkle et al., 2016; Wreford et al., 2019).

In academia, the uses of social media at events have been one of the most widely studied topics (see Hudson & Hudson, 2013; Hudson et al., 2015; Llopis-Amorós et al., 2019; Pasanen & Honu, 2016; Schivinski et al., 2019). Social media makes it possible to get to know the participants of the events more closely, communicate with them, and engage them beyond the moment of the event itself. The creation of hashtags, profile updates, and the generation of quality content are key elements in ensuring successful social network strategy for events. Thus, this facilitates cocreation “as the key ingredient in providing these more personalized, unique, and memorable experiences” (Bustard et al., 2019, p. 117). With the help of social networks, events can achieve greater participation of the attendees and invite them to participate; for example, in designing the event’s format or program, developing “interactive tools such as online games or applications to not only establish a connection with potential attendees but also to allow them to personalize content and use their creativity” (Llopis-Amorós et al., 2019, p. 141).

Related to that, gamification appears as another useful technique that can increase the attendee's engagement (see Liu et al., 2019; Moise & Cru-ceru, 2014).

However, beyond this widespread use of social media and the incursion into other aspects of digital transformation, the results of the study carried out by Ryan et al. (2020) revealed that the "events industry appears not to be digitally mature" (p. 60) and that "maintaining pace with the capabilities of advances in digital technology will remain a key objective for events and event management education in the coming years" (p. 62).

Since the arrival of COVID-19, there has been growing interest among event professionals in learning how to use the advantages of digital transformation in event design. In times of uncertainty, online events can be a smart way to connect with the attendees and ensure that human connection is not lost (Eventbrite, 2020). Some of the advantages offered by online events are: the ease of access, reduced costs, the ability to reach wider audiences, more extended durability over time, and reduced carbon emissions produced due to attendees not having to travel (Sá et al., 2019).

Studies have also been conducted on virtual events that include virtual reality or augmented reality (Mowad, 2017; Peltz et al., 2018). Virtual reality (VR) is described as "a method of cognitively transporting a user into a virtual environment through interactions and immersive content" (Wreford et al., 2019, p. 721). Augmented reality (AR), for its part, is "a form of human-computer interaction, which overlays computer-generated information, images, and sounds into the physical world and in real time" (Craig, 2013). Virtual reality replaces reality, whereas augmented reality enhances it (Thurlby, 2018). Fully simulated events can include avatars—graphic images that represent a person in a virtual world—and, if so wished, can imitate the physical characteristics of the attendees with great realism.

Nevertheless, the use of VR or AR in festivals is still very limited (Olya et al., 2020). In this regard, storytelling is a useful communication technique (see Orefice, 2018). As Wreford et al. (2019) stated, "implementing a well-defined storyline could give users the context necessary to avoid confusion or disorientation" in virtual events (p. 730).

Ryan et al. (2020) were the first to define an event 4.0 (E4.0) as one that "includes the integration of social media, Internet of Things, virtual technologies and the use of mobile devices" (p. 62). The current research analyzes whether the traditional festivals scheduled during the COVID-19 pandemic adopted this digital transformation.

## Methodology

This research aimed to analyze the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the organization of events and the alternatives applied, particularly the way digital transformation has been implemented.

To this end, an analysis was conducted of the traditional festivals promoted by the governments of the Spain's five most populated cities (Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Seville, and Zaragoza) during the period of the state of emergency declared by the Spanish Government in response to COVID-19 (<https://www.boe.es/eli/es/rd/2020/03/14/463/con>), which began on March 14 and ended on May 4, 2020. Spain was chosen because it was one of the European countries most affected by the pandemic and because of its strong tradition of organizing this type of festival.

The research questions addressed are:

- RQ1.** How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the organization of traditional festivals?
- RQ2.** How is digital transformation being implemented in the organization of events?

The research applies qualitative methodology based on the case study approach, which makes it possible to "increase knowledge about real, contemporary communication events in their context" (Daymon & Holloway, 2010, p. 105). The recommendations of Harrison et al. (2017) have been adhered to, according to which "the focus of a case study is the detailed inquiry of a unit of analysis as a bounded system (the case), over time, within its context" (para. 21). The case study is also the research method used by other authors who have previously addressed the analysis of events, such as Hudson and Hudson (2013).

