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Article

Building the Virtual Dancefloor: Delivering and Experiencing House Music Events in the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequent social lockdowns necessitated an immediate cessation of events, replaced entirely by virtual events—a concept present in the existing events literature, but one not fully conceptualised. This article explores the virtual event experience during the pandemic through the lens of a case study, Love to Be events, a long-established house music brand which produced a series of successful virtual events during the lockdowns and beyond. This research also offers discussion on the potential for virtual events—in contrast to what this research terms ‘venued events’—to become a notable and profitable element of the events industry in the longer term. This article presents a substantial literature review considering multiple relevant areas, centring on the event experience and virtual event potential. This article also presents primary qualitative data in the form of a semi-structured interview with Marc Dennis and Tony Walker, DJs and founders of Love to Be, conducted in Autumn 2020 via Zoom, and analysed using a thematic analysis as well as a comparison with other pandemic virtual events. The original contribution to the events studies literature is two-fold; firstly, a novel conceptualisation of event experience during this historic moment, documenting the practical and philosophical nature of events at that time. Secondly, by synthesising primary and secondary data, it offers theoretical principles on how virtual events may develop to become a notable and profitable element of the industry. This article concludes with suggestions for future research, in the hope that this exploratory research will stimulate further studies.



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Keywords: virtual events; event experience; house music; event management; music events

1. Introduction

Ever since we broke up,
I’ve been afraid to go out.
But I won’t be a prisoner locked up in this house.

Róisín Murphy released ‘Murphy’s Law’ in March 2020 presumably unaware that these lyrics [1] presaged impending global events. The song, a blissed-out house tune ostensibly about the pitfalls of a break-up in a small town, takes on new meaning in the context of the global reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic where, in the face of lockdowns severely curtailing personal freedoms, the desire for event experiences as a way of feeling free prevails.

In March 2020, the UK government implemented a nationwide lockdown requiring most businesses to close premises, and requiring people to stay at home, forgoing any form of social mixing with others. Similar to so many other industries, this caused an immediate and catastrophic cessation of live events and associated commerce [2,3]. Venues closed, festivals cancelled, promoters hastily postponed tours to the apparent safe haven of 2021—sometimes then again to 2022 [4]. Of course, however, the consumer demand for experiences has remained, and, by utilising technologies alongside innovative delivery, so-called ‘virtual events’ [5,6] have become an important tool in the continuation of musical performance in these conditions. Ranging from low-tech home recordings, to ‘virtual raves’ and ‘happy hours’ [7] to the premium-quality ‘Idiot Prayer’ performance by Nick Cave [8],

pockets of the industry have sought to feed the ongoing appetite for music, and recoup revenue vital to maintaining industry ecosystems [9].

These seemingly new ways of producing and consuming events have in fact existed for many years [10]; evidence suggests that, focused on the financial imperative of 'live', the industry has largely ignored the possibilities of virtual music events [10,11]. Now, with huge global investment into virtual event technology in the face of COVID-19 [12,13], it appears that we may be on the cusp of the music industry's latest 'Napster moment' [14], whereby the hegemony of 'live' may be challenged for the first time. As producers and consumers grapple with new ways to create and engage in music event experiences, there is a high likelihood that, in a post-COVID-19 world, things will never 'return to normal'. Indeed, this paper argues that this pandemic represents a significant opportunity for events to harness technology and create new viable and engaging event products. By examining how a house music brand [15] has adapted and endured during the pandemic, this potential to create experiences and develop these viable models of production/consumption will be examined with conceptual and empirical discussion towards a deeper understanding of how the virtual music events market is likely to endure and grow.

This research combines a conceptual discussion with a case study analysis, examining the activity in 2020 of Love to Be, a house music brand established in 1994. It provides rich qualitative data to address the following principal research questions:

- How have virtual house music events been produced and consumed during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How are virtual events experienced in comparison to venues events?
- How may this current reality inform post-pandemic production and consumption?

The conceptual framework is located in the argument herein that virtual event experience is essentially the same as venues event experience yet has some distinct trappings which differentiate virtual from venues [7,10] and is thus not generally seen as equivalent. The extant virtual event technology [2,16], along with the scope for vast development in this area [17], and ongoing economic difficulties for venues event businesses [18,19], point to the potential for virtual events to become a notable element of the event industry. Therefore, this research explores and synthesises these individual conceptual elements to address the research objectives. The rationale for this research concerns both theoretical and practical issues. On a theoretical level, there is a current need for more research into virtual events as a concept, but moreover, a lack considering the comparison between virtual and venues events. For this reason, the discussion combines research on virtual events from a pre-COVID-19 perspective alongside those from during and after the pandemic to offer further perspective on the experience, production and consumption as well as other subsidiary issues as explored latterly herein. A specific gap this research seeks to address is that of the production of pandemic virtual events and how this can inform post-pandemic production and consumption. This relates to the practical level rationale; this research offers insight into how virtual events can be produced and consumed, and thus how virtual events could become a more established and notable element of the events industry.

This research firstly explores the existing literature on event experience, house music events and virtual events, which informs the synthesis of empirical findings from the case study to produce outcomes and areas for future research, as detailed in the Discussion section.

2. Literature Review

The British musician Lianne La Havas featured in an episode of the long-running TV programme *Later...* in April 2020, playing mesmerising, soulful songs from her latest record [20]. However, as the studio was unavailable due to lockdown, La Havas instead recorded 'as live' from her home, giving a performance which could be described as intimate, despite being broadcast to millions and having no live audience. Performances of this ilk at that time tapped the initial lockdown period's mood of confusion, isolation and powerlessness as relatively raw proto-virtual events [7,21]. In the context of the COVID-19

period, it is possible to note the role which virtual events have held within each phase in leisure, wellbeing, ontological security, social interaction, artistic expression and working environments. The roles of music events have arguably fallen into all these categories and presumably more because music transcends many aspects of human life [2]. As such, this research uses March 2020 as an initial locus from which to understand the current and future role of virtual event experiences.

