

ARTICLE

A Reflection of EHPS 2025 as an Online Attendee

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Abstract

I entered the 39th Annual EHPS Conference as a reluctant virtual attendee, navigating the Zoom fatigue common to post pandemic academia. This article reflects on how that experience shifted my perception of digital integration. I explore how the conference infrastructure moved me from a passive observer to an integrated member of the scientific community, facilitating a sense of presence often missing in online formats. Drawing on parallels with my own research into virtual human simulations, I discuss the necessity of reciprocal interaction in digital spaces. This reflection highlights how high quality hybrid models address the real world tensions within academia of personal commitments, financial constraints, and environmental sustainability. In conclusion, I suggest that inclusive digital access to our conferences must become the baseline standard for a more equitable and sustainable professional community.

Key words: digital integration, inclusivity, sustainability, virtual attendance

The 39th Annual EHPS Conference in Groningen was a much anticipated fixture on my calendar, our conference is the key event that I look forward to each year for scientific exchange and networking opportunities within our community. I had intended to attend in person this year however, due to family commitments, I had to pivot to virtual attendance at the eleventh hour! This article is a reflection on my experience as a somewhat (initially) reluctant online attendee and an exploration of how my perception of attending virtually evolved over the course of the proceedings.

For many who, like me, completed a PhD during the COVID-19 pandemic, the prospect of having to attend another virtual conference was met with hesitation. Having spent years navigating digital platforms that often felt isolating, I entered the EHPS 2025 conference with a certain level of 'Zoom fatigue'. I was very grateful for the bursary that made my attendance possible, however, I was curious to see how the hybrid format would manage the balance between remote access and genuine engagement with the live events in Groningen.

What I experienced at the conference this year, however, was a significant shift in how digital integration is handled. There is a clear distinction between simply watching a stream and being integrated into a live scientific environment. The infrastructure provided for EHPS 2025 ensured that virtual participants were not a secondary audience, from the clarity of the plenary sessions to the interactive nature of the oral presentations, the digital set-up felt less like a barrier and more like a functional extension of the physical venue.

This experience prompted a broader reflection on the role of hybridity in our field. As health psychologists, we are increasingly focused on sustainability, accessibility, and the practical implementation of digital health tools. The format of the conference acted as a practical example of these themes. The organisers bridged the gap between a physical Dutch venue and a global online audience, addressing a primary tension in modern academia: the need for high-level connection balanced against the realities of funding constraints, environmental impact, and personal commitments.

Presenting My Research

A personal highlight was the opportunity to deliver an oral presentation on my PhD research, which examined the feasibility and preliminary evidence of effectiveness of an AI-driven virtual human tool designed to provide obesity education and communication-skills training to General Practitioners. While my research focuses on automated simulations, presenting the findings as an online attendee gave me real-time insight into how much the digital infrastructure actually impacts the quality of interactions. In previous online experiences, presenting my work often felt isolating; you deliver your work and receive no feedback, which can be quite demotivating, even disheartening. It is difficult to gauge if research has made an impact when you are speaking into a void, or worse, looking at tiny version of yourself in a box! However, the setup at this conference allowed for a genuine sense of presence, seeing the room and the audience in real time provided the visual feedback necessary for more authentic communication, making the Q&A feel like a conversation rather than a transaction. The feedback from international colleagues regarding the feasibility of AI tools in clinical settings was direct and valuable. This reinforced the relevance of my work and left me feeling much more motivated than at previous events I have attended, where online formats have lacked this level of engagement.

Reflecting on the delivery, the experience highlighted how important it is for online spaces to support reciprocal interactions. There is a clear parallel here with my own research, just as a simulated patient-provider consultation requires a sense of realism to be effective, the conference infrastructure allowed for a sense of presence that made the Q&A feel authentic. This reinforced a core consideration of my own work, that when virtual environments are designed for presence, they can facilitate genuine connection rather than just the transfer of information.

Reflection on Keynotes

Attending from my home office, I did initially question whether the gravitas of a keynote address could be maintained through a screen. However, the experience was not diminished by being online, if anything, I felt more connected. In a large conference hall, I can be easily distracted (a “giddy goat”, as a former teacher once called me!), but the high-quality digital infrastructure provided by the conference committee meant that I was able to attend without any distractions. Two keynotes were of particular interest to me due to their direct alignment with my own research.

Professor Ellen Smets’ keynote was very relevant to my PhD research focused on optimising how General Practitioners interact with patients within the sensitive context of obesity. Professor Smets’ insights into micro-interactions and the layers of uncertainty in consultations were really useful to inform my thinking on communicative nuances when designing digital tools to support medical education and training, specifically regarding non-stigmatising communication. Attending the session virtually offered a front row seat effect that allowed for a level of focus on the presentation and discussion that I found conducive to deep thinking.

