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BSW light, the first completely virtual surgical congress in Belgium: Out of the box

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Abstract

Background

Due to the SARS – COV 2 pandemic related restrictions the 2020 Belgian Surgical Week (BSW) was organized as a virtual congress, being the first surgical, virtual congress in Belgium. Since this was a new experience and probably not the last, we aim to share our experience to assist other professionals in organizing their virtual event.

Methods

The “BSW-light” was organized by the RBSS in collaboration with a Professional Congress Organizer (PCO), which is described in detail. Analytical data of the event were provided by the PCO and a UEMS “live educational events participant evaluation form” based survey was sent out to all registered participant, using google forms, to evaluate the event.

Results

During 2 days, 78 prerecorded presentations were broadcasted in 2 virtual conference rooms, each followed by a live Q & A session. The plenary session on the third day contained 8 live presentations, both from Belgium and from abroad. A total of 503 people registered for the congress, of whom 224 trainees. Each session attracted 158 visitors on average, each spending an average of 73 minutes.

Attendees were satisfied with the technical aspect of the virtual congress, but they preferred an event that is at least partially live.

Conclusion

Although the “BSW-light” proved to be successful, a preference to meet in real live remained. However, given its potential, we should keep an open mind towards integrating the advantages of a virtual meeting into a live event.

Key Words

Belgian Surgical Week

BSW-light

Virtual congress

Pandemic

COVID-19

Disclosure of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest

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Introduction

As dictated by tradition, May 2020 was supposed to be the month of our 21st Belgian Surgical Week with the theme “Out of the box”. Due to the SARS – COV 2 pandemic related restrictions this event, like many other (non-) professional events, could not take place in its traditional sense. However, since the Royal Belgian Society of Surgery (RBSS) is primarily a scientific society, we wanted to provide a platform for our colleagues to present their scientific endeavors within a reasonable timeframe after abstract submission. This has led to the “BSW-light”, the first completely virtual BSW, which took place in November 2020.

Virtual congresses have several potential advantages. Since one can attend from home, travelling time and cost are substantially reduced, potentially increasing attendance (1). Moreover, costs for organization are substantially reduced due to absence of for example venue rent and catering (2).

In addition, for a virtual format a host of audio-visual technologies is used to facilitate real-time talks, Q and A sessions, electronic posters, follow up discussions and virtual industry exhibits. This technology also allows the organization to gather data on attendance, demographics and participant feedback. These data can be shared with and adopted by other meetings, potentially contributing to improvement of conferences (1, 3, 4).

Since experience is still limited and many sections and affiliated societies of the RBSS are considering virtual events, we aim to share the results of evaluation of the first “BSW light”.

Materials and Methods

The “BSW – light” was completely virtual and was organized by the RBSS board (authors of this paper) in collaboration with a professional congress organizer (PCO), AIM-group international (Via Giuseppe Ripamonti 129, Milan, Italy) who delegated Co-mana (22 Rue Ortelius, B-1000, Brussels, Belgium) as technical crew.

The congress contained 16 “free paper sessions” (FPS), held in 2 parallel, virtual rooms, spread over 2 days, and three, subsequent, plenary sessions on the third day. Presentations for the FPSs were prerecorded and broadcasted through the congress platform provided by the PCOs (Hopin). The presentations were followed by a live Q & A session in which questions could be asked by chat, moderated by a live moderator. The plenary sessions contained only live presentations that were rehearsed several days before the actual congress. Interaction was live through the platform’s chat function and moderated live.

All congress participants were asked to be present in a virtual “tech-room” to check their presence and connection.

Within one week after the congress an evaluation form based on the UEMS “live educational events participant evaluation form” (<https://eaccme.uems.eu/library.aspx?goto=b49>), was sent to all registered participants through google forms (https://www.google.com/intl/nl_be/forms/about/) for an open survey.

Analytical data on congress attendance was provided by the PCOs.

Results

During the first 2 days, 16 free paper sessions took place spread over 2 virtual conference rooms, facilitating presentation of a total of 78 abstracts. One abstract was withdrawn due to unavailability during the prerecording slots. The third and final day contained 8 live presentations in one plenary room, four of which presented from Belgium, two from the U.S., one from Portugal and one from Italy.

A total of 503 people registered for the congress and 497 people actually attended, of whom 224 were trainees. The average time spend by attendees was 379 minutes.

In table 1 the sessions, the number of visitors per session, the time they spend per session, the number of visitors with a comment and the number of comments per session is depicted. Each session attracted 158 visitors on average, each spending an average of 73 minutes.

Of the total of 503 registered attendees, 309 filled out a complete evaluation form (61 %). Results for each question are presented graphically in figures 1 to 8.