2.1. Venued Events vs. Virtual Events

Previous understanding of event experiences (and indeed wider concepts of leisure) have been grounded in place [5,6,22,23]. The event venue or destination has become central to the understanding of how an event is performed and experienced, whether in the context of hallmark events intrinsically associated with a specific place [23,24], notions of heterotopic event locations [25,26] or more broadly the vernacular act of ‘going to’ an event. Whilst this is simply a reflection of the vast tradition in human society of people meeting to share an experience, it is also somewhat incongruous when considered in the broader context of technological developments since the advent of the internet [17]. The internet has of course revolutionised so many aspects of society, such as music production and consumption [16,27], retail habits [28], personal relationships [29] and concepts of identity [30–32]; these radical shifts are now taken as normal in 2024, yet despite the advent of available technologies and online communities, any shift to virtual events remained non-existent until 2020. Indeed, the existing terminology reflects this stasis; whilst virtual events possess a succinct and cogent term, conversely, there may be ‘face-to-face’ events, ‘real-world’ events or ‘in-person’ events, imperfect terms which this research offers could be replaced with the term ‘venued events’, reflecting the key difference: the presence or lack of a defining and central place. ‘In-person’ and ‘face-to-face’ suggest that a depersonalised experience is central to virtual experiences, which is a poor assumption to make considering the noted potential for online relationships to mirror those offline [30,33]. Indeed, as discussed latterly in this research, rather than being passive or depersonalised, virtual events have the potential to be highly engaging and personalised because they are nonetheless ‘in person’ and can also be ‘face-to-face’. Attendees are present and engaged yet participate remotely with one another.

2.2. Adapting to Virtual Events

The reality of the modern events industry is a highly asset-led infrastructure and ecosystem concentrated around venues, equipment and the symbiotic relationships with the infrastructure of the wider visitor economy, e.g., transport, hospitality and accommodation [34,35]. This means that whilst consumers might readily shift to virtual events, existing businesses may lack the incentive and business flexibility to do the same in creating and selling such experiences [3]. Whilst the established events sector experiences insecurity and future uncertainty, this leaves huge potential opportunities for new businesses, products and skilled professionals to enter the industry and grow the virtual events sector whilst the venues events specialists remain focused on creating a viable return from fixed assets. Already in crisis in the UK before 2020, empty nightclubs and music venues have been a haunting image, a spectre of a possible future without these formerly teeming institutions. But they also represent an increasingly unviable model [36], particularly in provincial towns and cities, a far cry from the thriving nightlife in these locations in decades past [37]. That said, plenty of businesses simply attempted to ‘wait out’ what was seen as a short-term disruption [21], ignoring potential adaptations which could have provided some cost-effective revenue in what became a medium-long-term disruption to business. Indeed, this ‘disruption’ may in fact lead to a longer-term evolution of an emerging trend.

A key determinant of the entrenchment of emerging trends is the ability to change consumer habits and behaviours [38]. This process can be slow and protracted, but the sudden impact of the coronavirus lockdown in March 2020 presented an immediate change

to habits unparalleled in its immediacy. This impacted society in manifold ways, and one such was the immediate unavailability of venue event experiences [3,7]. The rapid speed in which businesses adapted to online event delivery presented some short-term problems such as a lack of technological expertise [2,7], but considering the rate of change through 2020, the longer-term potential of virtual events is evident. Charron [10] (p. 2) notes the ‘dematerialised possession’ of music fandom in the 21st century whereby relationships with artists are now less based on ownership of artefacts such as records or merchandise due to the prevalence of online engagement and relationships [31,39,40]. This, allied with the sudden shift to online events in the face of COVID-19 restrictions, meant that the behavioural shift was actually quite seamless, the cultural and societal shock of the cessation notwithstanding. It introduced virtual events to the world at large, and it seems likely that now that virtual platforms and events are established within the UK’s cultural and social landscape, they can become a notable element of the events industry post-COVID [41]. This sense of choice is explained further in the Findings and Discussion section.

2.3. Event Experiences

At the centre of this discussion—indeed, the centre of much discussion within the event studies literature—is the very essence of the event: the experience. Understanding experience is central to understanding event design [15,42–44], which is itself a central process in event management [45,46]. Event professionals in the contemporary industry must therefore consider the three aspects of experience, as noted previously, to ensure an event matches or exceeds consumer expectations [47]. This is ever heightened at a time when online representations of experience are imperative to the communication of the experience [48–50]; social media have become a primary means of relating experiences to others, and of understanding the experiences of others [41,49,51]. A notorious example of this is the fraudulent disaster of Fyre Festival [52], where hundreds of duped festivalgoers instantly posted their terrible experience. Whilst in hindsight, this was no concern of the convicted organiser Billy McFarland [52], the Glastonbury Live event in May 2021 fell foul after technical difficulties prevented paying customers from viewing the livestream [53]. Both attracted concomitant social media traffic, as is now common for any notable event [49,54,55]. As such, perceptions of event experience are formed, developed and reflected beyond the eventscape in ways unimaginable in the recent past.

