

Understanding Intentions to Attend a Convention: A Gender Perspective

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Abstract

The meeting, incentives, conventions and exhibitions (MICE) or Business Events sector is a growing industry. However, research on conventions, which is arguably the main component of the sector, is a largely neglected area of study and little is known about attendees and their intentions to attend association conventions. Existing studies have sought to explain the convention attendee decision-making process, yet have not focused on how decisions might vary for different groups of attendees, for example males versus females. This paper attempts to fill some of this gap by providing an overview of the research pertaining to convention attendees and presenting arguments in favour of gender based research to predict future convention attendance. While traditionally men have represented the majority of convention attendees, particularly in the scientific industries, the number of women attending conventions continues to rise. Despite this trend, research on women and convention travel is scarce to date. Future research could examine the role that gender plays on convention attendee decision-making behaviour to help explain whether differences exist between men and women's decisions with regard to convention travel. This paper is aimed at developing a more complete understanding of and the capacity to better predict convention attendance decisions according to gender. Such information would be vital for the industry to better understand what men and women deem important when deciding on convention travel. The paper concludes by suggesting that more research is required, with a particular focus on gender, before we can truly claim to understand convention attendee behaviour.

Keywords: convention attendee; intentions; gender; behaviour

Introduction

Business events generally include meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions (MICE). One of the main components of business events are conventions, also referred to as conferences, which are a forum to share knowledge, disseminate the latest research results, hear eminent speakers, learn new skills, gain accreditation points to keep a professional certification or rating, advance education in the field of interest and network with peers (McCabe, Poole, Weeks, & Leiper, 2000; Rogers, 2003). Not only can conventions aid the exchange of knowledge and expertise but they may provide economic contributions for a destination. Today, convention tourism is a global industry that has become a highly competitive segment of the tourism sector, however the amount of research conducted in the area has not kept pace with the growth (Crouch & Louviere, 2004; Jarumaneerat, Al-Sabbahy, & Jones, 2007; Lee & Back, 2005a; McCabe, et al., 2000; Oppermann, 1996; Yoo & Weber, 2005).

Typically, convention tourism research, to date, has focused on convention site selection, the economic impact of conventions, the role of destination image, the evolution of the industry and convention bureau operations (Carlsen, 1995; Crouch & Louviere, 2004; Lee & Back, 2005a; Yoo & Weber, 2005). A review of convention tourism literature also shows that the focus has been almost exclusively on the meeting planner's perspective in relation to their destination decision-making process, the importance of site selection attributes and satisfaction with hotel venues (Boo, Koh, & Jones, 2008; Hilliard & Baloglu, 2008; Kang, Suh, & Jo, 2005; Oh, Kim, & Hong, 2009; Qu, Li, & Kei Tat Chu, 2000; Severt & Palakurthi, 2008). Despite the fact that attendees are arguably fundamental to the survival of the convention industry, they are one of the most poorly researched areas of convention tourism (Leach, Liu, & Winsor, 2008). A review of convention tourism research from 1990 to 2003 found that only eight out of 137 articles focused on convention attendees across this 14 year period, making it the least published research theme out of the five themes identified (Lee & Back, 2005a).

Scholars who have examined attendees have largely focused on association attendees because they are the key decision-maker in choosing whether to attend a convention (Lee & Back, 2007a; Mair & Thompson, 2009; Ngamson & Beck, 2000; Oppermann, 1998; Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Rittichainuwat, Beck, & LaLopa, 2001; Yoo & Chon, 2008; Zhang, Leung, & Qu, 2007). Essentially, association attendees have more volitional control over the decision to attend a convention compared to other types of attendees (such as government or corporate attendees). Clearly, understanding the association convention attendee, how they make decisions and the factors that influence these decisions would benefit conference organisers and meeting planners whose revenue depends on attendance levels (Lee & Back, 2005a). Destination marketers would also find this information useful as association conventions provide the largest share of income for many operators servicing the business events sector (McCabe, et al., 2000). Association attendees are therefore the focus of this paper.

