

Brief Report

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New normal of academic virtual conference: Imperative during pandemic

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Abstract:

In COVID pandemic, attending the continuing medical education, workshops, and conferences with physical attendance is not possible. We designed, developed, and hosted the first of its kind academic virtual/online conference at par with an in-person academic conference to disseminate the expertise of the renowned subject experts along with researchers to present their research work due to the ongoing pandemic. We, in this article, had summarized the most critical steps in order to make the process easier for first-timers while providing our more comprehensive walkthroughs on each step. We choose a live session of the speakers on the Zoom meeting mode to retain the atmosphere of a live conference. WhatsApp, Google (Google Meet and E-mail), and Kahoot were other platforms to communicate with speakers, researchers, and participants to seamlessly participate. A number of advantages in terms of protection for delegates/speakers and their families came from the Virtual Conference on Nutrition and Health, restricting the spread of COVID-19, low budget for organizers, economically much cheaper alternatives both for speakers and participants, dissemination of knowledge, time productive, and meeting research paper presentation eligibility for a professional course. When one is new to technology, try adding an innovative aspect as a starting point to future virtual and in-person events, and seeing how it works is imperative. Ensuring Internet bandwidth, updated hardware, or webcam and/or microphone functionality at the participant end is critical.

Keywords:

Conference, COVID-19, online, virtual, web based

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Introduction

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the “coronavirus disease 2019” (COVID-19) outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.^[1] On March 11, 2020, it was declared a global pandemic. Certain countries had implemented lockdown as a measure to limit the spread of the infection. The Government of India took a decision of nationwide lockdown with effect from March 25, 2020. During this period, the educational institutes remained closed and academic gatherings were not permitted. The guidelines for reopening in a

phase-wise manner, unlock 1.0, were issued on May 30, to be implemented from June 1, 2020, onward, but in an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19, the educational institutes were to still remain closed.^[2]

Students of most of the institutes in the country left their hostels and had to be relocated to their homes just before the nationwide lockdown came into effect. The routine teaching program in the colleges such as lecture classes, practical, clinical postings, seminars, tutorials, and examinations came to a standstill.^[3]

After several months into the pandemic, it was felt that we need to come out with

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certain innovations so that our professional learning and rich experience sharing in the form of a conference continues. Though earlier disease-specific virtual conference tools for education purpose of patients had been developed.^[4,5] We designed, developed, and hosted the first of its kind academic virtual/online conference at par with in-person academic conferences to disseminate the expertise of the renowned subject experts. Many researchers including the postgraduate students did not have a platform to present their research work due to the ongoing pandemic. Hence, we incorporated this in the virtual/online conference along with quiz competition.

Prerequisites for Virtual Conference

It needs a considerable amount of forethought and situation analysis to organize a conference from the ground up. We, in this article, have summarized the most critical steps in order to make the process easier for first-timers while providing our more comprehensive walkthroughs on each step.

Every successful conference needs a theme with a unified message that speakers deliver and participants take away. Catchy, relatable, and inducing an emotional reaction are the best concepts to succeed during infodemics.^[6] Theme must encourage and promote conversation in the conference. Theme also guides branding, creating a slogan to come up with hashtags with social media to print the flyers, brochures, and other collateral.^[7] Theme of our conference was “Malnutrition-free India via gender-friendly initiatives.”

From a visionary perspective, the event depends on the intent, but when it comes to practice, the truth of what one achieves falls down to the budget for the event. The cumulative cost of putting together a virtual conference has been greatly reduced. Organizers can save on staff, venue, setup and takedown, participant lodging, drinks, travel costs, and so much more.

To take responsibility for various facets of conference such as strategy, negotiations, and promotion, any event needs a committed team of people. The core teams to be included for the event are the planning team, administration team, scientific committee, IT committee, hospitality, transport, caterers, volunteers, and others. Teams mapped out every piece of details with respect to timings, responsibility allocation, program, location, dignitaries, speakers, invitations, contact details, soft and hard data files, designs, marketing, maintaining E-mails and social media, and backup plan and made educated prediction on what all is essential going to carry conference out well.

We pivoted to organizing virtual networking events in 2 months and chose a date that did not overlap with other important events, such as festivals and vacations.^[8] It is more critical for onsite conference where city-wide activities make it more complicated to book flights and usually impede travel to and from the meeting. Nevertheless, to conduct virtual conference weekend suited the best. The time zone for your conference should be selected carefully. We need to determine how the rates of virtual registration would vary from those of in-person registration. This is an essential choice, and the organizers reviewed all changes to the registration prices to ensure that all expected expenditures are accounted for.^[7] Considerations for charging attendee fees largely depend on existing institutional infrastructure and facilities. Our event registration was free of cost.