This has been conceptualised and stratified in numerous studies [15,42,51,56]. Despite the notable and burgeoning literature based on the subject and nature of experience, it remains difficult to summarise due to its inherently subjective nature [15,42,43,57–59]. Experience is noted to encompass issues including thoughts and feelings [27,60,61], actions [56,62,63], the sense of wellbeing [60,64], the sense of identity [64–66] and other factors, all of which represent individual aspects of experience building to a sense of overall experience, itself a nebulous concept, as noted previously. Indeed, the ‘multiphasic’ nature of events [15,67,68], whereby the experience changes over its discrete time period, suggests that the event experience is itself made up of multiple complementary/separate experiences. This has been identified as three elements [56,69]: the conative experience, involving physical experience such as active or passive participation, the cognitive experience, involving thoughts and how information is understood, and the affective experience which constitutes the feelings and emotional responses associated with the other two elements. This underpins much other research in the field as a means of noting the complexity of experience; whereas Petterson and Getz [56] use this to quantify or ‘map’ an available experience, Grebenar [15], using the Event Experience Mapping Model methodology, created a subjective means of evaluating one’s own experience by distilling the three experience types into key aspects of experience [42]. It is the *cognitive* and *affective* experiences which occupy much of the existing literature; several studies have noted the ability of events to generate wellbeing outcomes [60,64,70] as an affective phenomenon, whilst much of the literature in the field of sports events examines feelings

of belonging and community in a similar vein, which also relies on cognitive assumption and (sub)cultural capital [71–75].

2.4. Music Event Experiences

Music event experiences are distinct from others. Music is a ubiquitous part of UK culture, subsumed into many aspects of life [76]. Listening to music is a cultural expression as well as a leisure activity [60,77,78], and it is linked to personal/collective identity [66,79–81] and a sense of emotional and subjective wellbeing [60,82,83]. Indeed, the act of musical performance, whether primary or secondary [66], has manifold benefits for the individual beyond simple enjoyment as leisure. Whether through creating or listening, music has been shown to create significant, memorable moments and experiences, be it the ‘peak experiences’ of Gabrielsson [84] or the strong experiences of music (SEMs) as noted by Lamont [83,85,86]. These potent experiences are complex combinations of multiple influences and are generally seen as eudemonic responses [83], which can become powerful signifiers of self-perception [64,83,87]. The music eventscape allows this to be expressed in multiple ways; for example, it can be through dress [65,80], the co-creation of experience [88] or cultural expressions such as dancing, language use or other specific behaviours [65,75,80]. These may be encouraged and vital to the experience; equally, depending on the style of music or audience profile, they may be unwanted or even prohibited [75,87,89]. It is perhaps this unpredictability which marks live performance as *the* authentic experience of music [89–91], superseding passive listening to recorded music as an interactive experience; it is represented as such in the way live music is promoted as a leisure experience [59,66] and indeed in the body of research into music event experiences, as outlined herein.

Festivals tend to be the main focus of music event research, though these are noted as heterotopic environments commanding their own experiences and norms [58,92–95]; often typified as places of freedom and individualism, they may nonetheless create/reinforce the structures of power and marginalisation observed in society at large [96,97]. This research has covered the nature of the festivalscape [58,59,62], festival communities [98–100], guest motivations [94,101,102] and wider impacts [92,95,103], creating a significant body of research within the event studies field. However, there is also a lesser body of research into smaller/grassroots events, which provide the lifeblood of the UK’s music scene [15,91,104,105] and represent a different eventscape and experience. Smaller events and eventscapes are the realm of amateur musicians, local scenes and up-and-coming performers [91]; indeed, on a local level in the UK, it is perhaps this part of the industry which, both economically and socially, has been missed the most. In these eventscapes, the divide between performer and audience is less delineated both physically [89] and conceptually, as performers mix freely with, and may form part of, the audience and community [104]. This sense of music communities is widely noted in research [91,104,105] as a key element of experience which can sometimes be even more important than the music itself [106]. This community element of grassroots events is self-evidently different from events staged by global artists in large venues, which by nature draw more disparate audiences for what tend to be one-off spectacles as opposed to smaller events which can happen far more frequently. It is also different to the festival community, though, as noted in the previous paragraphs, there are nonetheless over-arching issues of experience which can relate to a wide variety of music event types.

2.5. Grasping the Virtual Event Future

As stated, the UK has a highly developed live music industry, which is highly likely in time to reach the recent record economic success [107]. This overwhelming dominance of ‘live’ (i.e., venue events) is something of a paradox in the context of the music industry; whilst the industry is almost entirely geared to venue events, recorded music, on the other hand, is now overwhelmingly digital [108], a recent resurgence in vinyl records notwithstanding [60]. As such, we may observe that whilst recorded music has yielded

to the advance of digital technology despite initial resistance [14,78,108], live music has not [107]. Whilst live and recorded music are not comparable products per se—they offer different experiences [109,110]—the paradox lies in that the industry has not materially attempted to harness the willingness of consumers to embrace digital music towards virtual music events [108] in the same way that has been attempted with high-profile theatre performances [110]. This must change considering the shift in consumer behaviour during the pandemic, some of which is likely to remain post-pandemic [109]. Virtual music events represent a new market with huge potential that is ripe for promoters and innovators to explore [108,111,112].

