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AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF CONFERENCE ATTENDEES' POST-PARTICIPATION BEHAVIOUR

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With a specific focus on the conference segment of the MICE industry, this study extends the growing body of knowledge by testing a modified version of approach adapted from Severt et al. (2007) to a new classification of conference type (international and academic). A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from 497 international conference attendees. The results of the multiple regression analysis showed that performance and satisfaction, respectively, have a direct positive significant relationship on post-participation intentions of international conference attendees. The mediating effect of satisfaction is also supported. The results of this study can be considered as an important tool for conference organizers, universities and associations to attract future international academic attendees and improve the overall quality of their academic events.

Keywords: Performance Evaluation, Satisfaction, Post-Participation Intentions, International Attendees, Kuala Lumpur, Conference Industry

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INTRODUCTION

The Meetings, Incentives, Convention and Exhibition (MICE), also known as meeting industry, is the new catchphrase in international tourism. MICE tourism is a significant contributor to the overall economic growth produced by the tourism industry, and an essential part of the spread of knowledge and professional practices (UNWTO, 2014) that have also appeared as a major subsection of the tourism industry, both in terms of amount of travel and expenditure generated (Law, 1993; Oppermann, 1996; Nice, 2004). In recent years, “MICE has become a new emerging globalized industry with the characteristics of three high, three great, and three superior – high value created, high value added, and high potentiality; great value, great employment opportunity, and great inter-industry linkage; superior service, superior order, and superior environment” (Lin, 2005, p.1). According to Yoo and Chon (2008), the rapid growth of the meeting industry leads tourism authorities to struggle to attract a larger number of attendees to conventions and conferences in their destinations. Accordingly, Lee and Park (2002) asserted that in today’s world business, conventions and conferences have become crucially important. Consistently, Kim (1998) argued that conventions serve effectively the purpose of re-imagining a city for tourists in a positive, dynamic way. With the development of the convention industry, the increasing importance of service has been recognized by destinations more than ever (Lee & Park, 2002) because appropriate facilities and the quality of the services provided are critical in terms of the destination’s success in convention tourism (Crouch & Weber, 2002). Recent years have also seen an increase in the competition among convention destinations, as new facilities are added to the already saturated convention market (Malek Mohammadi & Mohamed, 2010). To face the conditions presented by such a competitive market, destinations and associations both need to maximize the numbers of convention attendees in general (Oppermann & Chon, 1997) and international attendees in particular.

Among the hospitality industry, conference tourism has reached the status of an important component that benefits to a variety of stakeholders (Severt et al., 2007). Additionally, conference tourism has been described as one of the fastest growing segments of the tourism industry (Fenich, 2001; Rogers, 1998) in the last 30 years. Nevertheless, the scientific literature has not thoroughly examined

meeting and convention industry, despite its global expansion and worldwide rise (Choi & Boger, 2000). This field has only recently been addressed as the main focus of research, and it still presents considerable gaps in its exploration. Some aspects of the conference tourism's field have been researched to a greater extent, while others still deserve more insights (Malek Mohammadi et al., 2011). It may be argued that this industry has not attracted the researchers' interest, as it actually deserves. In this regard UNWTO called for more research and data to be gathered for the development of the meetings industry since there is no reason to abandon efforts or discount the value that meetings, conventions and exhibitions generate (UNWTO, 2014).

The main purpose of this study is to determine the international conference attendees' post-participation behaviour through a comprehensive investigation. This research takes the perspective of the conference attendees and examines attendee's evaluation of conference performance, satisfaction and also their post-behavioural intentions in order to (1) fill the research gap in the understanding of the conference attendees' behaviour, and (2) to help conference organizers to identify the most effective marketing strategy to attract a larger number of international attendees to their destinations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To a large number of potential visitors, meetings offer the chance of becoming acquainted with a particular tourist area or region. If these visitors receive a satisfactory experience, they will not just benefit the destinations by reporting positive comments and publicizing it by word of mouth, but they may also like to return and visit the area on different occasions (Oppermann, 1996). Moreover, Edelstein and Bennini (1994) suggested that business travellers accompanied by their spouses may also enhance the benefits to the host locations. According to Opperman and Chon (1997), this factor should make host locations aware of the fact that by providing extensive leisure facilities, they may gain an additional stream of revenues. Consequently, conference buyers need to compete on the basis of key success criteria, and the fulfilment of the convention attendees' expectations (Go & Govers, 1999; Severt et al., 2007), while using more appropriate and sophisticated marketing strategies

in order to satisfy the attendees' expectations and desires (Lee & Lee, 2005).

