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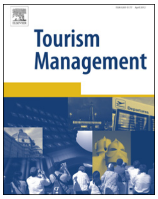

Customer-customer interactions (CCIs) at conferences: An identity approach[☆]

Wei Wei [a], [*], Ying (Tracy) Lu [b], Li Miao [c], Liping A. Cai [d], Chen-ya Wang [e]

[a] Hospitality Services Department, Rosen College of Hospitality Management, University of Central Florida, Office 284C, 9907, Universal Blvd, Orlando, FL 32819, USA
[b] Hospitality Management and Tourism, School of Human Environmental Sciences, College of Agriculture, Food & Environment, University of Kentucky, 121 Erikson Hall, Lexington, KY 40506, USA
[c] School of Hotel and Restaurant Administration, College of Human Sciences, Oklahoma State University, 210 Human Sciences West, Stillwater, OK 74078, USA
[d] School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, College of Health and Human Sciences, Purdue University, 700 W State St., West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA
[e] Institute of Service Science, College of Technology Management, National Tsing Hua University, No. 101, Section 2, Kuang-Fu Road, Hsinchu, 30013, Taiwan, ROC

HIGHLIGHTS

- Customer-customer interactions (CCIs) influence attendees' self-esteem and transcendent conference experiences.
- Social-emotional support in CCIs has a bigger impact on transcendent conference experiences than know-how exchange does.
- The impacts of CCIs on self-esteem and transcendent conference experiences are partially mediated by group identification.

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ABSTRACT

The dynamic of modern events reflects an increased focus on staging unique and compelling experiences for event attendees. Considering the centrality of customer-customer interactions (CCIs) in conferences, conference experience is greatly driven by attendees' engagement in CCIs. Anchored in social psychology, organizational behavior, and marketing/branding literature, this study adopts the Self-Concept and Social Identity Theory (SIT) as its theoretical bedrock to investigate the underlying mechanism through which CCIs influence attendees' experiences at association conferences. Data was collected from 821 former association conference attendees. SEM results suggest a mediating model, which illustrates that attendees' experience of know-how exchange and social-emotional support during CCIs significantly influences their group-based self-esteem and transcendent conference experiences, while the social-emotional support plays a more significant role. Such relationships are further found to be partially mediated by one's identification with the conference group. Findings yield both theoretical contributions and managerial implications.

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1. Introduction

Recent years has witnessed an increased focus on *experiential events*. According to a survey conducted by the Houston-based hospitality management company, the top 2015 conference and meeting trend reflects an emphasis on attendee experiences; conference and meeting professionals are seeking to deliver unique and creative experiences (Alderton, 2015). *Successful Meetings* also pointed out a need to create a compelling meeting experience for attendees (Gilmore, 2015). Ball (2012) particularly called for a perspective shift from thinking of the event-goer as a *passive attendee* to an *active participant* who expects active engagement. While the level of attendee engagement is recommended as a natural measure for evaluating an event experience (Kuhn, Wattenhofer, Wirz, Flückiger, & Tröster, 2011), studies related to

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[*] Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: Wei.Wei@ucf.edu (W. Wei), tracy.lu@uky.edu (Y. Lu), lm@okstate.edu (L. Miao), liping@purdue.edu (L.A. Cai), cywang2@mx.nthu.edu.tw (C.-y. Wang).

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attendee engagement in the event setting is nevertheless lacking with few recent exceptions (e.g., Nordvall, Pettersson, Svensson, & Brown, 2014; Richardson, 2014). It is therefore of critical importance to boost a deeper understanding of attendee engagement in events.

Conferences are regarded as one the most competitive segments of the business sector of events (Getz, 2008). As one critical component of a conference, customer-customer interactions (CCIs) play an essential role in fostering a memorable conference experience. A PCMA (Professional Convention Management Association) Survey in 2010 pointed out that conference attendees expected greater opportunities to interact with others. Compared with other settings, CCI studies in a conference setting seemingly lag behind (Zhang, Beatty, & Mothersbaugh, 2010). A few conference studies have acknowledged the positive effects of interactions among attendees on networks building (Mair & Thompson, 2009), knowledge exchange (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2007), education and career development (Zhang, Leung, & Qu, 2007), and self-esteem improvement (Severt, Wang, Chen, & Breiter, 2007). However, these studies have prioritized the instrumental outcomes of CCIs. How attendees subjectively experience CCIs remains less understood.

