Virtual Technologies and Conferences Attendance: Perceptions of YCT Academic Staff

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ABSTRACT

Academic conference was majorly face-to-face gathering for sharing new knowledge, disseminating research findings, establishing networks among team members and for social interaction. However, holding virtual meetings is not completely a new phenomenon but conference virtualisation was not in place before the year 2020. But the current widespread adoption of virtual conferences was facilitated by the global outbreak of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, which struck almost the whole world and forced nearly all sectors to resort to online activities. This study seeks to examine the acceptable level of virtual conferences using the most popular web conferencing tools such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams. Three research questions were raised with three corresponding hypotheses. The design adopted was a survey, the population comprised over 800 academic staff in Yaba College of Technology, Lagos and a sample size of 206 was selected. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data and was analysed with frequency distribution and Chi-square test of association. The finding of the study revealed high awareness about virtual conferences (88.1%), high attendance (76%), and high preference for virtual conference attendance (62%)and these stemmed fromthe opportunity to build networks, security concerns, time management, and cost-effectiveness. It also showed that Zoom was the most preferred virtual technology (50%).The study concluded that virtual conferencing has come to stay because of its high awareness, attendance and preference among academics and Zoom technology is the key driver as the world is moving towards a global community.

Keywords: Academics, Conference attendance, Technologies, Virtual conferences, Zoom.

INTRODUCTION

An academic conference is a meeting, a congress, or a symposium, where participants present their research findings. It is a gathering where professionals meet and interact to increase knowledge. Falk & Hagsten (2021) stated that academic conference is used generally for networking, collaborating, mentoring novice researchers, sharing research findings, and socialising with colleagues. An academic conference is also an instrument for assessing the visibility of lecturers and their institutions (Sá, Ferreira & Serpa, 2019). The researchers stressed that conference attendance improves the quality of academic papers and the chances of publishing in high-impact journals. To this end, an academic conference is a meeting where researchers connect with their colleagues to share current opinions. There are two modes of academic conferences, namely, the traditional face-to-face or in-person conference and virtual conference. The traditional mode of academic conferences is face-to-face attendance or in-person conference. The face-to-face conference brings like-minded participants together to explore themes. Experienced keynote and lead paper speakers are invited to share knowledge with participants. It makes researchers visible in their field. Lecturers physically socialize, converse and discuss with colleagues from sister institutions. This agrees with McCulloch, (2018), there is live interaction among participants. They make trips to exotic locations, visit recreational centres, have fun, do shopping and meet with key personalities (Bhandari, 2018; Finnegan, McGhee, Roxburgh, & Kent, 2019). Some undeniable challenges of the face-to-face academic conference include lack of funds to cover conference expenses, traveling to long distances, and accessibility and safety of participants. In-person

academic conferences require participants to make trips, and travel distances to physically present their papers(Mair, Lockstone-Binney, & Whitelaw, 2018). These physical and financial barriers conventionally prevent conference attendance. Consequently, to model the in-person conference, virtual conferencing emerged as a result of the invention of more sophisticated technologies coupled with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Rubinger Gazendam, Ekhtiari, Nucci, Payne, Johal, Khanduja & Bhandari (2020) posited that an upsurge in virtual meetings became a part of the 2020 work setting. A virtual conference is described as an online presentation through the internet to synchronously interact. Haji-Georgi, Xu and Rosca (2020) described the virtual conference as the act of sharing, discussing, and learning new developments in a field within a community of practice. In this digital age, there are many free and cost-based virtual technologies that academics can use. These technologies have unique features and reasons for their preference.

The most common virtual technologies include Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and To Go Meeting. An effective virtual conference has the potential to reduce the costs associated with booking venues, catering, and traveling across geographically dispersed areas and reduce environmental footprints. Despite the enormous benefits of the virtual conference, there are many challenges, especially in the face of dwindling infrastructure in our country, Nigeria. Participants may experience technical issues connecting online, poor internet connection, bandwidth issues, background noise, muting and unmuting, lack of time, lack of social interaction and not having sophisticated devices up to like 4g plus makes it tough to successfully participate in virtual conferences.