The aim of this paper is to highlight that a gap exists in convention tourism literature with regard to an understanding of the role played by gender. It is argued that this line of inquiry warrants greater attention in an effort to better predict future attendance at association conventions. The next section of the paper provides an overview of research carried out to date on drivers of association convention attendance and predicting intentions to attend future conventions.

Convention Attendees and Drivers of Attendance

Several drivers of convention attendance have been identified in the literature. Some of these include the convention destination/location, networking, educational opportunities, cost and the influence of significant others. Other drivers have emerged in some studies, however they are not considered to be generalisable.

It appears to be unanimous that the location or destination of the convention is one of the main factors affecting association convention attendance (Bauer, Law, Tse, & Weber, 2008; Grant & Weaver, 1996; Jago & Deery, 2005; Lee & Back, 2007a; Mair & Thompson, 2009; Ngamson & Beck, 2000; Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Rittichainuwat, et al., 2001; Yoo & Chon, 2008; Yoo & Zhao, 2010; Zhang, et al., 2007). In some cases, particularly for international attendees, the pull of the destination can drive convention attendance as it allows attendees to combine both business and pleasure through pre and post touring around the convention dates (Rutherford & Kreck, 1994). A favourable perception of a destination can positively affect attendance intentions because convention attendees prefer certain destinations over others and delegate numbers will be higher in some destinations largely due to their perceived image (Lee & Back, 2007a).

It is widely accepted that networking opportunities and the social elements are also important drivers of convention attendance decisions (Grant & Weaver, 1996; Jago & Deery, 2005; Lee & Back, 2007a; Mair & Thompson, 2009; Ngamson & Beck, 2000; Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Rittichainuwat, et al., 2001; Severt, Wang, Chen, & Breiter, 2007; Yoo & Chon, 2008, 2010; Yoo & Zhao, 2010; Zhang, et al., 2007). In particular, Jago and Deery (2005, p. 34) note that “conventions offer a concentrated and convenient occasion for face-to-face discussion, underpinning further research collaboration and business deals”. Similarly, Yoo and Chon (2008) suggest that potential attendees evaluate the convention program and are more likely to attend if the time allocated for professional and social networking opportunities is considered to be sufficient for their needs. Moreover, Mair and Thompson (2009) contend that networking opportunities are significant predictors of future convention intentions amongst UK convention attendees.

Another important driver of association convention decisions identified by existing studies is educational opportunities (Grant & Weaver, 1996; Mair & Thompson, 2009; Ngamson & Beck, 2000; Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Rittichainuwat, et al., 2001; Severt, et al., 2007; Yoo & Chon, 2008; Yoo & Zhao, 2010; Zhang, et al., 2007). The “educational” factor has also been referred to in other studies as encompassing personal and professional development, career enhancement, the desire to learn, keeping up with changes in the profession/field, updating knowledge, hearing eminent speakers and learning new skills (Oppermann & Chon, 1997). According to Yoo and Chon (2008, p. 120), “people are interested in attending conventions to increase their knowledge by listening to speakers and gathering information that they can use.”

Cost is another factor that is important to the convention attendance decision (Mair & Thompson, 2009; Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Rittichainuwat, et al., 2001; Yoo & Chon, 2008; Yoo & Zhao, 2010; Zhang, et al., 2007). Association attendees are often required to pay for their own convention travel due to the discretionary nature of association conventions. An attendee would need to assess his or her financial situation before deciding to attend. Alternatively, attendees may seek financial support from their employer to cover their attendance. In some cases, a company offers a limited number of places for their employees to attend a convention and many may apply for this support which can often become competitive between colleagues. Rittichainuwat et al. (2001) suggest that both affordability and availability of time are also considered under the cost factor. More recently, Yoo and Zhao (2010) not only identify cost as a determinant of attendance, but they group it with travel distance to the convention destination.