There are several virtual event platforms offering trade-offs between characteristics, prices, complexity, and stability. Pricing and functionality, including support for exhibitors and other components, also differ considerably.^[9] We choose live sessions of the speakers on meeting mode to retain the atmosphere of a live conference and involve the viewer in a way that would not be possible with a long recording. Via a service like WhatsApp, setting up forum threads helped panelists to communicate between the sessions and researchers to seamlessly participate. Registration and abstract submission were done through Google Forms. Google Drive as the common shareable online was used for sharing and storing the curriculum vitae and presentation of speakers. The sessions were held on the institute Zoom^[10] logins with the host initiating and holding the session together while handing the co-host facility to the speakers and chairpersons.

Designing the Scientific Session

Interactive sessions, language options, inviting guest speakers, and more should meet a thought purpose. When planning an event such as this, it is imperative to gain the acceptance of experts in the field. Willingness to share their time and expertise in the area of interest was critical to the success of the event. The highlights of the conference are speakers. A compelling and interactive event agenda is imperative to attract attendees and ensure a professional experience.^[7] We were fortunate to have a wide range of experienced speakers from all areas – Ministry of Health and Family Welfare India, UNICEF, World Health Organization, Indian Council of Medical Research, National Health Mission, National Nutrition Mission, Integrated Child Development Services, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) New Delhi, AIIMS like Institution, Public Health Foundation of India, Indian Association of Preventive and Social Medicine and Indian Public

Health Association and other renowned Government and Private Institutions and Organizations across India. It is our collective efforts and thoughts of nearly 50 speakers on best practice that brought us closer to tackle malnutrition. The conference catered nearly 700 delegates, hundreds of oral and poster presenters across the country with a group of nearly 30 faculty members as judges.

Conferences opt to shorten the number of hours of a plenary session to focus the attention of participants. We customize the program schedule by shortening the time of keynote presentation from 45 to 20 min, reducing by 30%–50% human presentation lengths, consolidation of linked sessions into one track, and using one common virtual location for participants to connect. Prompts were displayed in between the session to record participants' attendance. The scientific committee screened the abstracts, and those requiring revisions were promptly mailed to the authors. For each oral and poster session, three judges were invited for evaluation from medical colleges across the country. They were provided with an evaluation sheet generated on Google Forms with instructions for the same. The evaluation sheet comprised the auto-generated name of the judge and provision for entering his/her E-mail ID, registration number/poster ID of each presenter along with an evaluation matrix. For posters, we collected a one-page pdf, and for oral presentation, we collected 6–8 slides presentations from all presenters and made them available to the evaluators via Google Drive before the meeting. The Zoom Meeting link for the oral/poster presentation was shared about 15 min prior to the session to all the presenters of that session and three judges for the session. The presentation slot was for 5 min, and the discussion round was for 3 min. Queries were entered in the chat section of the screen by presenters as well as judges. For presenters/participants with nonsession queries, the backup team promptly called them over the phone to avoid distractions from the ongoing session on the display screen.

We invited a few interested and motivated faculty from other institutes to frame questions for the quiz with due credit. Quiz was planned as a two-step process. All participants were subjected to a screening round using Google Classroom. For the final round, a free version of Kahoot App was used which allows up to 50 players to play the rounds.

Infrastructure, trust, instruments, uninterrupted power supply, and good Internet connectivity at the conference by the Institute are vital. Availability of free versions of Google Account and Kahoot account enabled the ground for conducting the quiz online. The main mode of communication was through a specific E-mail ID

created by the team, and this acted as a clearinghouse for interaction between participants and the team. We were able to reach most of the participants through E-mail, calls, WhatsApp, etc., which bridged the gap between the host and the participants.

When planning for an information technology-based national conference/on a digital platform, it was an uphill task even for a developing institute. The major issue with the campus was the poor mobile network. The Zoom platform required the participants to be admitted and muted almost immediately without disrupting the speaker too. As presentations including changing slides were managed by the host, some participants felt they could not present in sync with their slides. Major facilitators and barriers are summarized in Figure 1. Ensuring necessary precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 was crucial.

Conclusion

The first online conference on nutrition and health on September 12 and 13, 2020, showed many benefits in terms of safety for the delegates/speakers and also their families, limiting the spread of COVID-19, low budget for the organizers, economically much cheaper alternative also for the delegates and participants, nationwide dissemination of scientific contents, and opportunity for the researchers to present their research papers in the scientific oral and poster sessions, and minimal or we can say almost no interruption with their respective duties for the esteemed speakers considering the current pandemic situation. It also provided greater accessibility for COVID convalescent and disabled persons. It offered the involvement of those from travel-restricted areas and facilitated greater geographical and age diversity. It was a trendsetter for future large-scale academic events.