It is imperative to note that neither virtual events nor the basic technology to facilitate them are new [5,10,109]. The term ‘virtual event’ [5], though, has become common now that virtual events have themselves become a mainstream concern, although it does not yet appear to have a firm definition beyond the use of mediating technology [113]. Primarily, conceptualisation is offered as a tacit contrast to *venued* events, such as what is *missing* from virtual events, rather than what is present [110]. For example, Mueser and Vlachos [110] note the ‘4 Ps’ of live (i.e., *venued*) events—People, Purpose, Period of time, and Place—inferring that virtual events cannot, therefore, be ‘live’ due to the lack of Place. Indeed, the event studies literature has a conspicuous lack of virtual events research and discussion, though, in the wake of COVID-19, this type of research and discussion is growing [38,109,111,114]. Some studies see virtual events as intrinsically linked to virtual reality [10,115], others as a means to augment a *venued* event [51,110,116], and these events are even suggested to be inherently inferior to *venued* events [3,5]. In the context of the shift to virtual events in the pandemic, virtual events can today be any event which is necessarily mediated with online technology [111], but which may take many forms; this might be live/asynchronous, participatory or non-participatory, planned or unplanned, as discussed in a variety of research studies [5,10,21,51,108,111,115,116]. As such, we must arguably conceive ‘virtual events’ not as an event type or form, but as a fundamentally distinct phenomenon with the scale, diversity and depth we perceive in the term ‘events’, and whilst *venued* events and *virtual* events have much in common, they are not entirely similar. Since 2020, the general conception of virtual events has revolved around online technology [111], which fits seamlessly into the milieu of the ‘online self’ [29,109], increasingly indistinct from our lives offline [32]. Social media, virtual reality and portable and wearable technology have all in some way changed our interactions in the ‘real world’ to the point where now, accelerated by pandemic restrictions, a virtual event experience is commonplace within our engagement with technology [21,51] such as the significant (and arguably central) role social media plays in society [109]. Thus, virtual events have become a mainstream concern which, arguably, presents significant future opportunities for the industry, as well as potential new entrants and disruptor businesses [108], in developing quality virtual event experiences in a post-pandemic economy where *venued* events are once again part of the social landscape. It has been noted that virtual events can also provide new revenue streams [110], improve consumer choice [109] and offer better resilience to the highly volatile events industry [111].

An immediate beneficiary of the sudden shift to virtual events was the telecommunications platform Zoom, a previously little-known service pushed, seemingly overnight, to the forefront of the pandemic experience in the UK. It became the *de facto* virtual events platform, from the ubiquitous ‘Zoom quiz’ held in family and social groups [117] to hastily rearranged corporate events and social gatherings [2,3]. In the longer term, it has remained a notable platform for straightforward point-to-point communication despite the so-called ‘Zoom fatigue’, where individuals become tired of using not just that platform but of the online social experience [118]. There has also been an influx of new or rebranded platforms seeking to offer a more novel, immersive or versatile virtual event experience such as Kumospace [119], which seeks to replicate social nuances missing from Zoom calls, and Hopin [12,120], a platform which combines virtual event tech with event planning tools. This innovation has only just begun in the context of the virtual events industry [111],

though existing technology has been equally harnessed. Platforms such as Facebook Live, Instagram Live and Mixcloud have been used for virtual events, creating a seamless link between social media presence and live virtual events, and building a more connected experience in the process [51]. In a world where bars were closed, the ‘happy hour’ instead became attached to short virtual events as DJs performed from home to their audiences [7], whilst some high-profile musicians created ambitious events such as Nick Cave’s ‘Idiot Prayer’ and Róisín Murphy’s ‘Global Live Stream Event’. Murphy devised an innovative hybrid of music video and live performance, broadcast three times in 24 h, creating a new type of experience not emulating a venues event but harnessing the virtual platform to create something new [121].

This opportunity to define the virtual event experience, distinct from venues events, appears to be the critical issue for event professionals as the industry grapples with its near future in a late- and post-pandemic landscape. In a world where consumers have spent months and years experiencing events online like never before [109], the potential to harness the market’s newly acquired tech skills is clear. Whilst smaller or heavily asset-led businesses may decline to adapt, consider the potential for global names. Ed Sheeran or Beyoncé, for example, could command an enormous virtual audience for a prime time venues event in the manner pay-per-view sports have for decades. This could be highly lucrative but also present a more accessible experience for those excluded on monetary, health, geographic or other grounds. The potential therefore of virtual events not just as events per se but as opportunities for diversification adds further substance to the notion of virtual events as the single most important event trend in the 2020s and beyond.

But what do these virtual experiences represent within our conception of event experiences? Concomitant with the overwhelming focus of events literature to date, ‘experience’ is a term used almost exclusively for venues events. This presents a significant gap in the existing research body; much of the event studies literature is qualitative and/or constructivist in nature, meaning that transferability is often a noted limitation, and so existing research cannot be easily applied to virtual events. Considering the swift rise in virtual events since 2020, this needs urgent attention, and so this research aims to contribute to the post-COVID base of virtual event studies.

3. Methodology

Following the nature of the research questions, this research seeks to create a ‘snapshot’ of the current perspectives on the nature of virtual house music events [15] and, by extension, the wider use of VEs in the music events sector. This desire was complicated by the very nature of the pandemic; as an unprecedented and uncertain time for the music events world and beyond, it was difficult to ascertain a frame of reference, which is normally useful for iterative research [122]. As such, a case study approach was deemed the most appropriate approach to provide in-depth and focused qualitative data [123] from which to draw meaningful conclusions. Taking a phenomenological approach and utilising a semi-structured qualitative interview subject to a thematic analysis, this research is explained in detail in this section.