Under the perspective of the tourists' consumption process, three stages can be determined in the tourists' behaviour: pre-, during- and post-visit. Tourist behaviour is composed of an aggregation of the concepts of pre-visit's decision-making, onsite experience, experience evaluations and post-visit's behavioural intentions and behaviours (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Ryan, 2002; Williams & Buswell, 2003). The choice of a destination to visit, subsequent evaluations and future behavioural intention are parts of the tourists' behaviour. Among 'subsequent evaluations', we can distinguish factors such as the travel experience or perceived trip quality during the stay, perceived value and overall satisfaction; on the other hand, future behavioural intentions include the intention to revisit and the willingness to recommend (Chen & Tsai, 2007). The marketing literature has already researched the concepts of service quality and customer satisfaction to a great extent, although post-purchase behaviours are somewhat less understood, especially within the context of the MICE industry.

Performance quality is conceptualized as the attributes of a service that are controlled by a tourism supplier (Baker & Crompton, 2000). For example, Akbaba (2006) argued that even if service quality is a major performance measurement for tourism products, it is simultaneously intangible; in other words, it cannot be seen or known before actual purchase (Ozer, 2008). In this regard, other studies (Crompton & Love, 1995; Huang et al., 2010; Johns et al., 2004) have also discovered that service performance is a more reliable and valid measure for both service quality and customer satisfaction on the operational level.

At the same time, in the field of tourism, satisfaction has been defined as the tourist's emotional state after experiencing the trip (Baker & Crompton, 2000). However, it would be appropriate to draw some differences between overall satisfaction and satisfaction with individual attributes, as particular tourism attributes may impact overall tourist satisfaction in different and notable ways (Huang et al., 2010). According to Oliver (1997), overall satisfaction does not only represent the sum of the individual assessment of each satisfaction attribute, but instead is a different, though related, construct from attribute satisfaction. Overall satisfaction may be

considered as a broader concept, implying holistic evaluation after purchase (Gnoth, 1994), instead of a sum of each attribute's individual measure (Bigne et al, 2001). This study employs this same definition of overall satisfaction.

Williams and Buswell (2003) argued that several studies conducted on consumer satisfaction and perceived performance have reported that there is a positive relationship between these components and behavioural intent measures such as recommendation and return intention. Several previous studies (Chi & Qu, 2008; Cole & Illum, 2006; Dabholkar et al., 2000) have also confirmed satisfaction as a mediating factor between some determinants and revisit intention.

In addition various scholars (Anderson & Sullivan, 1990; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Keaveney, 1995) have considered post-purchase behaviour as being significantly influenced by satisfaction. Previous research has determined that visitors' satisfaction and perceived quality are the most employed factors motivating the behaviour of tourists to visit a destination repeatedly (Hui et al, 2007; Pizam & Ellis, 1999).

When considering the context of conference attendees, in conformity with other phases of travel planning, the decision-making of an individual is lengthy and heavily influenced by the evaluation and satisfaction of the conference performance. In the conference context satisfied attendees will have intentions to participate in the same conference again or in conferences that take place in the same destinations, and will also recommend the conference to their colleagues and friends. This factor, as argued by Severt et al. (2007), becomes very significant in determining the degree of likelihood to participate in future conferences. Satisfaction also remains a crucial factor to conference attendees, because expectations and intentions for the purchasing decision of a next conference are affected by it. Consequently, satisfaction may also influence the revenue of the hosting hotels and convention centres, and even consolidate the stability of the destination and the convention centres (Oliver, 1996).