To enhance the experience of the participants, the more the team is trained, the better it is to keep things going. For few platforms, daily tech support is part of the contract for the conference dates. For others, users need to reach out to the support chat, so it is important to practice with the platform to keep things going. We all know that individuals come to conferences to meet each other, so networking should be positively and clearly supported by the virtual conference. Ensuring Internet bandwidth, updated hardware, or webcam and/or microphone functionality at the participant end is critical.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

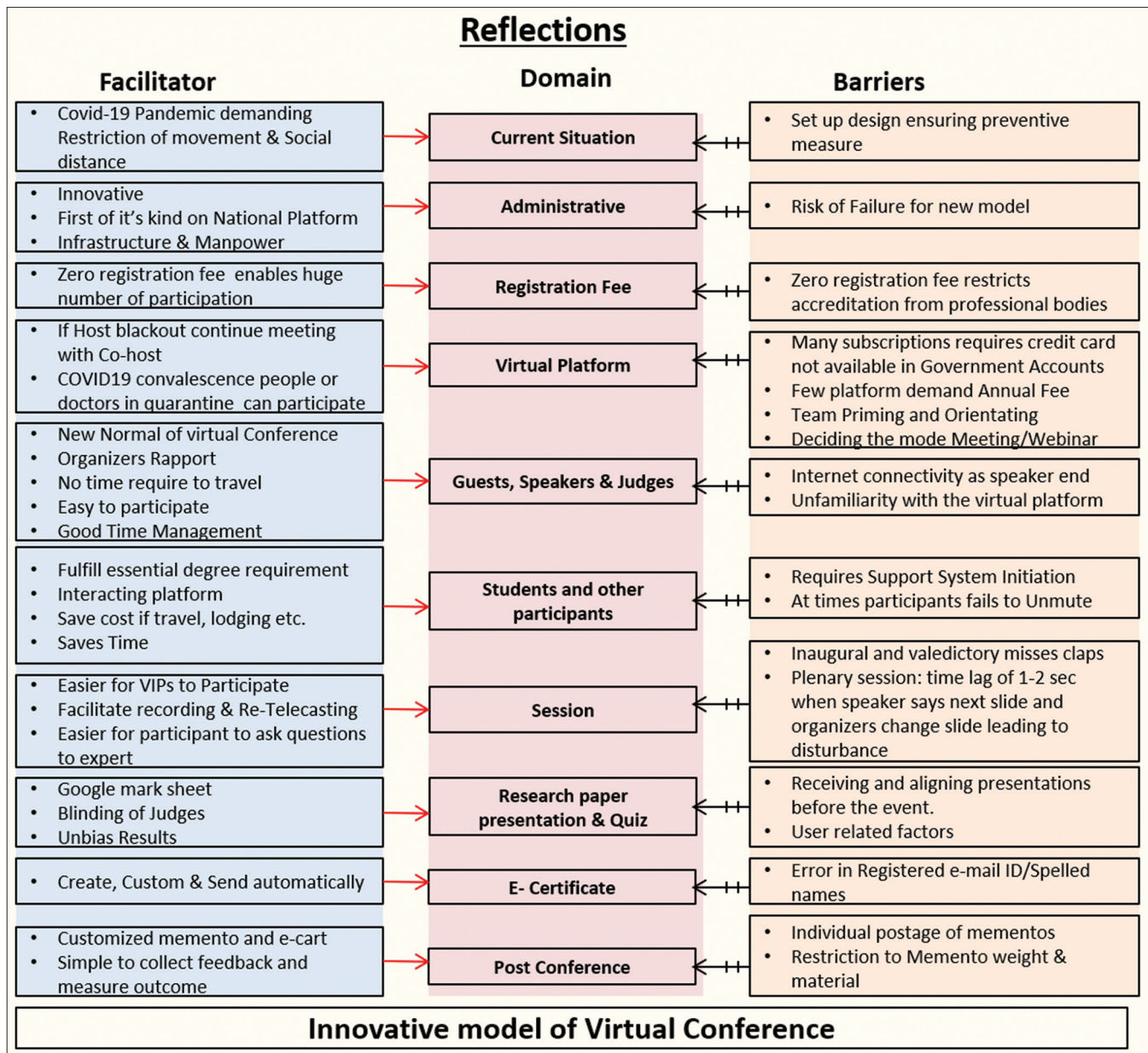


Figure 1: Major facilitators and barriers of new model of virtual/online academic conference

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