To address the research gaps identified in prior studies, the present study was aimed at investigating attendees' subjective experience during CCIs. Specifically, this study adopts the Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) to illuminate the process of CCIs influencing conference experience. The objectives were threefold: 1) to investigate the impact of attendees' CCI experiences on their conference experience, 2) to test the relationship between CCI experiences and group identity, and 3) to examine the role group identity plays in influencing attendees' conference experience. From a theoretical perspective, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach by synthetizing perspectives from social psychology, organizational behavior, and marketing/branding to propose an underlying mechanism through which attendee engagement in CCIs can make an impact on their conference experiences. The findings will extend previous CCI literature in general hospitality and tourism settings to a setting where CCIs are integral to consumers' overall experience yet have not received sufficient investigation. Practically, this study will offer a way to conceptualize what keeps attendees engaged and return, and provide the events practitioners with insight into how they can leverage the mechanisms of emotion and identity meaning-making to create a more profound and meaningful experience for attendees and to ultimately sustain the development and success of the event industry.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Attendee engagement and customer-customer interactions (CCIs)

The current customer-centric business environment calls for hospitality organizations to pursue strategies steering customer engagement. Different from relationship marketing, customer engagement concept focuses on the interactive relationship and the perceived experiential values (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011). This concept is predicted to be among the top priorities for firms (Verhoef, Reinartz, & Krafft, 2010) and a new research perspective in marketing and service management in the coming years (Brodie et al., 2011). In the event setting, attendee engagement has not received sufficient academic attention. One exception is the study of Richardson (2014), which examined the psychological and social processes of attendee engagement in small, popular music venues. The findings provided music venues administrators with tools to help create audience loyalty by fostering participant engagement.

In prior attempts to conceptualize and operationalize customer engagement in general service settings, customer-customer interactions (CCIs) emerge as a frequently recognized behavioral manifestation of customer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011; van Doorn et al., 2010). Such interactions can be offline (Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012) or online as initiated by potential, actual, or former customers about a company (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). CCIs, therefore, build opportunities for increasing participatory engagement. In a conference setting, a high level of interpersonal interactions among attendees is well recognized. Attendee engagement in CCIs is perceived to be purposeful, desired, and integral in attendee experience (Nicholls, 2007; Parker & Ward, 2000). Attendees can co-create with other attendees the meaning of their conference experience via active engagement in CCIs. It is thus of critical importance to examine the process of attendee engagement in CCIs creating a meaningful and transcendent conference experience.

2.2. Proposed framework of attendee-centric conference community triad

The "brand community" literature provides great insights into how attendee engagement in CCIs may influence their conference experience. Customers desire to have a linking value with other customers to satisfy their social needs for a sense of community (Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999). From a customer-experiential perspective, a brand community represents a fabric of social relationships in which the customer is situated (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), more vividly, envisioned a brand community as a customer-customer-brand triad (see Fig. 1). In this brand community triad, crucial relationships include those between the customer and the brand and those among fellow customers. In such a customer-centric brand community, the existence and meaningfulness of the brand community lies in customer experience of those crucial relationships (McAlexander et al., 2002).

Conferences bear resemblance to this customer-centric brand community for two reasons. First, conferences feature a high level of interpersonal interactions among attendees who gather for the same theme. Second, the success of a conference greatly lies in attendees' engagement in these interpersonal interactions. Therefore, by incorporating perspectives of branding, this study proposed a conceptual framework, which depicted conferences as an attendee-centric community triad built upon a fabric of interactions among attendees (see Fig. 2). This triad framework along with the self-concept laid ground for the proposal of an operational model of attendee CCI experience. Self-concept is perceived as being multidimensional with three levels: personal self, relational

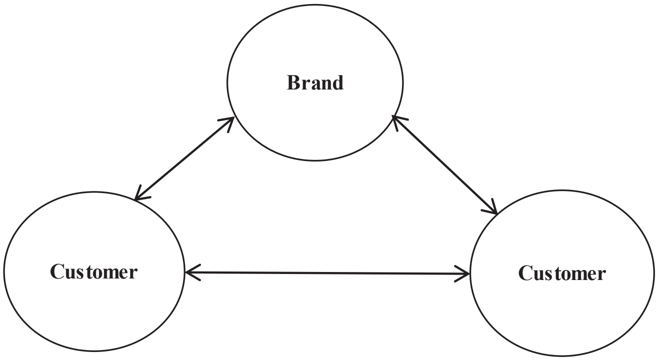

Fig. 1. Brand community triad (Muniz & O'Gulnn, 2001).

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