To establish the missing link in existing literature, this study seeks to examine the awareness and attitude of academic staff about the two modes of academic conferences, the preference for conference attendance, the reasons for such preference, the preference for mode of virtual technologiessuch as Zoom, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams, the reasons for the mode of preference and the challenges of virtual conference attendance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The face-to-face or in-person conference isa traditional mode of the conference. The benefits of attending and participating in the traditional conference have implications for lecturers and their institutions (Bhandari, 2018; Rowe, 2018; Chai & Freeman, 2019; Finnegan, McGhee, Roxburgh, & Kent, 2019). Sa, et al. (2019) reiterated that it provides ideas, knowledge and development opportunities for lecturers and their institutions. The traditional in-person conference involves the inconveniences of traveling long distances, insecurity, lack of funds to book hotel accommodation and other conference expenses.

During the Covid-19 period, restrictions such as closed local and international borders, travel bans and public gatherings, resulted in the cancellation of many face-to-face meetings, workshops, seminars and conferences, which made academic communities adopt virtual conferencing (Abbott, 2020; Achakulvisut, Ruangrong, Bilgin, Van Den Bossche, Wyble, Goodman, Arnal, 2020;Vargo, Zhu, Benwel, & Yan, 2021). A virtual conference is an event staged and attended online by participants who interact synchronously (Vargo, Zhu, Benwel & Yan, 2021). The researchers maintained that in a virtual conference, participants remotely join the meeting from any part of the world.

According to Haji-Georgi et al (2020) virtual conference entails utilizing technologies to deliver papers in an online environment. Furthermore, they maintained that virtual conference has the advantage of eliminating the logistics associated with face-to-face gathering. Consequently, the virtual conference turned out to be the ad hoc measure for an academic conference (Haji-Georgi, Xu & Rosca, 2020).The virtual conference has become the global new normal situation and has drawn the attention of lecturers and institutions (Withington, & Kolivand, 2022). Thus, it is significant to determine the awareness and attitude of lecturers and the preference for virtual conference technologies and their features. There is a long list of virtual conference technologies, which include Microsoft Teams, Go To Meeting, Google Meet, Zoom, Apache Open Meetings, Team Viewer, TeamLink, ezTalks Meetings, and Join.me, Skype for business,

and many more. This study focused on three of the most common use ones, namely, Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams. Zoom requires a participant to create an account and generatethe meeting ID that qualifies a participant to join the conference. It has easy-to-use features such as calls, chat, quality audio and MP4 video recording. Zoom is accessible in free and paid descriptions. The free plan lasts for only 40 minutes and allows a maximum of 100 participants while the paid plan, a large meeting add-on hosts up to 500 participants. Microsoft Teams is part of the Microsoft Office 365 bundle that requires a sign-up email address. It has free and paid plans that allow the subscriber to host 250 -300 participants. There is no time limit or duration for meetings. The features of Microsoft Teams include phone calls, a chat box, video conferencing, a calendar and sharable files. Google Meet is an app within Google workspace. It has paid subscription that can host 100 to 250 participants depending on the subscription. Usually, the participant dials the number and enters the pin code available in the Meet invite. It can record, live stream and encrypt videos.

Empirical Review

Chen et al. (2020) described the benefit of the virtual conference as increasing the exponential dissemination of new knowledge, reducing the cost and risks of traveling, optimising time, and encouraging international research collaboration. van Ewijk & Hoekman (2021), reduce carbon footprint and other travel inconveniences. Virtual conference improves attendance status and saves valuable time and money (Zhang, Qin, Wang, & Luo, 2020). In a study titled academic conferencing in 2020: a virtual conference model, Haji-Georgi, et al (2020) reviewed the opinion of conference attendees and their findings revealed that virtual conference attendance skyrocketed, especially those at far distances. The researchers equally observed that about 95% of the respondents said their involvement in virtual poster sessions was the same as face-to-face participation, about 54.55% reported that they had better experiences with the virtual format.