The cases analyzed are the 2nd of May Festivity (Madrid), St George's Day (Barcelona), the Fallas Festival (Valencia), the April Fair (Seville), and the

Day of Aragon (Zaragoza). These events take place every year in early spring, traditionally in public spaces and outdoors.

The data for each event have been obtained by analyzing the information published on the city councils' websites, the media coverage of the events, the websites for the events, and the information published on the official social media accounts. In addition, in-depth interviews have been conducted with the heads of Institutional Relations and Protocol in the city councils. The interviews were carried out online between March 16 and May 11, 2020, and were subsequently transcribed and codified.

This study examines whether the traditional festivals in these five cities were cancelled, postponed, or redesigned during the lockdown. In those cases where the events were redesigned, the study looks explicitly into the degree of digital transformation achieved, based on the characteristics attributed to an event 4.0 by Ryan et al. (2020).

### Findings

#### *Redesigning Events to Respond to the COVID-19 Outbreak*

On March 14, 2020, to manage the health care crisis caused by COVID-19, the Spanish Government declared a state of emergency (<https://www.boe.es/eli/es/rd/2020/03/14/463/con>), which was extended several times during the following months. The measures adopted to respond to the situation made it impossible to hold large-scale on-site events. The festivals and celebrations that had been scheduled for spring in Spain's five most populated cities are detailed below, and it has been analyzed whether they were suspended, postponed, or redesigned, and, in the latter case, how and to what extent digital technologies were used (see Table 1).

*The 2nd of May Festivity in Madrid.* The 2nd of May commemorates the day when the citizens of Madrid rose up in arms against Napoleon's troops, marking the start of the War of Independence of 1808 (Demange, 2004), a historical episode immortalized by Francisco de Goya in his well-known painting "The Third of May 1808" (see more about national days throughout the history

and the geography of Spain in De Cienfuegos & Barcena, 2004). Traditionally, a floral offering and a medal-giving ceremony are held during the festivities. In 2020 the celebration of the event had to be readapted, and the ceremony was held to honor the public health and other essential frontline workers that had been fighting against COVID-19 and was broadcast live on Madrid TV, the regional public television channel.

In the evening, the same television channel broadcast a concert dedicated to the people of the city that featured different artists performing online, images of the most emblematic buildings, and unusual images of empty city streets. Citizens were also encouraged to decorate the outsides of their homes and share the images on social media using specially created hashtags. Likewise, the traditional exhibition "Haciendo Barrio," which was displayed in one of the city's galleries every year, was transformed into a virtual exhibition, with the participating artists encouraged to share their works using the hashtags created for the occasion.

*Saint George's Day in Barcelona.* Saint George is the patron saint of Catalonia. This national day (April 23) has come to defend the symbols of Catalan identity and it is celebrated especially in the capital, Barcelona. On this day, the streets overflow with booksellers and florists, and lovers give each other roses and books. In 1988, UNESCO declared April 23, which is also the day of Cervantes' and Shakespeare's deaths, World Book Day.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the celebration of Saint George's Day was postponed to July 23, 2020. Even so, the city government proposed a series of alternative activities on the city's official website. The organizers encouraged people to decorate their balconies with roses and symbols of Saint George's Day and to share the photos on social media using the hashtags created for the occasion. Children were invited to draw the covers of the books that they had been reading during the lockdown and then post them on the City Council's website. On the same website, free downloadable books were made available and famous writers shared their reading recommendations in video format.

Traditionally on Saint George's Day, different buildings in the city, including the City Hall, open



Table 1  
Transformation of the Festivals in the Main Spanish Cities During the COVID-19 Lockdown