Nevertheless, by analysing previous literature, there is ample evidence that although many studies have focused on meeting planners' chosen destination satisfaction, a lack of research is still present in terms of conference attendees' performance evaluation, satisfaction and behavioural intention (Baloglu et al., 2003; Lee &

Back, 2005; Severt et al., 2007; Yoo& Weber, 2005). It is therefore important for researchers and practitioners to recognize that attendees assess the performance of a conference in multiple and sometimes complex ways, and consequently they may decide to visit again and/or recommend the conference to others. Additionally, the literature related to conference participation has scarcely measured what is a successful meeting in terms of service's quality, and instead only observed the meeting planner perspective, neglecting the attendees (Severt et al., 2007).

A study conducted by Hinkin and Tracy's (1998) has applied the SERVQUAL model in order to assess the service quality; however, customer satisfaction was not investigated in this study. In this regard, Danaher and Mattsson's (1994) study measured a conference's overall performance perceptions and the performance according to certain variables, before considering the overall customer satisfaction. Parasuraman et al. (1988) further attempted to assess conference customers' overall satisfaction and expanded the current body of knowledge in the field by examining customer satisfaction specifically.

Severt et al. (2007) have thus far conducted the most comprehensive research on the relationship between the evaluation of the conference performance, the satisfaction level and the behavioural intentions at the regional conference level. They assessed the importance performance analysis by employing a modified approach adapted from Ford et al. (1999), and then investigated the performance of only a limited number of items. Thus, Severt et al. (2007) have called for "testing their model across and within the various classifications of conference type (i.e., community, regional, national, international) in order to advance researchers and practitioner's level of understanding regarding the specifics of attendee satisfaction and behavioural intentions" (p.407). This study therefore, employed a modified version of their approach in order to evaluate the importance of service at an international academic conference, and differentiate its various aspects.

THEORETICAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

The Hypothetical model(Figure 1) explains the underlying process, which is adapted to guide this study. This research tests

whether there is a positive relationship among performance, overall satisfaction and post-behavioural intentions of international conference attendees.

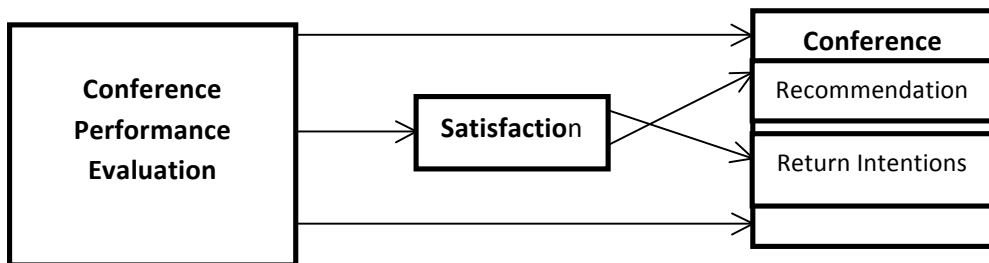


Figure 1. Theoretical model of the study

H₁: There is a significant relationship between conference performance and attendees' satisfaction.

H₂: There is a significant relationship between conference performance and attendees' recommendation.

H₃: There is a significant relationship between conference performance and attendees return intentions.

H₄: There is a significant relationship between satisfaction of the conference and attendees' recommendation.

H₅: There is a significant relationship between satisfaction of the conference and attendees' return intentions.

H₆: Satisfaction has a mediating effect in the relationship between conference performance evaluation and recommendation.

METHODOLOGY

A self-administered questionnaire was used in this paper to test the theoretical model. The survey was categorized in four sections. The first section of the questionnaire focused on the general questions, mostly related to demographic information and information sources used by respondents. The second section looked into attendees' evaluation of the conference's performance. This section involved a list of 10 performance evaluation items adopted from Severt et al.'s (2007) study of performance of attendees to a

regional conference. However, some modifications were made to the items in order to suit the context of this study. Attendees' satisfaction was measured based on an adaptation of the universal scale of Oliver (1997) and included three items. The behavioural intentions construct was operationalized with five items pertaining to recommendation and return intentions. A seven-point scale was used to provide a normal spread of observations.