Erickson, Kellogg, Shami, and Levine (2020), showed similar findings that virtual conference increases the number of attendees to the conference. In addition, the researchers observed that majority of their respondents agreed that the virtual conference was a good experience and they would like to use the platform again and again when the opportunity comes. Erickson et al. (2020) also drew a comparison between face-to-face and virtual conference attendance based on information sharing and social affiliation. Most of the respondents agreed that both modes are satisfactory, representing 96.3 and 98.2%. However, the comparison between the two modes in-person and virtual revealed that in-person (98.2%) while virtual (63.0%). This meant that they found more satisfaction in face-to-face conferencing. Other advantages of the virtual conference include cost-effectiveness, the virtual conference can hold everywhere and anywhere in the world, saves time, causes less stress and anxiety, enhances collaboration, increases creativity and is more inclusive.

Most human activities have advantages and disadvantages, and so do virtual conference technologies. The virtual conference is like a put-off to some presenters, they develop cold feet because they are not technically savvy. Virtual conferences cost a lot of money because of data usage. Poor networks in Nigeria make virtual conferencing almost impossible as presenters keep muting and unmuting. A poor power supply is a major hindrance to virtual presentations. Technologies for virtual conferences can be technologically challenging, internet connection may fail (Lopes, 2019). This is in agreement with the assertion of Diethart, Zimmermann and Mulà, (2020) who stated that virtual conferences present technology-oriented challenges. Similarly, in a study titled virtual conference design: features and obstacles, Hurst et al. (2022) observed that virtual conference attendance is limited by internet connectivity which means, the network is often an issue with virtual conference systems.

Sam, (2022) carried out a study titled effective virtual platform for an online meeting. The researcher stressed that in virtual conferences, in-person or physical face-to-face communication, eye contact is lost. According to her, eye contact is essential because it creates a link between the presenter and the listeners. The other challenges she identified include the requirement of high-speed gargets, hacking of information and misuse by hackers, and health-related back and joint pains from sitting in the same place for a long time.

Theoretical Review

This study was built on the process virtualization theory put forward by Overby (2008) who described how processes are conducted without people interacting physically or interaction between objects and people. He posited that process virtualisation thrives on the adoption of the virtual process and the quality of the outcomes or outputs of the process. Overby noted that process virtualisation is built on sensory, relationship, synchronism, and identification and control requirements. This implies that a continual decrease in these concepts in society has made virtualisation in processes a possibility. The event of the Covid -19 has accelerated the process of virtualisation due to the lockdowns and social distancing that resulted coupled with the complex nature of society today. This gave impetus to the argument of Overby (2012) that certain processes have proven more appropriate and agreeable to virtualisation. Other authors also agreed that virtualisation as a mode of organising is inspired by process onto logies in social settings (Peters, 2020). In Nigeria for instance, the risk of journeying from the place because of the danger of kidnapping and terrorism which in the recent time had skyrocketed giving rise to fears of traveling and boosting the attendance of virtual meetings and conferences.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a survey design to ascertain the perceptions of academics about virtual conference attendance and the technologies used therein. A convenience sample of 206 academic staff was drawn from the over 800 academic staff of Yaba College of Technology, Yaba Lagos and a well-designed questionnaire was administered to them to collect the necessary data used in the study. The instrument was personally administered to the academic staff members of the institution and retrieved instantly by the researcher. Frequency distributions were obtained from the data collected on the key concepts of the study and Chi-Square tests were performed to test the hypotheses stated with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 26.0). The hypotheses ascertained the association between academics' awareness of and attendance of virtual conferences with their demographic characteristics, their preference for virtual conferences and the technologies used therein and their reasons for such preferences. Ethics was observed in this study as the consent of the academic staff was obtained before they participated in the study.

The Chi-square test compared the observed frequencies with the expected frequencies as the opinion of the academic staff on the key concepts of the study were considered. The Chi-Square test statistic is given as:

$$\chi^2 = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \frac{(O_i - e_i)^2}{e_i} \; ; \sim \chi^2_{\alpha,v}$$

Where O_i is the observed frequency, e_i is the expected frequency, v = n – 1, and n is the number of cells in the contingency table. The test is conducted at a 5% level of significance.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Academic Staff

Demographic Characteristics		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	108	52.7
	Female	89	44.3
	Non -response	6	3.0
Age (years	< 30	18	9.0
	30 – 39	38	18.9
	40 – 49	77	38.3
	50 +	62	30.8
	Non-response	6	3.0