3.1. Research Philosophy: Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a noted research philosophy within the realm of human experience [122,124,125]. Essentially, it is an interpretative approach that prioritises the way in which ‘individuals make sense of the world’ [125] (p. 15); under its premise, the nature of human experience is entirely subjective and is based on prior experience [122]. Phenomenology seeks to understand what the ‘human experience is like’ [124], rather than a concrete or discrete positivist reality. This approach is chosen for this research to explore the human reality of devising and delivering virtual events in the context of the two founders of Love to Be, and thus address their own situation, rather than generalising or considering other alternatives, and generate specific, rich and highly applied data [122,123]. This follows more generally with the constructivist approach

common in event studies research [60,126], which locates all knowledge as ‘necessarily the construct of the human mind’ [60] (p. 147), and thereby assumes that meaning comes from prior experiences shaped by a wide and tacit number of factors such as culture, history and social behaviour. Again, the unprecedented nature of the pandemic means that the impinging factors are yet to be fully appreciated; this further supports the constructivist approach, allowing the experiences of the individual to contribute to ongoing knowledge creation of event experiences during COVID-19.

3.2. Research Design: Case Study

Based on the constructivist and phenomenological approach, a case study design is deemed appropriate and suitable [123], utilising an intensive examination of one ‘exemplifying case’ [125] (p. 56). This is because, rather than attempting to give an account of an objective or positivist reality, this research, in line with the research question and objectives, attempts to conceptualise the ways in which virtual events were delivered during the pandemic. A case study design allows for the multiple emergent sources of enquiry [123,127] needed for rich qualitative data and allows the researcher to become immersed in one specific reality. However, this approach has limitations, such as limited external validity [128–130]. Key to this is understanding the ‘domain to which a study’s findings can be generalized [sic]’ [129] (p. 46), and so, whilst the question of external validity is a vital methodological consideration, case study research deals with *analytical* rather than *statistical* generalisation. Indeed, Simons [123] notes that case study research is necessarily subjective when looking at one example, but that this is neither a strength nor a limitation in itself.

The chosen case study is Love to Be Events (hereafter abbreviated to LTB), a house music event brand [15] renowned for producing taste-making events for almost 30 years, primarily in the UK but with an international profile. The brand, founded and managed by DJs Marc Dennis (MD) and Tony Walker (TW) in the 1990s, quickly settled on a successful design for delivering virtual events for new and existing clubbers to experience at home in the early stage of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Running weekly throughout the various UK lockdowns, the events—branded as ‘Living the Stream’ whilst also using other names—generally consisted of multiple DJs performing live from their own homes and broadcast through Facebook Live; this format allows clubbers to see and communicate with the DJs and also with each other on what Love to Be affectionately calls the ‘virtual dancefloor’—a fantastically evocative name for the event’s virtual eventscape. The case study was chosen for three practical reasons. Firstly, as LTB is a brand with an established venue event offer, it showcases how such businesses may transition into virtual events. Secondly, as LTB’s virtual events were successful, it offers insight into how virtual events can be successfully leveraged. Furthermore, whilst other brands were contacted as potential contributors to this research, LTB was deemed the most appropriate for the aforementioned reasons and also due to availability, the ability to contribute effectively and the presence of *two* interviewees, rather than just one.

3.3. Research Method: Semi-Structured Interview

An online interview with the brand’s founders, DJs Marc Dennis and Tony Walker, was held online via Zoom in November 2020. The participants were interviewed in tandem, rather than individually, in order to boost the impact of the probing inherent to semi-structured interviews (interviewees may respond to each other, not just to the interviewer), and also as there is major scope for duplication of a response if interviewed separately. The interview, which lasted approximately 60 min, was based on pre-prepared questions relevant to the research objectives; however, the semi-structured nature also allowed for the probing of responses, and the spontaneous introduction of new questions, which was used frequently throughout to develop deeper discussion or query unclear responses. The interview produced a significant quantity of qualitative data which, following transcription, was deemed sufficient for analysis without further interviews or follow-up questions.

3.4. Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Following the data collection, the qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis of the transcript to note recurring issues, important concepts and overriding thoughts relevant to the research aim and objectives, which are synthesised herein to develop further conceptual discussion building on the literature review. This was achieved with a sociolinguistic approach, whereby the qualitative data were interpreted for emergent themes [125,129]. This helped the researcher to unpick the complex mix of perceptions, motivations and actions [131] which contribute to the subjects' experiences, and thus address the research objectives. It gave the researcher flexibility to respond to the unique experiences of the subject; considering once again that the pandemic poses entirely new unique considerations which beforehand were never considered in the events studies literature base, the thematic analysis allowed for multiple perspectives to be considered whilst building a substantial 'snapshot' of LTB with insight and understanding [123].

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Redefining the House Party: Love to Be and the Virtual Dancefloor

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many brands and individuals supplied virtual event experiences, a particularly attractive premise for less-established brands due to low barriers to entry into the market. However, whilst the opportunity for new products is clear, and is likely to remain so in the post-COVID events landscape, existing businesses not originally geared for virtual events faced the existential crisis of adapting or (potentially) dying. Using the concepts raised in the literature review, this research will now explore the Love to Be virtual event series as a case study of a successful virtual event during the time of COVID-19. The discussion also incorporates other example events to compare and contrast the issues at play.

4.2. How Are Virtual Events Experienced in Comparison to Venued Events?

As with most events, the experience is the result of development and refinement from Love to Be's initial forays into virtual events in Spring 2020. Although 2020 saw the first 'official' LTB virtual events, MD and TW were both already aware of the potential of this medium, though it remained untapped. MD recounted a moment some years ago when, after performing a show in Ibiza, the pair were walking back from the venue and, using the Facebook Live function, 'went live' (MD) to their followers as an impromptu 'after party' (MD), which received a positive reaction from their fans. This suggests that the technology and, arguably, the demand for virtual events existed for years before the boom in demand during the pandemic, though, as noted by MD, virtual events were not seen as an alternative to venues events in any respect [132]. The pandemic represented a 'groundbreaking' (TW) moment for LTB which, by delivering weekly events, maintained and grew market presence and brand awareness by creating a new and highly relevant event in their portfolio. As TW stated:

'We could have just created music and given mixes that people just play at home, but they've wanted this shared experience. . . .'