International participants attending 22 international academic conferences in Kuala Lumpur were used as the sampling frame. The reason for selecting 22 different conferences is that the majority of the researches that have been carried out concerning conference attendees focused only on specific cases of conference attendance, where all the attendees were like-minded; this does not allow for either generalization of the results or for a broader understanding of conference delegates (Mair, 2010). However, this study tries to fill a gap in the understanding of conference delegates in general, rather than delegates that are part of one specific conference population.

After the pilot study, the researcher found out that in order to obtain reliable results, more time is needed for attendees to settle back into their everyday life where they might apply their new knowledge; therefore it was necessary that the data collection takes place approximately one to three weeks after the conference. The survey instrument was therefore, administered to the target sample via online survey system. The online survey was much faster and more economical than the traditional mail survey (Wright, 2005). The survey was made available via a URL link for the duration of 6 months, beginning from September 2011 till February 2012. The online survey was mailed to 1,500 international participants and 515 questionnaires were collected. After removing those with missing core questions from the sample, 497 questionnaires were usable.

STUDY FINDINGS

The online survey showed a high response rate (of 3:1). The data from 497 respondents were analysed using SPSS. The profile of the sample is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondent

Variable		Frequency
<u>Gender:</u>		
Male		263
Female		234
<u>Age:</u>		
Less than 20	18	3.6%
21-30	90	18.1%
31_40	12 9	26%
41_50	12 4	24.9%
Over 51	13 6	27.4%

<u>Profession:</u>		
Educator	28 2	56.7%
Student	15 4	30.8%
Industry Professional	61	12.3%
<u>Education:</u>		
Postgraduate	41 8	84.1%
Degree	78	15.9%
<u>Country of residency:</u>		
Africa	27	5.4%
America	74	14.9%
Asia	17 8	35.8%
Australia	15	3%

Europe	98	19.7%
Middle East	10	21.1%
	5	
<u>Conference experience:</u>		
1 time	70	14.1%
2-3 times	10	21.1%
	5	
4-5 times	16	34.0%
	9	
Over 6 times	15	30.8%
	3	
<u>Attendance payments:</u>		
By themselves	81	16.3%
By	24	48.3%
University/organization	0	
Partially both	17	35.4%
	6	

Total 100%	N= 497
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Trip characteristics of respondents (Table 2) revealed that while participation in the conference was the primary purpose of the majority of attendees (82.9%) for taking the trip to Malaysia, a great number of attendees (60%) consider their trip to be a combination of work and holiday and therefore most of them (51.9%) participated in the excursion offered by the organizers after the conference, even though the majority of the attendees (63.2%) had already been to Malaysia prior to the conference.

Table 2. Trip characteristics of the respondents

Variable Percentage %	Frequency
<u>Conference as the primary purpose of trip:</u>	
Yes	412
No	85
<u>Attending an international conference means:</u>	
Work	178
Holiday	19
Combination of work & holiday	300
<u>Conference excursion participation:</u>	
Yes	258
No	66
There was none	173

<u>First visit to Malaysia:</u>		
Yes	183	36.8%
No	314	63.2%
<u>Extending trip to stay more:</u>		
Yes	283	56.9%
No	214	43.1%
Total		N= 497
100%		

FINDINGS FROM THE FACTOR AND REGRESSION ANALYSES

The goodness of measures was determined through the applications of factor and reliability analysis. Factor analysis was carried out to reveal the underlying structure that forms the dimensions of performance attributes (P), satisfaction (S), recommendation (R), and return intention (RT). The Kaiser Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was higher than 0.6 in all analyses. The Bartlett's test of sphericity was also found to be significant. All of the anti-image values were greater than 0.50, indicating sufficient correlations among the items. The results found two performance evaluation dimensions namely: professional performance and cost and location performance.

According to the reliability analysis of all of the major variables in this study, the independent variables have a significant correlation with the dependent variable at a significance level of $p < .01$. This is considered as a good correlation for each dimension. This result also shows that all variables had Cronbach Alpha values higher than 0.70, confirming the reliability of the constructs.