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Professional field	Applied sciences	89	44.3
	Management sciences	76	37.8
	Humanities	10	5.0
	Non-response	26	12.9
Years of experience	< 10	40	19.9
	10 – 19	96	47.8
	20 +	52	25.9
	Non-response	13	6.5

Table 1 shows that 52.7% of the academic staff who participated in the study are male while 44.3% are female while 3.0% did not respond. Also, 30.8% of the academic staff were 50 years and above, 38.3% were 40 – 49 years, 18.9% were 30 – 39 years and 9.0% were below years and 3.0% did not state their age. It further shows that 44.3% of the academics were in applied sciences, 37.8% in the Management sciences and 5% were in the Humanities while 12.9% did not respond. Lastly, 20% of the academics had worked for below 10 years, 47.85 had 10 – 19 years of experience and 26% had put 20 years and above while 6.5% did not respond.

Table 2: Academic staff awareness and attitude to virtual conferences

Academic staff awareness and attitude to virtual conferences		**Frequency**	**Percent**
Aware of Virtually held conference	Yes	171	88.1
	No	23	11.9
Ever attended a conference virtually	Yes	148	75.9
	No	47	24.1
Location of virtual conference attendance	National	109	74.1
	International	21	14.3
	Both	17	11.6
View ofthe virtual conference	Welcome development	125	66.8
	Subpar	6	3.2
	Innovative	56	29.9

Table 2 shows that 88.1% of the academics were aware of virtual conferences, 75.9% had ever attended conferences virtually, 74.1% attended virtual conferences nationally, 14.3% attended internationally, and 11.6% attended both locations. Also, 66.8% of the academics viewed virtual conferences as a welcomed development, 30% saw it as innovative and only 3.2% view it as below expectation.

Table 3: Academic staff preference for mode of conference attendance

Academic staff preference		**Frequency**	**Percent**
Mode of Conference attendance preferred	Face-to-face	67	38.1
	Virtual	109	61.9
Zoom is used for virtual conferences	Yes	124	71.7
	No	49	28.3
Google Meet used for virtual conferences	Yes	60	33.0
	No	122	67.0
Microsoft Team used for virtual conferences	Yes	13	6.6
	No	184	93.4
Most preferred technology for use in a virtual conference	Google Meet	27	21.1
	Microsoft Team	30	23.4
	Zoom	64	50.0

	Go To Webinar	7	5.5

Table 3 shows that 38.1% of the academics preferred to attend conferences in person (face-to-face) while 61.9% preferred virtual attendance. Also, 71.7% had used Zoom for virtual conference attendance, 33.0% had used Google Meet and only 6.6% had used Microsoft Team for conferences. Lastly, half of the academics preferred to use Zoom for conference attendance, 21.1% preferred Google Meet, 23.4% preferred Microsoft Team and only 5.5% preferred Go To Webinar.

Table 4: Reasons Academic staff prefer the mode of conference attendance

Reasons Academic staff prefer the mode of conference attendance	Yes (%)	No (%)
Building Networks	106 (52.7)	95 (47.3)
Security	67 (33.3)	134 (66.7)
Cost-effective	65 (32.3)	136 (67.7)
Time management	60 (29.9)	136 (70.1)
Estacode involved	16 (8.0)	185 (92.0)
Travel experience	43 (21.4)	158 (78.6)

Table 4 shows the reasons for the preferences of the academics and it reveals that 52.7% had their preferences because they want to build their networks, 33.3% because of security concerns, 32.3% for its cost-effectiveness, 29.9% to manage their time, 0nly 8.0% do for the estacode involved and 21.4% for the travel experience it offers.