Discussion

The vast majority of the attendees found the event useful for their professional practice (figure 2) and virtually all attendees were positive about both the program as well as the organization (figure 3). Moreover, the vast majority was satisfied concerning their educational goals (figure 5).

When analyzing the virtual aspect of this event we were happy to see that almost all attendees graded the virtual platform and the audio-visual quality of the

congress as good or excellent, including the technically most challenging session, the live plenary session (figure 4).

As depicted in figure 6 most attendees were satisfied with the time available for Q&A. This seems to be somewhat contradictory to the average number of comments per session. The number of registered comments was 29 per session on average (table 1), which means about 5 per presentation in most sessions. This seems to be a higher number than during our previous live events, particularly for the free paper sessions. Perhaps the relative anonymity of the chat function lowers the threshold of commenting on a presentation. Due to time limitation, the moderators were asked to select a few of the questions that were asked in the chat. The presenters were asked to answer questions that were not answered during the live Q & A, by chat. Unfortunately no data are available to determine compliance towards this request. Based on the number of comments it is our impression that more time for Q&A is desirable to facilitate discussion and we expect that extra time could further improve approval ratings.

Although the BSW light was successful as a virtual congress, judging by the attendance and evaluation, a vast number of attendees does not want to maintain this format exclusively, as shown in figure 7. There is a great interest to return to a fully live congress, however, it seems a similar great interest exist for a hybrid congress, combining the advantages of a virtual platform with a live event. The preferred format, based on the traditional organization of the BSW, would be a live plenary sessions and live sessions organized by the sections, combined with virtual FPSs (figure 8).

On average, the sessions were followed by 158 colleagues, who all spent on average 73 minutes per session. The sessions were only 60 minutes, including

the break, but the additional time spent per session can be explained by connecting to the session in advance to make sure the beginning is not missed. Moreover, it is likely that not everybody disconnected at the end of the session correctly, leading to extra time registered for certain sessions while in fact it was finished.

Based upon these attendance data and the positive evaluation, the first virtual congress of the RBSS can be considered successful. Evidently, the event was virtual due to social limitations forced upon us by the pandemic and it is unclear whether a similar event would be equally successful in “normal” times when we are allowed to organize a “live” event. The results of the survey show, in short, that attendees were satisfied with the technical aspect of the virtual congress, but that they prefer an event that is at least partially live. Since the survey showed no real preference for either a live or a virtual FPS and looking at the great number of visitors during the virtual FPSs, it seems that in a hybrid format the FPSs should remain virtual.

Conclusion

Virtual congresses have a lot of potential to innovate and improve congress experiences. A number of conferences have incorporated virtual reality tools to create new conference environments, and apps and machine learning algorithms to match attendees of similar research interests into virtual discussion rooms, enabling networking and collaboration. We were forced to organize our national congress virtually due to the pandemic and the presented results clearly show the desire to meet in real live. However, we are just at the beginning of our

“virtual congress” learning curve and given its potential, we should keep an open mind towards integrating the advantages of a virtual meeting into a live event.

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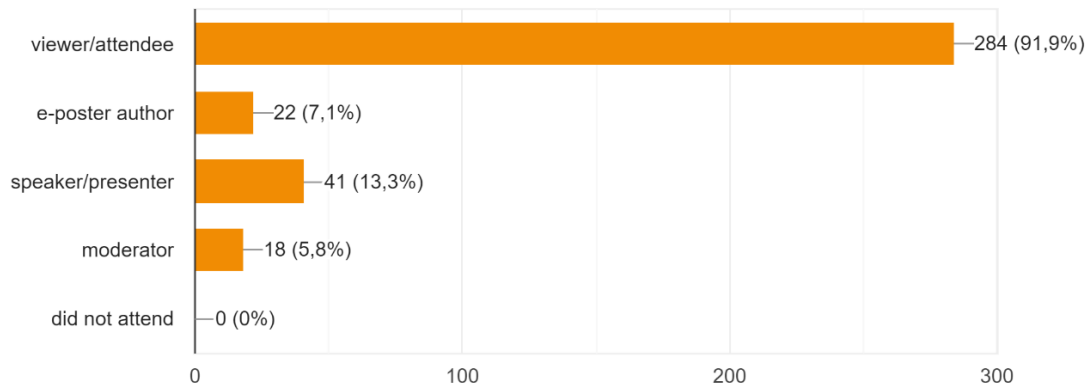


Figure 1. How did you participate in this event?