This is mirrored with other virtual events used as an alternative to cancellation—for example, the premium 2021 'Live at Worthy Farm' event at Glastonbury [53] (yet, at the time of writing, no further such virtual Glastonbury events have been staged). Therefore, by innovating to create these shared experiences in a virtual eventscape, LTB identified the nascent potential of adding a new product to its offer. Though venues events were not possible at that time (Spring 2020), there was nonetheless, as noted in the above quote, no automatic imperative to offer a virtual alternative. However, LTB used this opportunity to create a new experience for new and existing clubbers whilst adding intangible value (and possible future tangible value) to the brand. A similar situation affected the US band The Hold Steady; rather than cancel their yearly 'Weekender' event [133], usually held in London, the band staged an empty-venue virtual event, thus expanding their reach

and creating a new and valuable experience [134]. Indeed, the key findings relating to this research objective appear majorly at that intersection of the event experience and the perception of value. This section will discuss these findings and synthesise a discussion to propose some specific outcomes in the context of experience and value.

The LTB virtual event experience is de-centred from a venue, but the DJ remains the central focus despite the ability for interaction between clubbers. Broadcast from the DJ's home/studio, which is branded as a 'virtual dancefloor' (TW, MD), upends the social norms of a venue dancefloor to create an alternative reality of the 'premium night out' (MD) in one's home. This complex convergence of experience and value is key to its success and efficacy; however, only once valorised as it was as 'a weekly event' (TW—with stress on 'event' emphasising its meaning as an important weekly occurrence) was this value truly communicated as something valuable in itself and also as an ongoing social focus with certain meaning, such as a weekly Zoom quiz for a friendship group [117] or a regular 'happy hour' for music fans in a specific scene [7]. Key to this, as noted by both DJs, is the sense that it is a visibly shared experience, not an impersonal one as implied by prior terminology such as 'remote', or that virtual events are neither 'in-person' nor 'face-to-face' (as discussed previously). LTB facilitated this with two means. Firstly, the ability for live chat between 'clubbers' (the term used consistently by MD and TW to describe their consumers) themselves and also between clubbers and DJs. This subverts the normal social and spatial conventions of a nightclub to create a communal textual forum in which those present can participate or simply observe. The aforementioned 'Weekender' event [133] also took this approach; whilst the band performed onstage, spectators could opt to appear on camera with a chance to be randomly selected to appear on screen in front of the band and have the potential for interaction with them/other spectators [135]. This interactivity was noted by TW as a critical element in creating the LTB virtual experiences: 'it's a virtual clubbing event. . . mirroring what we do offline', and not simply 'some DJs playing music', which he felt would not translate effectively into the virtual realm. However, despite this attempt at mirroring, and whilst MD described their virtual events as a 'premium night out' and 'the next best thing' to their venue events, they have arguably created a new, distinct and alternative product. The pros and cons of the Facebook Live approach have been documented [132] in that whilst it presents a veneer of connectivity, a more engaged virtual experience, similar to that attempted at the 'Weekender' event, needs to be specifically designed just as for a venue event [43]. Considering this, and whilst MD and TW identified venue events as their preference, it is not difficult to see how some clubbers might prefer the virtual event experience.

LTB has also found new opportunities to grow the brand using the virtual events model. Both MD and TW noted that, at most basic, virtual events during the pandemic ensured that the brand remained visible, but the success of the events has grown the LTB community both on official social media and also fan-led community social media. Furthermore, whilst the potential for brands to capitalise on the ongoing desire for events in the face of the pandemic is clear [111,114], virtual events have also, somewhat unintentionally, enacted developments on the brand itself; as TW noted, 'it has crafted our sound',

'...we've hooked up with some decent [new] agencies. . . people are coming from London, DJs that work for Defected [Records, the record label], they want to come and work for us because we're doing something on a regular basis.'

By using this opportunity to develop and evolve the brand and product, rather than hibernate or stagnate, LTB harnessed other event providers' absence of virtual events to add further value, augmenting their 'premium night out' standard. Building on this, MD noted the sense of anticipation and excitement in the days building up to the virtual events, exactly as was experienced for their venue events. This is predicated on conscious event design which, though at first relatively tentative, has been focused on their existing high brand standards as explained by MD:

‘We’re really stringent on the sound quality and the look of the videos. . . . We want them [clubbers] to look at it [and think] it looks great, it sounds great, I’ve had a really good night’

This sense of value is arguably the critical element in the success of LTB’s virtual offering, and indeed any event [136,137]. It demonstrates that the link between value and experience is clear in the production and delivery of LTB virtual events; it also suggests that value is important because of the (potential) preconceived notion that virtual experience is inherently of inferior quality in comparison with venue experience. A fantastic example of confounding this notion is the Róisín Murphy ‘Global Live Stream Event’ [121], which moved on from Murphy’s ‘groundbreaking’ forays into livestream [138] towards a fully realised and original event concept showcasing the artist’s extraordinary creativity [138]. This success in reflecting Murphy’s nature and brand [121,138] is echoed by Petridis [53] in describing the Live at Worthy Farm experience, as evocative of Glastonbury’s home and its unique mystique, and by Goggins [134] in maintaining The Hold Steady’s close relationship with fans at their virtual ‘Weekender’ event. By using this evidence, it seems that only by confounding this notion of inferior quality can the value of virtual experience be conveyed, particularly in a post-pandemic world where venue events are once again commonplace.