Table 5: Challenges of virtual conference attendance

s/n	Statements	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
1.	Virtual conferences attendance is for those who are technologically savvy	86 (43.4)	51 (25.8)	46 (23.2)	15 (7.6)
2.	Virtual conferences attendance costs much in terms of data usage	52 (26.5)	77 (39.3)	44 (22.4)	23 (11.7)
3.	Networks in Nigeria make attending conferences virtually almost impossible	41 (21.0)	76 (39.0)	54 (27.7)	24 (12.3)
4.	Attending virtual conferences when sponsored makes retirement of advancements difficult	30 (16.5)	54 (29.7)	78 (42.9)	20 (11.0)
5.	Building social networks are limited by virtual conferences attendance	70 (36.6)	66 (34.6)	43 (22.5)	12 (6.3)
6.	Inconsistent power supply hinders virtual conferences attendance	53 (29.9)	73 (41.2)	40 (22.6)	11 (6.2)
7.	Having devices that are not 4G plus enhanced makes it difficult to participate in virtual conferences	52 (29.9)	70 (40.2)	42 (24.1)	10 (5.7)
8.	I don’t feel I have attended a conference when it is virtual	21 (11.3)	53 (28.5)	73 (39.2)	39 (21.0)
9.	My institution does not recognise conferences attended virtually	30 (17.8)	37 (21.9)	55 (32.5)	47 (27.8)
10.	Papers presented virtually are not always criticised and are discussed thoroughly	33 (19.1)	63 (36.4)	46 (26.6)	31 (17.9)

Table 5 considered the challenges of attending the virtual conference. It shows that 69.2% of the academics agreed or strongly agreed that virtual conferences attendance is for those who are technologically savvy, 65.8% agreed or strongly agreed that virtual conferences attendance costs much in terms of data usage, and 3 in every 5 academics agreed or strongly agreed that networks in Nigeria make attending conferences virtually almost impossible. Also, 46.2% agreed or strongly agreed that attending virtual conferences when

sponsored makes retirement of advancements difficult, 71.2% agreed or strongly agreed that building social networks is limited by virtual conferences attendance and 71.1% agreed or strongly agreed that inconsistent power supply hinders virtual conferences attendance.

In addition, 70.1% agreed or strongly agreed that having devices that are not 4g plus enhanced makes it difficult to participate in virtual conferences, 39.8% agreed or strongly agreed that they don't feel they have attended a conference when it is virtual, 39.7% agreed or strongly agreed that their institution does not recognise conferences attended virtually and 45.5% agreed or strongly agreed that papers presented virtually are not always criticised and discussed thoroughly.

Hypotheses Testing

The hypotheses of the study were tested using the Chi-Square test of associations at a 5% level of significance.

Hypothesis One

$H_0{}^1$: There is no significant association between academic staff attendance atthe virtual conference and their demographic characteristics.

Table 6: Chi-square test of association between ever-attended conference attendance and academics' demographic characteristics

Academic staff demographic characteristics		Ever attended a virtual conference		$\chi 2$ (p)
		No (%)	Yes (%)	OR (95% CI)
Gender	Male	12 (19.4)	50 (80.6)	2.114 (0.146)
	Female	5 (9.6)	47 (90.4)	2.26 (0.74 – 6.89)
Age (years)	< 30	2 (28.6)	5 (71.4)	2.638 (0.451)
	30 – 39	4 (22.2)	14 (77.8)	
	40 – 49	5 (10.2)	44 (89.8)	
	50 +	7 (17.1)	34 (82.9)	
Professional field	Applied sciences	14 (25.5)	41 (74.5)	7.161 (0.028)
	Management sciences	2 (4.9)	39 (95.1)	
	Humanities	1 (16.7)	5 (83.3)	

The results show that the proportion of males (80.6%) was lower than that of females (90.4%) but the association was not significant (χ^2 = 2.114, p > 0.05). Also, there is no significant association between age and having ever attended the virtual conference (χ^2 = 2.638; p > 0.05). Lastly, there is a significant association between ever-attended virtual conferences and the professional field of academics (χ^2= 7.161; p < 0.05).

Hypothesis Two

$H_0{}^2$: There is no significant association between academic staff preference for mode of conference attendance and their demographic characteristics.

Table 7: Chi-square test of association between preferred mode of conference attendance and the reasons Academic staff prefer the mode

Academic staff reasons for preference		**Preferred the mode of conference attendance**		**$\chi 2$ (p)**
		Face-to-face (%)	**Virtual (%)**	**OR (95% CI)**
Building Networks	Yes	26 (38.8)	75 (68.8)	15.273 (<0.001)
	No	41 (61.2)	34 (31.2)	3.48 (1.84 – 6.58)
Security	Yes	12 (17.9)	52 (47.7)	15.920 <0.001)
	No	55 (82.1)	57 (52.3)	4.18 (2.02 – 8.67)