Similarly, the keynote by Professor Justin Presseau was a priority for me. My current postdoctoral role is heavily underpinned by implementation science, and having the opportunity to hear from a leading figure in the field was important to me. Professor Presseau’s insights into how implementation frameworks support and sustain behaviour change are directly applicable to my current effort in developing a national blueprint to inform future implementation strategies for sustainably integrating digital mental health solutions into university systems and clinical workflows in Ireland.

The challenge of developing this national blueprint lies in the complexity of multi-level systems. In the context of university systems, implementation is proving to not be a linear process, it requires an understanding of institutional readiness, practitioner buy-in, and the unique referral pathways found within academic environments. Attending Professor Presseau’s discussion on behaviour systems at scale reinforced the necessity of looking beyond the individual deliverer and recipient toward the systemic environment. The keynote highlighted for me that the success of a digital health tool is as much about the system it inhabits as the technology itself.

SIG Activities and Networking

Networking opportunities are often considered the hardest aspect of a conference to replicate online. However, as a committee member of the Digital Health and Computer Tailoring Special Interest Group (SIG), I found the virtual integration of our annual meeting to be really effective. The interactive format facilitated meaningful engagement with my wonderful colleagues and provided me with the opportunity to formally meet our new chair; although we had engaged previously, being able to do so in person, albeit online, still felt like a genuine interaction.

For me, attending virtually did not diminish the utility of the session. It remained a fruitful space to discuss emerging topics within our own group, such as the intellectual property of digital solutions generated within academia and the growing influence of AI on our research methodologies. These discussions led to practical outcomes, the questions raised during the meeting, particularly regarding AI, prompted the SIG to organise a series of expert-led talks which were recently delivered to our SIG members. This direct link between the conference meeting and subsequent professional development activities demonstrated the practical value of the hybrid format. It showed that a virtual meeting can act as a catalyst for ongoing collaboration and knowledge exchange, even when all participants are not physically in the same room.

This sense of connection was further supported by the EHPS WhatsApp groups, which provided a practical link to the atmosphere on-site. Getting updates from Groningen, including the local festival celebrations and the EHPS band (which I was devastated to miss this year!) allowed me to stay informed about the social side of the conference without feeling like an outsider. I will not lie, I still missed the ‘craic’! but, the ability to engage with this social pulse while remaining present for family at home was an additional nice touch. It confirmed for me that virtual attendance, when supported by an active peer network and inclusive digital infrastructure, can be both professionally fulfilling and practically sustainable.

Sustainability and Financial Inclusion

Departing now from the intellectual and social content, my experience was defined by the practical realities of modern academia involving the intersecting demands of funding, sustainability, and personal commitments. There is a timely push within the EHPS community to offer more robust hybrid variations as we reflect on whether conferences should be held in locations that are more accessible and require a smaller carbon footprint. As health psychologists, we are well aware of how environmental factors impact global health, then prioritising sustainability is a logical extension of our scientific values.

The ability to attend virtually was the only sustainable way for many, including myself, to remain connected to the international community this year. This shift toward hybridity invites a necessary conversation about the geography of academia. There is an undeniable draw to historic venues, but is it time to consider balancing that experience against the environmental impact and the financial constraints of the global community? A somewhat rhetorical question, however one without a straightforward answer, particularly when accounting for the digital divide.

This balance is also particularly relevant when considering the financial barriers to entry. I was fortunate to be awarded a bursary to attend this year, without that funding, my participation would not have been possible. For some, perhaps many PhD students and Early Career Researchers, the cost of international travel and accommodation is unfortunately often prohibitive. Through the investment in high-quality virtual infrastructure, the EHPS can provide a path to engagement that has the potential to bypass, or certainly reduce, many of these costs. In doing so, the society is actively democratising access to knowledge and ensuring that participation is not limited by a researcher’s budget or their geographic location. This is not only about convenience and inclusivity, it is about the long-term viability of international scientific exchange.

Concluding Thoughts

My perception of the success of the EHPS 2025 hybrid model offers a reflection point for future hybrid offerings at our conferences. My experience as an online attendee this year felt different, it was apparent that the online participant was no longer a secondary consideration but as important as those attending in person. As we look toward future meetings, access to high-quality digital infrastructure should move beyond a contingency plan to become the baseline standard for inclusivity within our community.

The EHPS committee demonstrated a successful implementation of their own by moving beyond providing a simple digital platform to creating a system that considered the attendees need for presence, interaction, and engagement. Overall, the hybrid format respected the reality of the ‘human’ behind the researcher and acknowledged that professional development does not exist in a vacuum, separate from family commitments or environmental responsibilities.

Attending EHPS 2025 online has shown me that it is possible to maintain the intellectual rigor and social fabric of our community while embracing a more sustainable, equitable, and flexible future. I am grateful for the opportunity to have been part of the conference this year, and I look forward to seeing how these lessons continue to shape the way we “put health psychology to work” in our research, our systems, and our practices.



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