The combination of experience and value is manifest in how virtual events can be positioned within the industry—and, crucially, how they can be differentiated as alternative/complementary to venue events. This balance appears to be a pertinent question in the short and longer term for the industry, and, as revealed in this research, there are key issues from the pandemic which can inform business and industry responses going forward.

4.3. *The Virtual Events Industry—A New Reality Post-Pandemic*

This research objective attempts to look into the future. The events industry is highly affected by micro and macro trends, and the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a cataclysmic cocktail of epidemiology, laws, bankruptcies, redundancies, changing consumer behaviours and the boom in virtual event technology alongside many others. Whilst much public discourse revolves around an elusive ‘return to normal’, in reality, by the end of the pandemic, the industry had undergone significant and permanent change even beyond what would normally be expected over a similar time frame. Whilst acknowledging the limits in transferability of qualitative data, this research uses Love to Be, alongside supplementary evidence, as a means for identifying potential developments, trends and opportunities for post-pandemic virtual events.

Perhaps the critical finding herein is the belief that because the virtual event is now established on a wide scale in the context of changed consumer habits, it is not merely a passing trend but a bona fide business model with significant potential in the short and long term [13,21,108,111]. Indeed, TW noted the potential for a longer-term shift, suggesting that in the future, virtual events will provide ‘more clubbing experience than the real world’, and that the pandemic will be seen as a ‘groundbreaking moment’ in the development of virtual experiences as major event products, much the same as digital music has gradually dominated after its Napster moment [14]. Virtual capability is now a ‘major tool’ (TW) for LTB, with MD and TW both identifying the market development opportunities for the brand. One such example is the market termed the ‘older crowd’ (MD) who have followed LTB for a long time and are now in their 40s–50s or older, with their associated changes in lifestyle reducing the likelihood of regular attendance at LTB events. The ability to access virtual LTB events significantly increases demand from this market segment, and thus creates a larger overall audience. Similarly, the international audience for LTB has grown; this was not previously a target of the brand’s marketing strategy, but, through the power of virtual events, LTB now boasts a notable engagement with clubbers outside the UK. This potential to monetise international demand further was noted by TW, acknowledging that an overseas performance from a high-profile DJ such as Carl Cox would be highly attractive to the UK market if available virtually, a notion supported by the popularity

of in-(video) game performances from a raft of international musicians [139]. It is also anticipated that brands such as LTB could use their considerable following to leverage events in newer markets by ensuring a significant virtual attendance alongside a venued audience, a concept trialled variously by Coachella, Tomorrowland and Glastonbury [140] as evidence that technology and demand can be used to present an event as hybrid/virtual.

‘Virtual’ therefore appears to offer the key to flexible, accessible and attractive event delivery on a continuum from ‘venued’ to ‘virtual’ with the mixed ‘hybrid’ option giving some benefits of both. This was explored in the interview, with LTB appearing to favour hybrid with a focus on venued. In this way, the venue provides a communal focus—the sense of place noted earlier—with a virtual audience augmenting the reach of the experience and brand. Considering the relatively low set-up costs of the required technology, hybrid appears to offer established brands the most attractive and (potentially) lucrative option in capitalising on the purported ‘pent-up demand’ [141] for event experiences whilst also addressing the demand for online availability. This could also help the industry to re-establish reliable revenue levels where consumer confidence in events, or associated restrictions, is more gradual. The full extent of potential, as ever with technological innovation, is unknowable for now; TW noted the seeming absence of ‘rules’—the accepted norms of event delivery identifiable in every event type. These have been fluid and changing in the wake of the pandemic, even likened by MD to pirate radio, evidenced by the relatively basic initial attempts at virtual events which, over time, became high quality in line with the brand standards.

As discussed previously, the perception of value is key to any event experience. By combining the power of virtual with their track record of delivering a ‘premium night out’ experience (MD), this has been achieved by LTB in the face of technological barriers and scepticism about the attractiveness of virtual events. Indeed, da Silva [140] notes that where virtual events are designed by programmers/engineers, they may lack the creative vision of those which are not. Part of the ability to demonstrate value comes also through how an activity is valorised [79,136], considering that events can be variously deemed or perceived as illegal, undesirable, fringe or dangerous [75]. The creative industries operate through the legal prism of licencing and permissions, and whilst in house music, there is a tradition of anti-establishment and illegality [87], this does not translate into long-term legitimate sustainability. A major hurdle for LTB’s virtual events was the lack of a virtual event licence equivalent to the PRS for Music licence required in the UK for any music venue. This ensures that artists receive income from the performance of their music via the PRS [142]. As the original run of LTB virtual events was not adequately licenced (at that time, an impossibility, and still unclear), they could not legally or, as noted by MD and TW, ethically earn money from the events. Whilst this chimed with the generosity of feelings experienced across the UK in the early-stage pandemic [143], it is not sustainable in the long term for a business. TW spoke at length about the critical requirement of an event licence to make virtual music events a viable business model, highlighting that otherwise, the burden falls onto the hosting platform. He noted that Facebook, where the majority of LTB events were hosted, is not licenced in this way, and so streams are liable to be ‘taken down’ (i.e., the stream is terminated by the platform). Other platforms, however, such as Mixcloud, are licenced but lack the integrated social network of the major social media platforms. As such, both interviewees noted the potential for an integrated social network and events platform to become a successful home of virtual events as there is currently no clear ideal platform:

‘There’s not one platform that’s absolutely nailed it [created an ideal platform]. . . it’s left everyone a bit divided on which platform is the best, but I think there’s an opportunity there for someone to launch a platform and absolutely clean up on it [achieve success].’