Cost-effective	Yes	12 (17.9)	46 (42.2)	11.082 (0.001)
	No	55 (82.1)	63 (57.8)	3.35 (1.61 – 6.95)
Time management	Yes	7 (10.4)	51 (46.8)	24.803 (<0.001)
	No	60 (89.6)	58 (53.2)	7.54 (3.16 – 17.96)
Estacode involved	Yes	6 (9.0)	9 (8.3)	0.026 (0.872)
	No	61 (91.0)	100 (91.7)	0.92 (0.31 – 2.70)
Travel experience	Yes	27 (40.3)	13 (11.9)	19.019 (<0.001)
	No	40 (59.7)	96 (88.1)	0.20 (0.09 – 0.43)
Gender	Male	19 (42.2)	39 (65.0)	5.396 (0.020)
	Female	26 (57.8)	21 (35.0)	0.39 (0.17 – 0.87)
Age (years)	< 30	1 (2.1)	5 (8.5)	4.814 (0.186)
	30 – 39	5 (10.6)	11 (18.6)	
	40 – 49	21 (44.7)	27 (45.8)	
	50 +	20 (42.6)	16 (27.1)	

Table 7 shows that 68.8% of those that preferred virtual conference attendance and 38.8% of those who preferred face-to-face attendance do so to build networks and the association is significant (χ^2 **= 15.273; p < 0.05)**. It shows that those that preferred to attend virtual conferences are 3.5 times more likely to do so to build networks than those that preferred face-to-face attendance **[OR = 3.48; 95% CI = 1.84 – 6.58)]**. Also, 47.7% of those that preferred virtual conference attendance and 17.9% of those who preferred face-to-face attendance do so security concerns and the association is significant (χ^2 **= 15.920; p < 0.05)**. It shows that those that preferred to attend virtual conferences are over 4 times more likely to do so to security concerns than those that preferred face-to-face attendance **[OR = 4.18; 95% CI = 2.02 – 8.67].** In addition, 42.2% of those that preferred virtual conference attendance and 17.9% of those who preferred face-to-face attendance do so because of its cost-effectiveness and the association is significant (χ^2 **= 11.082; p < 0.05)**. It shows that those that preferred to attend virtual conferences are over 4 times more likely to do so for cost-effectiveness than those that preferred face-to-face attendance **[OR = 3.35; 95% CI = 1.61 – 6.95].**

Furthermore, 46.8% of those that preferred virtual conference attendance and 10.4% of those who preferred face-to-face attendance do so because of its time management and the association is significant (χ^2 **= 24.803; p < 0.05)**. It shows that those that preferred to attend virtual conferences are 7.5 times more likely to do so for time management than those that preferred face-to-face attendance **[OR = 7.54; 95% CI = 3.16 – 17.96].** However, 11.9% of those that preferred virtual conference attendance and 40.3% of those who preferred face-to-face attendance do so because of travel experience and the association is significant (χ^2 **= 24.803; p < 0.05)**. It shows that those that preferred to attend virtual conferences are 80% less likely to do so for travel experience than those that preferred face-to-face attendance **[OR = 0.20; 95% CI = 0.09 – 0.43].** Lastly, more male academics preferred virtual conference attendance to those who preferred face-to-face attendance do so while the females converse and the association because the preferred mode and gender are significant (χ^2 **= 5.396; p < 0.05)**. It shows that female academics were 60% less likely to attend virtual conferences than males**[OR = 0.39; 95% CI = 0.17 – 0.87].**

Hypothesis Three

H_0^3: There is no significant association between academic staff preference for virtual technologies and their demographic characteristics.

Table 8: Chi-square test of association between academic staff preference for virtual technologies and their demographic characteristics

Academic staff reasons for preference	**Most preferred technology for use in the virtual conference**			**χ2 (p)**
	Google Meet (%)	**Microsoft Team(%)**	**Zoom (%)**	**OR (95% CI)**