	The 2nd of May Festivity	Saint George's Day	The Fallas Festival	Seville April Fair	The Day of Aragon
City	Madrid	Barcelona	Valencia	Seville	Zaragoza
Date	May 2	April 23	March 14–19	April 26 – May 2	April 23
COVID-19 decision about the event	Redesigned	Postponed and redesigned	Postponed and redesigned	Suspended and redesigned	Redesigned
Facebook	@ayuntamoentodemadrid	@barcelona.cat	@AjuntamentVLC	@AyuntamientodeSevilla	@ayuntamiento-dezaragoza
Twitter	@MADRID	@bcn_ajuntament	@AjuntamentVLC	@Ayto_Sevilla	@zaragoza_es
Instagram	@madrid	@barcelona.cat	@AjuntamentVLC	@ayto_sevilla	@zaragoza_es
YouTube channel	Ayuntamiento de Madrid en directo	Barcelona Ajuntament	Ajuntament de Valencia	Ayuntamiento de Sevilla	Ayuntamiento de Zaragoza
Special hashtags	#HaciendoBarrio #Fiestas2D2020 #ArtistaHaciendoBarrio2020 #Fiestas2D	#SantJordiBCN20 #TotsFemSantJordi #SantJordiAlsBalcons	#fallas20#ExpoNinot20 #FallesUNESCO #ParlemAmbArtistesFallers #AçòTambé Passarà	#SevillaQuédateEnCasa	#DíaDeAragón #SanJorge2020
Integration of social media	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Streaming	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
3D settings	Virtual exhibition 'Haciendo Barrio' (Malasaña)	Online 3D tour of the City Council and the Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site	Online 3D visit of the Fallero Museum and the Ninot Museum	Virtual Fair of Seville	No
Avatars	No	No	No	Yes	No
Internet of Things	No	No	No	No	No
Event app	No	No	Yes (Fallas 2020 official app)	Yes (Plan Feria)	No

Note. Source: Author's creation.

their doors to the public. Given the impossibility of on-site visits, they offered the chance to go on a virtual tour on their websites. Furthermore, to coincide with Saint George's Day, an online 3D tour of the Sant Pau Hospital Art Nouveau Site was launched.

*The Fallas Festival in Valencia.* The Fallas is a festival that takes place every year from March 1 to March 19, and which turns the city of Valencia into an ephemeral art museum, declared Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO (see Costa, 2002). The origin of the Fallas Festival goes back to an ancient tradition of local carpenters, who, on the eve of the feast of their patron Saint Joseph, burned scraps of wood in front of their workshops (<https://comunitatvalenciana.com>). Over the years, the carpenters started to add old belongings and rags to this purifying bonfire, which gave the wooden structures a human-looking appearance, until they became *ninots*, people-shaped figures often charged with critical and ironic meaning. On the night of March 19 (Saint Joseph's Day), all the figures are eventually burned in the *cremà* (the burning) except one: the *ninot indultat*, the figure selected and saved by the jury. Another highlight of the Fallas Festival is the *mascletà*, a very noisy firework display.

In 2020, Valencia City Council and the local groups participating in the Fallas Festival agreed to postpone the celebration of the 2020 Fallas until July. The decision was made public on the city's YouTube channel. Although the festival was postponed, it was decided to carry out that year's *cremà* (burning of the figures) in an empty square, with only police and the firefighters present. The event was broadcast live on the city council's YouTube channel. The Fallas Festival had its own app for Google Play (Fallas 2020 official app for Google Play). On the festival's official website (<https://www.fallas.com>), people could also take a 3D tour of the Fallero Museum and the Ninot Museum. In addition, video interviews with different Fallas artists were published on the same website and the official social media accounts.

*The April Fair in Seville.* Created in 1847 as a livestock fair, the April Fair of Seville has become a traditional festival with great cultural and economic impact (see Palma Martos et al., 2014; Soler

& Gémár, 2017). It takes place in a public space located on the outskirts of the city, where there are *casetas* (fair booths) in which, over the course of a week, the festival attendees eat *pescaíto* (typical fried fish), drink typical Jerez wine, and sing and dance flamenco dressed in typical Andalusian costumes. The April Fair begins with the night of *alumbrao*, the inaugural moment when all the fairground lights are lit, including the lights of the monumental entrance, erected every year to commemorate a monument of the city. The Fair ends with a large firework display over the Guadalquivir River (<https://visitasevilla.es>). This festival has its own app in Google Play—Plan Feria—that allows participants to search for booths and view them on the map using GPS.

On March 15, 2020, the mayor of Seville officially announced the suspension of the April Fair. Although the option of postponing it until September was initially considered, its definitive suspension was announced. Even so, the City Council sought a way to keep the spirit of the festival alive. On the day of the fair's planned inauguration, "instead of lighting the more than 200,000 lights of the Real 8 The Royal Alcazars of Seville, the neighbors agreed between each other to turn on the lights of their balconies and simulate the same effect after midnight" (El País, 2020). A documentary video was published on the official YouTube channel of the City Council and other social media recounting about the history of the Fair with photographs taken from the Municipal Photo Library and music played by the Municipal Symphony Band of Seville.