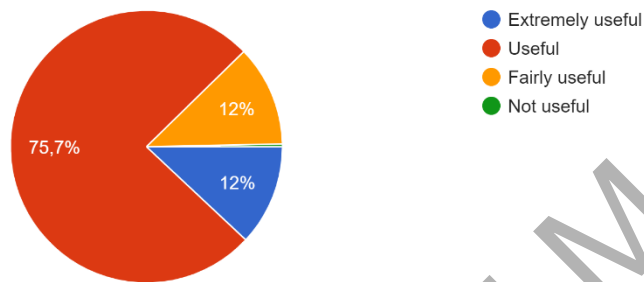


Figure 2. How useful for your professional activity did you find this event ?

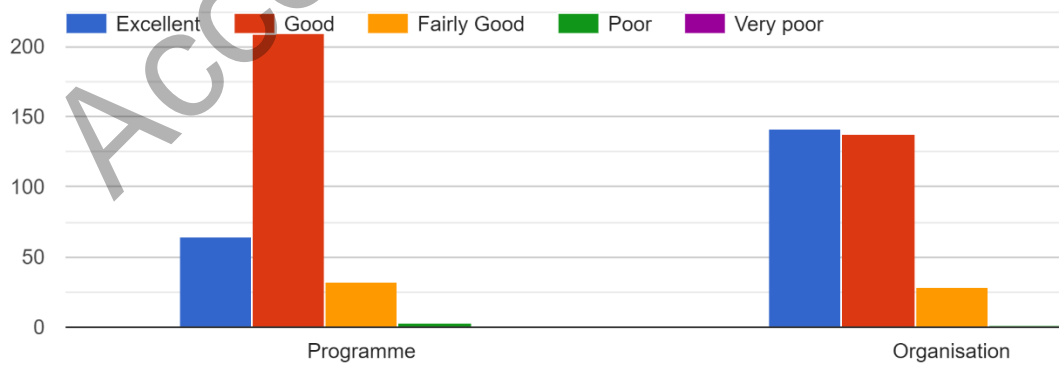


Figure 3. What was your overall impression of this event?

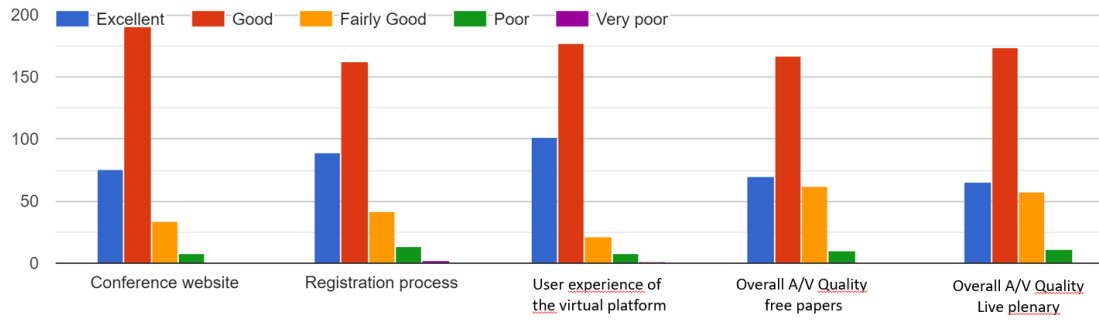


Figure 4. How would you rate the following aspects of this year's edition?

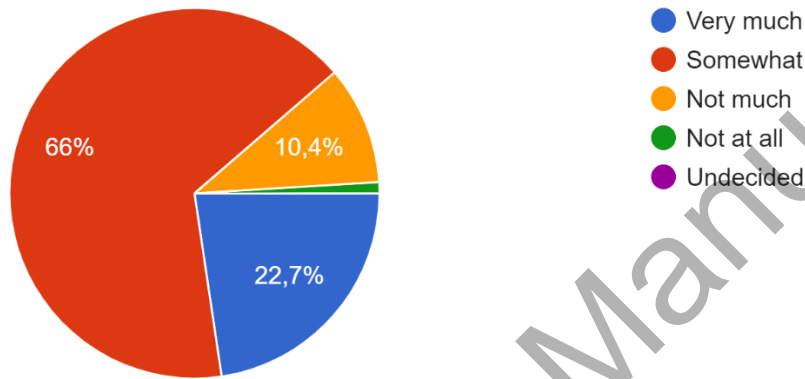


Figure 5. Did the event fulfill your educational goals and expected learning outcomes?