A study of family decision-making in convention participation showed that family members, especially spouses, play an integral role in the potential convention attendee's decision-making process (Oh, Roel, & Shock, 1993). Rittichainuwat et al., (2001) note that attendees' family/spouse can facilitate convention attendance. This finding possibly relates to attendees who travel accompanied with their family/spouses, who then assess the tourism activities at a destination (Davidson, 2003). In essence, "The business tourist becomes a leisure tourist when the working day is over and is often accompanied by a partner who is a full-time leisure tourist" (Swarbrooke & Horner, 1999, p. 32). Conversely, it is argued that convention attendees' boss/advisors and colleagues have a greater influence on attendees than their family/spouse with regard to their decision to attend a convention (Lee & Back, 2007b). These studies confirm the importance of significant others in the attendance decision.

There is insight to be gained from existing convention tourism studies, which have sought to identify the drives affecting association convention travel decisions. The influence of gender on these drivers has yet to be explored in the literature. Therefore, in developing a more complete understanding of attendees, gender investigations merit attention. The next section of the paper will explore the literature on the role of gender in a tourism context with a particular focus on the travel behaviour.

Gender and Travel

Tourism is considered to be "a process constructed out of gendered societies and all aspects of tourism-related development and activity embody gender relations" (Kinnaird & Hall, 1994, p. 24). Gender and tourism are in fact interrelated, as both are associated with social encounters. Gender analysis is particularly important in travel behaviour investigations, as it helps to identify similarities and differences between men and women. Such information is vital to tourism marketing activities, and is essential in ensuring that the different needs of both women and men are met. The study of gender has thus been used to explain travel behaviour and continues to be widely used by tourism marketers as a form of segmentation and for product and/or service development purposes (Collins & Tisdell, 2002; Oh, Parks, & Demicco, 2002). The importance of gender and travel behaviour, while under-researched, cannot be overlooked.

Although people have been travelling for centuries, researchers have only recently been exploring the differences between male and female travel behaviour from varied perspectives (McGehee, Loker-Murphy, & Uysal, 1996; Oh, et al., 2002). Some studies have centred their investigations on gender, primarily in the field of leisure tourism (for example Collins & Tisdell, 2002; Frew & Shaw, 1999; McGehee, et al., 1996; Meng & Uysal, 2008). There is some support for the view that differences exist in relation to gender regarding leisure travel behaviour. Specifically, when deciding on a holiday, women appear to be more inclined to visit destinations that provide heritage and cultural experiences, opportunities for family bonding, an appreciation of the natural scenery, and places to comfortably unwind and relax (Frew & Shaw, 1999; McGehee, et al., 1996; Meng & Uysal, 2008; Xie, Costa, & Morais, 2008). In contrast, men place greater importance on recreational activities and/or attractions involving sports, such as canoeing, hunting, fishing, visiting sporting museums and attending sporting events, when deciding on holiday travel destinations (Frew & Shaw, 1999; McGehee et al, 1996; Meng & Uysal, 2008). These results suggest that women and men may have different travel preferences, which are likely to influence their decision-making behaviour. Nevertheless, similarities have also been observed. For instance, Meng and Uysal (2008) revealed that quality and convenience were the most important destination attributes among American travellers to a nature-based resort. This suggests that while women and men are often different in their travel behaviour, this is not always the case.

Overall, however, only limited research has been conducted to address gender perspectives in tourism, despite the fact that gender appears to be fundamental in the travel decision-making process (Kinnaird & Hall, 1994; Norris & Wall, 1994). Criticisms have been made regarding researchers' lack of critical theory that includes gender into tourist experience investigations. As a result, analyses have been left incomplete and gender-specific concerns are often absent, which has led to 'gender-blindness' (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000; Westwood, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2000). This bias has "led to many assumptions that women's travel behaviour mimics the patterns of their male counterparts" (Smith & Carmichael, 2006, p. 66). Other researchers confirm this trend and note shortcomings in the literature, such as the dearth of gender-specific research in tourism, studies presenting a one-sided empirical focus on men and studies adopting a male bias without theoretical grounding (Meng & Uysal, 2008; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). This noticeable paucity of analysis pertaining to gender impedes the development of theoretical frameworks in the field of tourism. It also weakens our understanding of tourist behaviour and the role that gender plays on this process (Carr, 1999).