[MD]

In 2021, the PRS announced the Online Live Concert Licence [142] to some controversy [144], and at the time of writing, it is subject to ongoing discussion and review

as to its viability for grassroots musicians and promoters. Therefore, whilst the demand exists, and the supply of events is forthcoming, the virtual events ecosystem is yet to settle. Indeed, this is likely to undergo further change post-pandemic once the balance of virtual and venues events stabilises in the medium term, and in the longer term, will be subject to the developments of any business environment. The future of the event industry is filled with opportunity—whilst the lucrative venues events sector seems certain to rebound to its historic highs, virtual events represent an emerging market in which established businesses and start-ups alike can harness the desire for virtual experiences introduced to a mass market during the pandemic and which, as shown herein, are unlikely to disappear.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Theoretical Implications

Several theoretical implications are drawn from this research. Firstly, its contribution to the documentation of the COVID-19 lockdown periods acts as an insight into event experiences of the time itself but also as an interesting comparison to the periods before and after. Indeed, this repositioning of virtual events within the experience of the consumer suggests that the lockdowns have already provided an adjustment to the behaviour and understanding of the consumer regarding virtual events, which will be vital in establishing virtual events as a notable element of the industry in the long term. This research also implies that there are key differences in how we can conceptualise virtual and venues event experiences; chiefly, both offer unique opportunities to share experiences in different contexts, but event design is also a key element of both in shaping the experience. This is well-established in the context of venues events, but this research offers the assertion that experience design is equally paramount for creating a virtual experience seen as valuable and worthwhile, not an inferior experience or simply a half-hearted alternative. Despite the similarities, this research also considers the key differences in terms of ‘trappings’ of experience in the context of music events. This points towards the potential for virtual events to fulfil certain aims differing from venues events in the context of brand management, accessibility and experience. Finally, this research offers the term ‘venues’ events to act as a succinct opposite to ‘virtual’, thus replacing imperfect terms such as ‘face-to-face’, ‘in-person’ and similar, which could potentially help to reposition or reframe virtual events in the event studies literature.

5.2. Practical Implications

This research is intended also to further the practical implication of virtual event experiences. By noting the relative successes and failures of the case study, this research presents advice on how to design, deliver and evaluate virtual experiences. The interviewees noted event service quality as a key determinant of success, particularly to dispel the notion that virtual events are inherently inferior to venues events. The implication of this is that virtual and venues should arguably not be seen as directly comparable but as offered different experiences, which would be valuable and worthwhile in the right market and to the right consumer. Therefore, how virtual events are successfully differentiated within certain markets could be important for long-term success. As a comparison, consider how the TV broadcast of live sport does not draw a direct comparison to the venues event itself; even if it is implicitly seen as inferior to attending a live game, the broadcaster augments the experience using televisual techniques (such as commentators, pundits, replay, etc.) alongside the convenience/cost saving of watching at home or in a pub. On this basis, we may infer the practical implication that music events could become an established virtual/TV product in this way.

5.3. Limitations and Avenues for Further Research

The limitations of this study are considered throughout the research and are summarised here. Primarily, the case study design, which offers deep and rich qualitative data, is nonetheless limited in scope to just one event provider. This links to broader

conceived limitations of qualitative data, which could be supplemented with qualitative data. Furthermore, the consumer's voice is absent from this research; whilst it is beyond the scope of this study per se, it would be useful to consider that voice in a supply–demand approach.

By using the themes identified in this research, future studies could broaden the scope from a case study to a more comprehensive understanding of how the industry has retained the utility and potential of virtual events in the post-pandemic world, thus reducing the limitations of this study. These studies could also examine the dual forces of cost-of-living crises and environmental impact to further examine the role of virtual events. The focus on music events could also be broadened to wider creative industries, with the potential for cross-comparison of different sectors and relative success/failure of virtual events. Furthermore, the virtual–venued dichotomy would benefit from further examination in order to deepen the discussion on the critical similarities and differences between these two event forms. The trappings of virtual events, such as attendee behaviour, the demonstration of cultural/subcultural capital, and the performer–spectator relationship, as identified in this research, could also be examined in more detail to build a more critical understanding of the virtual event experience. Finally, as noted in Section 5.2, the potential for the live broadcast of music events in the same mould as live sports on a subscription/pay-per-view basis is another avenue of research which could lead to more practical outcomes.

5.4. Conclusions

This research has documented the use of virtual events during the UK's 2020 COVID-19 lockdown. In doing so, through the lens of the Love to Be brand case study, it has delivered three research objectives with rich qualitative data to generate timely and pertinent outcomes that contribute to the nascent literature base on this corner of event studies. At what may prove to be a ground-breaking and pivotal moment for the virtual event industry, this research also offers the term 'venued events' to describe events which are located in a specific place, in contrast with virtual events, the standard term for those which are not.

This research has examined how virtual events have been, and can be, produced and consumed. It has detailed and discussed a variety of social performances and norms which mirror and diverge from those of established venues events in order to conceptualise the sense of experience encountered at virtual events. This overlapped with entrepreneurial issues of branding and marketing, with a focus on the notion of value. This relationship between experience and value appears to be the crucial issue for virtual events going forward; indeed, it is offered herein that only by establishing virtual events as high-quality and engaging, kicking against the received wisdom that they are by nature less valuable than venues event experiences, can they become established as a viable longer-term revenue-generating product. Finally, this research suggests some further issues which are ongoing in the context of this developing area. It is hoped that the discussion of this cutting-edge event form will generate further research to highlight the future potential of virtual events alongside their potential limitations. As dancefloors reopen the world over, perhaps the virtual dancefloors built in our own homes might remain a permanent fixture.

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