Regression analysis was used to validate all the hypotheses in this study. The results of the regression analysis that was used to test the first five hypotheses show how the independent variables influence the level of respondents' overall satisfaction, and next their intention to recommend and re-attend the conference. Standardized estimates (beta coefficients) of each variable reflect the relative importance of the variables in the model.

As shown in table 3, the first regression model was run with the conference performance as the independent variable and satisfaction as the dependent one. The independent variable can explain 68% ($R^2 = 0.68$) of the variance of satisfaction. ($F = 518.195$, $p < 0.001$). Two dimensions, professional performance ($\beta = .372$, $p < 0.001$) and cost and location performance ($\beta = .571$, $p < 0.001$), were found to have a positive and significant effect on satisfaction.

Table 3. Regression analysis of conference performance evaluation on satisfaction

	Standardized Beta
Professional Evaluation Performance	.372***
Cost and Location Evaluation Performance	.571***
R^2	.679
F	518.195***

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

As seen in table 4, the second model was also significant ($F = 200.950$, $p < 0.001$). The independent variable (conference performance evaluation) can explain 45% ($R^2 = 0.453$) of the variance of the participant's recommendation. Thus, professional

performance ($\beta = .250, p < 0.001$) and cost and location performance ($\beta = .513, p < 0.001$) were found to have a positive and significant effect on participant's recommendation.

Table 4. Regression analysis of conference performance evaluation on recommendation

	Standardized Beta
Professional Performance	.250***
Cost and Location Performance	.513***
R ²	.453
F	200.950***

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

In the third regression model, the conference's performance evaluation variable can explain 26% ($R^2 = 0.258$) of the variance of the participants' return intention. The model was significant ($F = 83.344, p < 0.001$) and the R^2 was 0.25. Two dimensions of conference performance evaluation significantly affect the dependence variable.

Table 5. Regression analysis of conference performance evaluation on return intention

	Standardized Beta
Professional Performance	.163***
Cost and Location Performance	.406***
R ²	.258
F	83.344***

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

When satisfaction was regressed on recommendation, it was found that the model explains 68% ($R^2 = 0.684$) of the variance of the participant's recommendation. The result of the regression analysis determined that the model was also significant ($F = 1024.642$, $p < 0.001$) and R^2 was 0.68. The results clearly show that satisfaction ($\beta = .827$, $p < 0.001$) has significantly contributed to the participant's recommendation (See Table 6).

Table 6. Regression analysis of satisfaction on recommendation

	Standardized Beta
Satisfaction	.827***
R^2	.684
F	1024.642***

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

In addition, regression analysis revealed that satisfaction can explain 35.7% ($R^2 = 0.357$) of the variance of the participants' return intention. The model is significant ($F = 262.796$, $p < 0.001$) and R^2 is 0.357. Satisfaction ($\beta = .597$, $p < 0.001$) was found to have a positive and significant effect on the participant's return intention.

Table 7. Regression analysis of satisfaction on return intention

	Standardized Beta
Satisfaction	.597***
R^2	.357
F	262.796***

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Finally the last regression analysis was performed to explain the relationship between one independent variable (conference

performance evaluation), satisfaction (mediator) and two dependent variables (recommendation and return intentions). As shown in table 8, model one explained 67.9% of the variation in the satisfaction (adjusted $R^2= 0.678$; and $F = 518.195$ at $p<0.001$). Model two was significant at $p< 0.001$ and explained 45.3% of the variance of recommendation (adjusted $R^2= 0.451$; and $F = 200.950$). Model three also explained 68.4% of the variance of recommendation (adjusted $R^2= 0.683$; and $F = 1024.642$) and also significantly explained the predictor of recommendation ($p<0.001$). Model four significantly explained 69.3% of recommendation, with the inclusion of the predictor and the mediator (adjusted $^2= 0.691$; and $F = 361.869$; $p<0.001$). Multiple regressions were used to ascertain whether there are any mediator effects on the independent variables, and dependent variable. According to McKinnon et al. (1995), mediation is generally present when: a) the independent variable (IV) (in this case conference performance) significantly affects the mediator (satisfaction), b) the IV significantly affects the dependent variable (DV) (recommendation) in the absence of the mediator, c) the mediator has a significant unique effects on the DV, and d) the effect of the IV on the DV shrinks upon the addition of the mediator to the model.