Whilst extant research in gender and travel behaviour has provided some insight into understanding the differences between men and women's leisure travel, it is important to also explore how research in other tourism contexts, such as business travel, has investigated gender. More specifically, to understand the role that gender plays in convention travel decisions.

Gender and Convention Attendance Drivers

Although traditionally men have represented the majority of convention attendees, particularly in the scientific industries, the number of women attending conventions continues to rise (Lee & Park, 2002; Mottiar & Quinn, 2004). In response to this increase, there is new interest into understanding how the needs of women differ from men with regard to convention travel (McCleary, Weaver, & Lan, 1994). Despite this trend, research on gender and convention travel is scarce.

Amongst the few studies concerning gender and convention travel, Collins and Tisdell (2002) indicate that Australian women travelling overseas for the purpose of attending a convention are generally aged between 35 to 44 years. This form of travel gradually declines after women reach the empty-nest stage of the family life cycle, even though their children no longer live in their household and they have more time to focus on career goals. Collins and Tisdell (2002) explain that while some women re-enter the workforce, they may not be able to claim convention travel as a form of reward for tenure, which might disadvantage them in participating in convention travel. Conversely, the study shows that outbound convention travel for Australian men peaks at the age of 45 to 54, towards the later stage of the family life cycle. It may be that men in this age group hold senior roles at their workplace and see convention travel as an opportunity to share knowledge.

An earlier study by Grant and Weaver (1996) provides support for Collins and Tisdell (2002). Their study sought to profile attendees based on the criteria they use to select conventions and their demographic variables. They place attendees into three homogeneous groups. The first two groups attend conventions for the networking and educational opportunities. Both groups contain a relatively equal proportion of males and females ranging from 25-54 years. The third group of individuals attend conventions for the leadership opportunities. This group is dominated by males aged 45-54 years. These findings suggest that attendees have different reasons for attending a convention depending on their age and gender.

Still little is known, to date, about whether the drivers of convention attendance are different for men and women. It may be that women form future attendance intentions based on the convention destination or perhaps the opportunity to be a speaker influences men more than women to attend a future convention. Then again, there may be factors that both men and women consider to be equally important, such as the networking opportunities. There is therefore a need to examine convention travel decisions to gain further insight from a gender perspective.

In a recent study, Yoo and Zhao (2010) sought to determine whether differences exist between the demographic profiles of convention attendees and the underlying factors in their convention participation decision-making process. According to their study, there were no significant differences between males and females, with regard to the relative influence of networking, travelability (cost, travel distance), destination and educational factors on their convention travel decision. However, their study focuses on hospitality industry professionals who reside in the United States. Thus, future researchers could investigate different professional groups and a representative sample of international association convention attendees. Additionally, further studies could employ strong theoretical frameworks to provide a more comprehensive examination of convention attendees and possible gender differences with regard to the decision to attend a convention.

Conclusion

This paper reveals that convention tourism research is a largely neglected area of study and does not yet correspond to the growth in the sector. In particular, we still know little about association convention attendees. While studies have sought to identify the factors affecting convention attendee participation, research is required to understand how attendance decisions might vary for different groups of attendees. Scholars have recognised that gender is fundamental to travel decisions, yet there is a distinct lack of gender-specific research in tourism. This particularly applies to convention tourism research, where references to gender are almost nonexistent. Gender comparisons therefore need to be carried out, in order to better understand convention attendees.

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