At the same time, the Virtual Fair of Seville (<https://feriavirtualdesevilla.com/>) was organized as a private initiative by the company Virtualsoft. Thanks to a virtual reality web application, people could have a virtual experience in a multiuser environment where each user, by means of an avatar, could walk through the virtually reproduced fairground that had all the typical elements: fair booths, lanterns, the lit-up entrance, etc.

*The Day of Aragon in Zaragoza.* In Aragon and its capital, Zaragoza, April 23 also marks a festivity of great importance, because Saint George is their patron saint. Traditionally, several institutional

events are held to celebrate the day, but in 2020 all of them were reduced to purely formal events. The ceremonies took place in the Aljafería Palace and, similarly to Madrid, were turned into acts of homage to the Covid-19 victims and health care workers. Although about a thousand people usually attend this event, this time, the seating capacity was reduced to 20 people to ensure social distancing and thus prevent the spread of the virus. The ceremony was broadcast live on Aragon TV, the regional public television channel. The event was redesigned on a moderate scale, under the slogan “This year, we are all Saint George,” and concluded with a minute’s silence.

The event’s program also included an interpretation of *Aragoinaise* performed by the Kingdom of Aragon Orchestra, which was broadcast live on the YouTube channel of the Government of Aragon. The same day at 8 p.m., when the city residents went out to their balconies to applaud healthcare workers, the main façade of the Aljafería Palace was lit up by projecting the colors of the Aragon flag, a display that was also broadcast on the city’s official channels and social media profiles.

#### *Designing Events After COVID-19*

The interviews with the organizers of these festivals also point to some of the measures to be taken for designing the events after COVID-19:

*Livestreaming.* The use of streaming technology will be stepped up to broadcast live events with significantly fewer on-site attendees. In this regard, as the Event Professional D reported, the organizers have already contacted different providers and are now “working in coordination with the digital communication and social media department of the institution.” Efforts have also been made to improve the design in order to achieve a greater audiovisual impact.

*Strengthening Communication Through Social Media.* Social media, as well as social stories and live streaming videos, which were already used to promote the events organized by the city governments before COVID-19, were further developed during the lockdown (integrating social media

festival hashtags) and have been highlighted as one of the main channels for communicating future events.

*The Acceleration of Virtualization.* According to the Event Professional B, “digital technologies have become the main alternative to fill the communication gap left by the absence of personal contact, an inherent aspect of the events organized up until now.” Virtualization is viewed as a necessity, while the events’ organizers affirm that the coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the virtualization of events. Furthermore, as Event Professional C stated, “the virtual stage is not just an alternative during the lockdown; the format is congruent with such values as social responsibility and sustainability, which are aligned with those of the city council.”

*Opting for Hybrid Events.* All the interviewees agree that in the immediate future, when it will still be necessary to observe the physical distancing to avoid the infection, the focus will be placed on hybrid events; that is, events held in physical spaces with the possibility of online attendance. When organizing hybrid events, as Event Professional B stated, “one of the main challenges is to make all attendees, whether on-site or virtual, feel equally included.”

*Shortening of Official Events.* The interviewees also agree that the duration of these new events should be reduced, as the attention of online audiences is different from that of audiences at live events. As Event Professional C commented, “when announcing virtual events, it will be necessary to condense the contents and shorten the duration compared to on-site events.” This also implies shorter speeches by official representatives.

*Event Apps.* Although some festivals already have apps (such as the Fallas and the April Fair), most of them still do not have one. All the interviewees are considering creating specific apps for future events that would allow them to communicate smoothly with the participants, engage the community so that the event becomes more



convivial, and bring together all the relevant information about the event in one place.

*The Challenge: Generating Engagement.* Engaging the attendees of hybrid or virtual events is one of the challenges the interviewees say they will have to face. The event professionals interviewed are aware that this tends to be more challenging than in on-site events, and that, in this type of events, content is what matters most. Adjusting the design of the website where the event is to be hosted, publishing some of the content in advance—especially with high-quality prerecorded videos,—creating spaces for live chat, posting on social media, and publishing short videos to encourage participation are some of the strategies they are considering in order to generate a sense of community among attendees. As Event Professional A stated, “to design a hybrid or virtual event, we must create impactful moments to keep the attention of the online attendees focused.”