Gender	Male	12 (48.0)	13 (44.8)	38 (60.3)	2..355 (0.308)
	Female	13 (52.0)	16 (55.2)	25 (39.7)	
Age (years)	< 30	3 (11.5)	1 (3.3)	3 (4.8)	5.831 (0.015)
	30 – 39	9 (34.6)	1 (3.3)	8 (12.9)	
	40 – 49	6 (23.1)	18 (60.0)	28 (45.2)	
	50 +	8 (30.8)	10 (33.3)	23 (37.1)	
Years of Experience	< 10	6 (25.0)	8 (28.6)	12 (19.7)	7.919 (0.095)
	10 – 19	8 (33.3)	12 (42.8)	38 (62.3)	
	2) +	10 (41.7)	8 (28.6)	8 18.0)	

Table 8 shows that more females preferred Google Meet and Microsoft Teams for virtual conferences while more males preferred Zoom but the association is not significant ($p > 0.05$). Also, there is a significant association between the most preferred technology for use in virtual conferences and the age of the academics ($p < 0.05$). Lastly, the most preferred technology for use in a virtual conference is not significantly associated with the number of years of experience of the academics ($p > 0.05$).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study found that 88% of the academics were aware of virtual conferences while 76% had attended virtual conferences either nationally, internationally or both and 2 in every 3 academics welcomed the development. It can be seen that the proportions are indeed very high which portends that virtual conferences have come to stay as it has become very popular. These findings agreed with the submission of Withington, & Kolivand (2022) that virtual conference has become the global new normal situation and has drawn the attention of lecturers and institutions.

Secondly, the study also found that 62% of the academics preferred to attend conferences virtually and half of them preferred Zoom to the other technologies in use. This is in line with the submission of Erickson,*et al* . (2020) who reported more attendance via virtual means but differed slightly from their report as the percentage found in this study was lower than that of Erickson,*et al (2020)* and Brennan (2021) who posited that Zoom and other platforms offer tools that encourage deep engagement and achievement of outcomes of learning. The lower percentage can be attributed to the regional differences and challenges of using virtual technologies in Nigeria where power shortage and unstable networks are still being grappled with by the populace and more so that individuals use their private networks as opposed to the use of institutional facilities in the most developed world. The findings also differed from Medina & Shrum (2022) who found overwhelming preferences for in-person or face-to-face attendance for conferences held within a 500 km distance but virtually for distances above that. It also resonated with the recommendations of Cui, Du, Wu, & Xu (2022) that conferences should go virtual because of slow economic growth and other factors considered.

In addition, the study found that attending virtual conferences is associated with the professional field of academics showing that more management sciences go for virtual while the least was from applied sciences. This also agreed in part with Falk & Hagsten (2021) who found that a greater proportion of virtual conference attendants are from management sciences but differed with their submission of the least proportion from the humanities. In the same vein, building networks, security concerns, cost-effectiveness and time management were significantly associated reasons while academics preferred virtual conferences while travel experience offered was the only significant associated reason while face-to-face conference attendance was preferred. This goes to show that attending conferences virtually affords academics the opportunity of connecting to persons even in regions they may not be able to reach physically in their lifetime, keep them safe from the security hot point, especially in the country presently, help them attend conferences and disseminate their research findings at very minimal costs financially and opportunity-wise and use their time efficiently while continuing to deliver their services in their offices and still participate in conferences, especially in distant locations like international conferences.

This finding is in agreement with Chen et al. (2020) and Medina & Shrum (2022) who listed an increase in the exponential dissemination of new knowledge, reduction in the cost and risks of traveling, time optimisation, and encourage international research collaboration as the benefits of virtual conference attendance. Lastly, it found that technology preference is significantly age-dependent. This is because technically-savvy experience is indeed age-dependent as younger people tend to be more accustomed to the technological advancement of their age than their older compatriots. This finding disagreed with Staddon (2020) whofound no age influence in attitude difference between mature and non-matured users of technology. However, the findings aligned with the conclusions of Odigwe & Owan (2020) who reported that younger academic staff significantly utilise technology more than older ones in research, recordings and teachings.

CONCLUSION

The study sought the perceptions of academics on the new normal virtual conference attendance using a survey of academic staff from Yaba College of Technology, Yaba Lagos. From the findings discussed above, it concluded that awareness and attendance of virtual conferences were very high, and most academics welcomed the innovation of attending conferences virtually for network building within and across nations, managing security concerns, managing their time efficiently and cost-effectiveness. The study also concluded that Zoom technology is the major driver of virtual conferences presently as a majority of academics have used and also prefer it.

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