Table 8. Mediating effect of satisfaction in regard to the conference performance and recommendation

	Stand ardized Beta	Stand ardized Beta	Stand ardized Beta	Stand ardized Beta	Re mark
	Mode 11	Mode 12	Mode 13	Mode 14	
Prof essional Perform ance	.372* **	.250* **		.009	Ful l mediat ion

Conference Cost and Location Performance	.571* **	.513* **		.091*	Partial mediation
Satisfaction			.827* **	.768* **	
Adjusted R ²	.678	.451	.683	.691	
F	518.1 95***	200.9 50***	1024. 642***	361.8 69***	

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; Model 1= IV→MDV; Model 2= IV→ DV; Model 3=MDV→ DV; Model 4= IV+MDV→DV

Based on the regression results, the independent, mediating and dependent variables have met all of the conditions of mediation above. The result identified satisfaction as playing a full mediation role on the relationship between professional performances on recommendation. This can be seen from the insignificant relationship in model four. However, satisfaction played a partial mediation role on the relationship between conference cost and location performance on recommendation. Since the standardized beta of conference quality is insignificant but the beta value is lower than in the first and second models. Therefore, based on the results presented, all the hypothesis of this study are supported and accepted.

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Business meetings and conferences have become a feature of modern commercial life and one of the most valuable sectors of

business tourism that is increasingly used to promote tourism destinations. In order to draw attention of conference attendees, marketers and managers need to understand the various behaviours of conference attendees and their needs and wants in particular.

The current study was undertaken to empirically examine post-participation behaviour of international conference attendees. This study examined the relationships among performance evaluations, satisfaction and post-behavioural intentions of international conference attendees to determine important attributes of conference performance evaluated by international attendees. The results of the factor analysis found two performance evaluation dimensions, namely professional performance and cost and location performance. The results concerning professional performance in this study are very similar to those of Severt et al.'s (2007) that examine educational benefits as the most important conference performance evaluation criteria. Since previous studies on conference performance evaluation focused on regional conferences only, this study proposes a new performance dimension - cost and location performance dimension - which are considered very important when deciding to participate in conferences at the international level.

The respondents' evaluation of conference performance show that the conferences under study performed better in terms of location and cost, than in terms of professional and quality attributes. In regard to the satisfaction level, the results reveal that although attendees were generally satisfied, the conferences did not achieve an excellent level of satisfaction. In addition, while the willingness of attendees to recommend was high, their interest in returning back to the conference in the future is lower.

Furthermore, this study confirms the six hypotheses proposed above. The empirical data found the relationship among performance, satisfaction and post behavioural intentions is significant. The mediating effect of satisfaction is also supported. In parallel to Baker and Crompton's (2000) study, this research demonstrates that conference performance not only has an indirect effect on behavioural intentions through satisfaction, but also a direct impact on behavioural intentions. Improved performance quality increases attendees' interest to return to the conference and encourages their willingness to recommend it to others. The result of this study also demonstrates that satisfaction has

full mediation effect on the conference's professional performance, and participants' recommendation of the event. In this regard, the effect of other possible variables, such as travel funding and attendees past experiences that may affect recommendations and return intentions of conference attendees, should be explored in future research.

Another result of this study concerns the positive correlation between conference networking opportunities and the attendees' likelihood of attending the conference again in the future. Thus, the higher networking is as a motivator for attendance, the more likely the delegate is to attend the conference again in the future. The result of this study again confirms the previous work of Severt et al. (2007) with the difference that satisfaction has a partial mediation effect on conference cost and location performance, and participants' recommendation.

The current study confirms that customer recommendations and intentions to return are determined by attendees' satisfaction, with conference's performance as a vital antecedent. The outcome of this study offers insights for conference organizers in order to improve the performance of their conferences and attract customers. A great challenge for conference organizers is to identify attendees' satisfaction in order to encourage word-of-mouth. Therefore, the conference organizer should keep in touch with the attendees even after the conference to create positive post conference impressions. The suggestions provided by this study may strongly influence the conference organizers' future marketing plans and programs.

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