### Discussion

The study of how COVID-19 has impacted traditional festivals in Spain during the spring of 2020, based on case studies, in-depth interviews with their events’ managers, and the analysis of relevant publications, highlights the importance of crisis and emergency risk communication (as defined by Palenchar, 2010) in event management. The results obtained also show how online events become an alternative when external circumstances make it impossible to hold on-site events. Therefore, this study gives continuity to the growing literature on digital transformation and event management (Ryan et al., 2020; Van Winkle et al., 2018; Wrexford et al., 2019).

As shown in Table 1, more than half of the activities programmed for the 2nd of May Festivity in Madrid, the St George’s Day in Barcelona, the Fallas Festival in Valencia, the Seville April Fair, and the Day of Aragon in Zaragoza were suspended or postponed. Those activities that went ahead were redesigned with the sole participation of the authorities and essential personnel, and broadcast via live streaming and social media.

In some cases, the organizers decided to convert the event into a homage to COVID-19 victims and

healthcare workers (e.g., during the celebration of the Day of Aragon in Zaragoza and the 2nd of May Festivity in Madrid). Meanwhile, the organizers encouraged citizens to celebrate these festivals from their balconies, suggesting that neighbors should decorate them with the festivals’ motifs (Saint George’s Day in Barcelona and the April Fair in Seville) and share the photos on social media. For most of the events, special hashtags were created with messages of hope and also highlighting the importance of staying at home: #SantJordiDesDelsBalcons (SaintJorgeFromTheBalconies), #SevillaQuédateEnCasa (SevillaStayAtHome), #AçòTambéPassarà (ThisTooShallPass), #HermandadesVsCoronavirus.

Although the governmental organizers promoted virtual tours of the buildings associated with the celebrations, such as Barcelona City Hall, the Sant Pau Hospital Art Nouveau Site in Barcelona, and the Ninot Museum and the Fallas Museum in Valencia; virtual reality and augmented reality were the least-used elements. The only exception was the Virtual Fair of Seville, the result of a private initiative. The use of avatars, in consequence, was also minimal and reduced to the said virtual fair.

As for the digital maturity of the events analyzed, we can conclude that the redesign of the traditional festivals scheduled for spring 2020 in the Spain’s five most populated cities that had not been cancelled was focused mainly on the broadcasting via online streaming and on strengthening communication through the social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Although both features are an inherent part of any online event (Hudson & Hudson, 2013; Hudson et al., 2015; Pasanen & Konun, 2016), these events did not comply with the definition of 4.0 events offered by Ryan et al. (2020) because they did not fully meet the definition of “digitally managed; frequently upgraded its digital technology; fully integrated its communication systems; and optimized digital operations and communication for event delivery, marketing and customer experience” (p. 47).

According to the festival organizers interviewed, this was due to the short amount of time they had to redesign these events, the lack of previous experience in organizing online events, and, above all, to the characteristics of these traditional festivals. Although, according to Sá et al. (2019),

it is quite common for conferences and congresses to adopt the format of webinars or virtual events, traditional celebrations such as those analyzed in this study have a unique nature that makes it difficult to translate them into an online-only format. In fact, these events involve mass gatherings of people in cultural heritage cities, the chance to enjoy warm, sunny weather, and the promise of tasting typical gastronomy and dancing folkloric dances, listening to traditional music, and enjoying the fireworks.

Nevertheless, although their organizers affirmed that they did not expect the virtual events to be the same as the live ones—as they are not capable of substituting real event experiences, as described by Wreford et al. (2019)—they are already working on the future city council events, designing them with a more extensive virtual component. Even so, in the immediate future, they expect to focus on hybrid events; that is, those events that combine live on-site activities with online components. These events will have the following characteristics: (1) a minimum number of physically present participants (only the authorities and important figures), (2) a shortened duration, (3) enhanced stage design for live streaming to be shown on the screen (also adapted to mobile devices), (4) the creation of event apps, and (5) the use of tools to encourage communication not only between the organizers and the attendees, but also between attendees themselves. Event managers are looking for visitor-centric apps which, as suggested by Olya et al. (2018), can provide “interactive information for personalized communication” (p. 772).