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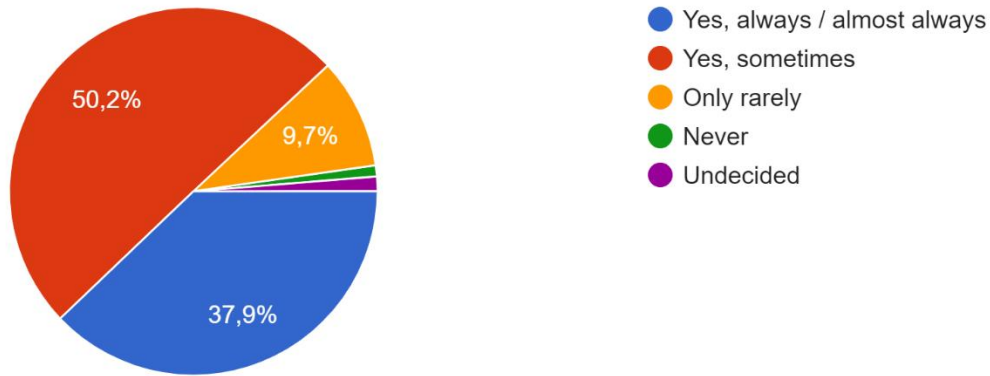


Figure 6. Was there adequate time available for discussions, questions and answers and learner engagement?

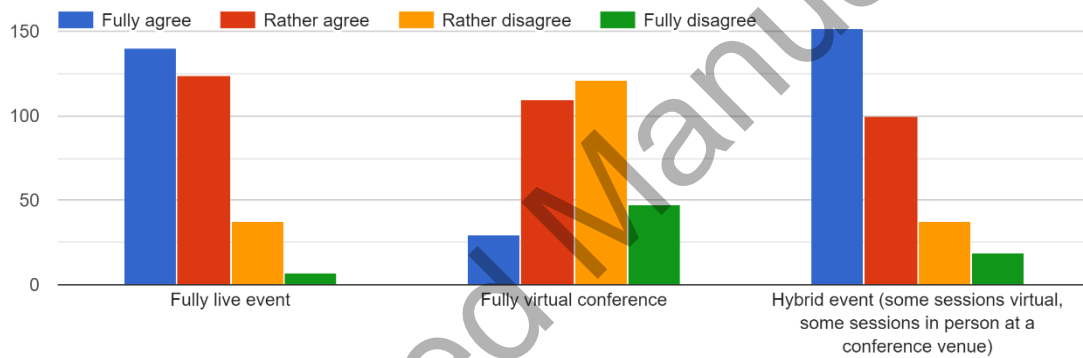


Figure 7. Please rate the following organizational format of future editions of the BSW?

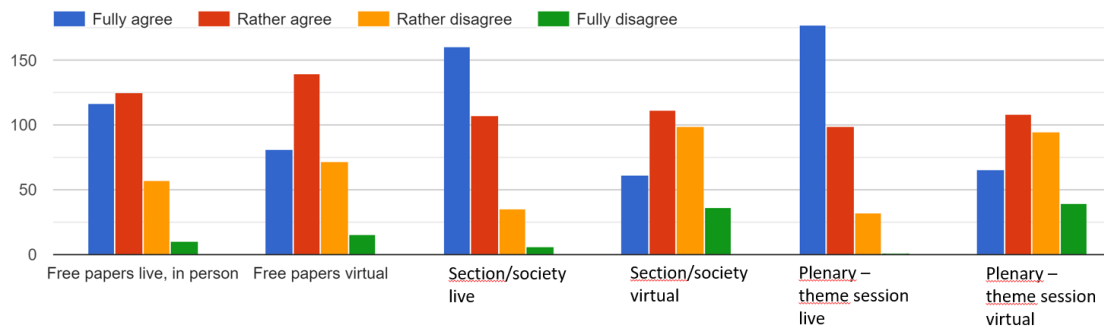


Figure 8. Please let us know which type of session organization you would prefer?

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Table 1. Statistics of the BSW light provided by PCO. The number of visitors per session, the time they spend per session, the number of visitors with a comment and the number of comments per session.

Time	Session	Number of visitors	Average visiting time (Minutes)	Unique visitors commenting	Number of comments
17.00 - 18.00	Cardio-thoracic	116	101	17	43
	Colorectal I	198	106	9	16
	Colorectal II	162	62	8	15
	General Surgery I	141	35	19	31
18.00 – 19.00	Abdominal Wall	171	70	10	26
	General Surgery II	164	76	17	49
	HBP I	153	48	8	12
	HBP II	134	65	12	35
19.00 – 20.00	General Surgery III	170	57	13	39
	Obesity-Metabolic	142	42	13	30
	Upper GI	193	72	17	43
	Vascular I	129	81	10	15
20.00 – 21.00	BAST	192	114	20	47
	Vascular II	128	58	9	20
	Video I	159	78	6	14
	Video II	168	97	17	25
Average		158 per session	73 min/visitor/ session	13 per session	29 per session