



The relationship between sense of community and satisfaction on future intentions to attend an association's annual meeting



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Sense of community has a positive and direct relationship with satisfaction.
- Sense of community has a positive and direct relationship with future intentions.
- The direct path from satisfaction to future intentions was not significant.
- There was no mediation effect of satisfaction between sense of community and future intentions.
- Sense of community has a stronger impact on future intentions than satisfaction.

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ABSTRACT

Annual association meetings are imperative to associations because they are the biggest revenue source outside of membership dues. The constant challenge for associations is to come up with innovative ideas to create a meeting experience that can build attendance and retain members year after year. This study proposes that the psychological factor sense of community drives people to an association meeting every year. The purpose of the study is to understand the sense of community at an annual meeting among association members and whether sense of community has an influence on future intentions to attend the annual meeting. In addition, the mediating effect of satisfaction on sense of community and future intentions is examined.

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1. Introduction

According to the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE, 2015), there are close to two million associations in the United States and the number keeps growing every year. These associations, which include trade associations, professional associations, and philanthropic or charitable organizations, host a number of meetings throughout the year. In 2012, 315,400 meetings were hosted by association/membership organizations with

more than 59 million attendees (Convention Industry Council [CIC], 2012). Of the different types of meetings hosted by associations, annual association meetings tend to be the largest that unite individuals and/or companies that share the same interests and passion. These meetings offer personal and professional connections, belonging, support, and empowerment for their members. Annual association meetings are important to associations because they are a huge revenue source. Associations can generate more than 30% of their annual operating income from these meetings through registration fees, exhibitor fees, and sponsorships (Fenich, 2012). A substantial part of the success of an annual meeting relies on attendance. Attendees are becoming more sophisticated in their choices and needs. Therefore, it is an ongoing challenge for these associations and meeting organizers to produce the same annual

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meeting year after year while making it attractive. Over the past decade, research has provided some understanding of what influences association members' decisions to attend an annual meeting. Most research has presented immediate motivating factors or inhibiting factors rather than examining the psychological reason behind the decision to attend. An annual meeting should be more than simply providing the visible elements that attendees are looking for. It should provide an experience. It is important to understand the psychological reason of why people are attending the meetings. Meeting organizers should gain a perspective of their members that goes beyond the previously found motivational and inhibiting factors of attendance.

There has been anecdotal evidence along with trade articles that discuss the importance of building a sense of community at these meetings. Interestingly enough, ASAE (2015, What is an association, 2) states that "a sense of community coordination is at the heart of the association profession", yet no research has been conducted to examine sense of community in regards to association membership. Therefore, this study proposes a psychological factor, sense of community, which drives people to an association meeting every year.

The proposed definition of sense of community at an annual meeting is a feeling that attendees have of belonging, a feeling that attendees matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that attendees' needs will be met through their commitment to be together at an annual meeting (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). For associations, the annual meeting is where "one can find people with similar ways of looking, feeling, thinking, and being ... a place where one can safely be oneself (McMillan, 1996, p. 321)." Sense of community is a feeling between the individual and the group, in this case, the annual meeting.

The purpose of the study is to understand the sense of community at an annual meeting among association members and whether sense of community has an influence on future intentions to attend the annual meeting. Although research in service and marketing has explained the strong direct relationship between satisfaction and behavioral intentions, in the case of meetings, several studies have found a limited to non-significant relationship between satisfaction and behavioral intentions, suggesting other factors may have a stronger influence on behavioral intentions (e.g., Lee, Petrick, & Crompton, 2007; Mason & Nassivera, 2013). Therefore, the mediating effect of meeting satisfaction on sense of community and future intentions is examined. The research objectives for this study are: (1) to examine the relationship between sense of community and future intentions and (2) to examine the mediating role of meeting satisfaction between sense of community and future intentions.

The major contribution of this study lies in adopting the sense of community model from psychology to gain a better understanding of attendee behavior. This study will add a theoretical foundation to the existing meeting and convention research. Also, this study will contribute to sense of community research in psychology by applying the concept to a new setting, an annual meeting.

2. Literature review

2.1. Meeting attendee behavior

Although research in the meeting industry has been growing, for over a decade most of the academic research in the convention and meeting industry has focused on the perspectives of meeting planners or organizers. The research includes studies on economic impact of conventions (e.g., Crouch & Ritchie, 1998; Rutherford & Kreck, 1994) and association meeting planners' site selection process (e.g., Baloglu & Love, 2001; Oppermann, 1996). Less attention

has been paid to individual convention attendees and their wants and needs (Lee & Back, 2005; Mair & Thompson, 2009; Zhang, Leung, & Qu, 2007).

The research that has focused on the perspectives of meeting attendees is largely twofold. There are studies that identified motivations and/or inhibitors in attending an annual meeting (e.g., Grant & Weaver, 1996; Jago & Deery, 2005; Lee & Back, 2007a; Ngamsom & Beck, 2000; Oppermann, 1998; Price, 1993; Rittichainuwat, Beck, & Lalopa, 2001) and those that presented a decision-making model (e.g., Lee & Back, 2007a, b; 2008; Mair & Thompson, 2009; Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Var, Cesario, & Mauser, 1985; Yoo & Chon, 2010; Zhang et al., 2007). The common thread of the motivation and inhibitor studies is in the identification of a wide array of motives for attendee participation including networking, education, leadership enhancement, and career enhancement and the inhibitors that may prevent attendance.

2.2. Sense of community

According to Chaskin and Richman (1992), community is defined as "... a place of reference and belonging ... the community includes dimensions of space, place, and sentiment as well as action" (p. 113). Definitions of community often make reference to a community's common component elements (e.g., individuals, physical contexts, activities) and to the processes (whether psychological, social, or cultural) that occur among those components (Wiesenfeld, 1996). The concept of sense of community is one of the concepts most used by community psychologists (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009).

The sense of community construct was first developed by Sarason (1974) to reflect the importance of community life and the strength of bonding among community members. It was defined as "the sense that one was part of a readily available mutually supportive network of relationships upon which one could depend, and as a result of which one did not experience sustained feelings of loneliness" (Sarason, 1974, p. 1). Sarason argued that sense of community was essentially a subjective experience associated with a feeling of belonging rather than the traditional objective approaches to group interaction. It is "the perception of similarity to others" (1974, p. 157). In addition, the absence of sense of community is associated with loneliness, alienation, psychological distress, and a feeling of impotence regarding social forces (Townley & Kloos, 2009). McMillan and Chavis (1986) are credited with providing a more theoretical model with four dimensions: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. They defined sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p.9). The authors emphasized a high degree of uniformity and homogeneity in reference to group values and norms (Colombo, Mosso, & DePiccoli, 2001). The membership component of sense of community asserts that communities form boundaries of who can and cannot belong (Fisher & Sonn, 2007). For more than two decades, the McMillan and Chavis model has remained the primary theoretical foundation for studies on sense of community (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009).

When the sense of community construct was developed, it did not explicitly refer to the territorial/geographical community (e.g., neighborhood). The sense of community model was developed to be broad enough to be applied to relational and organizational communities (e.g., work, political, or recreational interests). Most of the empirical research has investigated sense of community at different levels of territorial/geographical community, from a block

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