According to the event managers interviewed, these events pose two main challenges: to keep the distinctive socializing aspect of these festivities and to grab people’s attention and hold it, and to compete with other online distractions and generate engagement. To that end, previous research suggests that including natural pauses, creating spaces for interaction and cocreation such as chats and forums (Bustard et al., 2019; Llopis-Amorós et al., 2019), as well as gamification (Liu et al., 2019) and storytelling (Orefice, 2018; Wreford et al., 2019), can be useful engagement techniques. Future research can compare how next year these festivals will have changed and if some of these techniques have been applied.

## Conclusion

This study responds to the call from the academic literature to provide a greater understanding of risk and emergency management in event planning and look into the digitalization of events. The research focused on how traditional festivals in Spain were redesigned during the COVID-19 pandemic. The existence of, as yet, only a small amount of scientific literature on how COVID-19 has impacted event organization also makes this research a relevant contribution too.

Some of the most popular Spanish festivals are held in the spring. They include commemorations of historical events (such as the 2nd of May Festivity in Madrid), national days (the Day of Aragon in Zaragoza), dancing and tasting of typical dishes (the April Fair in Seville), fireworks displays (such as at the Fallas Festival in Valencia), and walks around the capital of Catalonia, Barcelona, in search of roses and books to give to the loved ones. These festivities enjoy the institutional support of the city councils and the participation of authorities.

This study has analyzed how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the organization of these events (RQ1). The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown decreed from March 16 and May 11, 2020 in Spain, forced the cancellation or postponement of more than half of them. Some of the events were initially postponed until July or September, making it necessary to adopt a crisis and emergency risk communication, as defined by Palenchar (2010). Others were redesigned and, with the help of digital technology, could be followed via live streaming, on social media, or even through virtual spaces. In the cases where they were neither postponed nor cancelled, the organizers decided to hold the events without an audience and to broadcast them via live streaming on the city council’s website or the regional public television channel.

This article has also answered the question of how digital transformation is implemented in the organization of events (RQ2). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, live streaming, as well as social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the YouTube channel, were already commonly used in the events organized by the city councils of these cities. Two of the festivals already had their own apps as well. On the other hand, the

use of virtual and augmented reality had not been at all widespread, nor was it an alternative adopted during the lockdown, mainly due to the lack of tradition and also to the haste with which the events—always previously held in an on-site format—had to be redesigned. However, it should be noted that virtual visits to emblematic buildings and museums that traditionally offer open days during these festivals were encouraged. In the same vein, a private initiative created the Seville Virtual Fair, an online environment simulating the April Fair of Seville in which the participants could interact using avatars. Moreover, the Internet of Things was not applied in these events. Thus, although there is a commitment to digital transformation, the traditional festivals analyzed were still far from being 4.0 events, as defined by Ryan et al. (2020). Therefore, in the immediate future, the organizers of these festivals are advocating for hybrid events more than purely virtual ones.

However, the results of the study also show that COVID-19 pandemic has been a catalyst for the digital transformation of events. When designing events in the post-COVID-19 context, according to the event managers interviewed and the literature reviewed, some of the practical implications for management are:

1. The importance of having contingency plans and adopting crisis and emergency risk communication.
2. The chance to redesign events in a hybrid or online format when external circumstances make it impossible to hold on-site events.
3. The importance of fostering live streaming.
4. The need to redesign the stages of events to ensure a greater visual impact (e.g., adapting to television formats to keep up the interest of the virtual attendees).
5. The need to integrate social media and strengthen two-way communication with stakeholders in order to foster dialogue.
6. The challenge of creating event apps that combine usability with design, concentrating all the information on the event in one place.
7. The possibility of adopting VR or AR in virtual events, creating immersive environments.
8. The option of using avatars in virtual events in order to increase attendee involvement.

9. The recommendation to create chats and virtual spaces to allow for greater interaction with the attendees, from pre- to postevent communication.
10. The adoption of storytelling and gamification to generate a greater engagement with attendants.

This study was conducted only in Spain, and therefore the results cannot be internationally generalized. Furthermore, the analysis focused basically on the events promoted by the city governments, so the results may not be generalizable to other sectors of the events industry. The study also provides basis for future work on how digitalization is a continuously process and how is adopted in the future in events management.

The findings of this article contribute new knowledge to the field of event management research and shed light on the use of digital media in event design in a context in which physical distancing is required, such as that caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The data gathered by this study can help event organizers to avoid having to improvise by designing contingency plans and planning their events, shifting from a reactive strategy to a proactive one.

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